

Psalm 137 -- Notes and Resources

Temple Micah Study Group, August 20, 2019 -- contact: V.Spatz, songeveryday@gmail.com

Psalm 137 is the only one which appears to allude to a specific historic situation. Most commentators today assume it was written in Babylon sometime after the First Temple was destroyed. However, ancient understanding, along with commentaries for centuries afterward, was different:

Rav Yehudah said in the name of Rav: What is the meaning of the verse: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept, as we remembered Zion'? This teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed David the destruction of the First Temple and of the Second Temple. The destruction of the First Temple, as it is stated: 'By the rivers...' The Second Temple, as it is stated: "Remember, O Lord, against the children of Edom..." -- B. Gittin 57b

Ibn Ezra (1089-c.1167) said the psalm was composed by a Levite in exile. Some later commentators combined the views, saying that the story about David's prophecy should be understood symbolically.

1) על נהרות, בְּכַל-שֵׁם יִשְׁבְּנוּ, גַם-בְּכִינוּ: בְּזַכְרֵנוּ, אֶת-צִיּוֹן
Al naharot bavel -- sham yashavnu, gam-bachinu: b'zachreinu, et-tzion
By the rivers of **Babylon**, there we sat and wept, as we remembered **Zion**.

"**Bavel**" appears 260+ times in the Tanakh, but only here (v.1 and v.8) and Ps. 87:4 in the Psalms. Later in Tanakh, beginning 2 Kings, "**Bavel**" is both the city of Babylon and the empire of Babylonia; In the Book of Daniel, Babylon is a place of excess and trial for Daniel and the people of Judah. Babylon is identified in commentary with the Tower of Babel city (Gen 11) and becomes part of the complex mythos of Babylon as representing city, wild entertainment and sex and other temptations. One reflection of this confluence of themes is found in the Broadway and political protest song "Mene Mene Tekel" (1939) --

*Mene mene tekel, tekel, tekel
Mene mene tekel upharsin
Mene mene tekel, tekel, tekel
Mene mene tekel upharsin*

Belshazzar offered jewels and gold
if the meaning of the words were told
In came Daniel, spurned them all
for nothing told the meaning of the letters on the wall

Now the king of Babylon, Old Belshazzar
sat feasting on his golden piazza
with his court and his concubines
a-stuffing in the chicken and the fancy wines...

King stop your frolicking, stop your flauntin'
you've been weighed and you're found wantin'
all your days are numbered days
the Lord don't like dictators or dictators ways...

-- lyrics as slightly adapted by Joe Glazer (1918-2006), from original by Harold Rome (1908 – 1993)

Beyond Daniel, we don't learn much about Babylon from the Tanakh.

B. Kiddushin 49b links Babylon with hypocrisy, arrogance, and poverty (some add: of learning); Babylon, in wider culture, often includes the "Whore of Babylon" in (Christian) Revelations.

"**Zion**" appears 154 times in the Tanakh, 36 in Psalms and often in prophets, first appearing in 2 Sam.

From *The Jerusalem Commentary*:

The word צִיּוֹן, *Tziyyon*, "Zion," at the end of the verse may allude to the word *tziyyah*, "a dry place," contrasting with the word נְהַרֹת, *naharot*, "rivers," at the beginning of the verse. The psalmist is intimating that Zion in its desolation is dearer to Israel than Babylon which is blessed with rivers. The expression, "by the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept," may also be suggesting that they shed tears like a river. -- p.387

כִּי שָׁם שְׂאֵלוֹנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ, דְּבַר־י-שִׁיר -- וְתוֹלְאֵינוּ שְׂמֵחָה... 3)
ki sham she'eilunu shoveinu, divrei-shir -- v'tolaleinu simchah...
for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors, for amusement...

תוֹלֵל -- m.n. oppressor (?); captor (?) (a hapax legomenon in the Bible, occurring Ps. 137:3 in the form **תוֹלְאֵינוּ**, which is of uncertain meaning. Since it is parallel to **שׁוֹבֵינוּ** 'our captors', **תוֹלֵל** prob. means 'oppressor', or is another word for 'captor'). [Of uncertain origin. Most scholars derive it from **יָלַל** (= to wail), and take it in the sense of *abstractum pro concreto*, and accordingly render it by 'those who make us wail, tormentors'.] -- Klein Dictionary, via Sefaria.org

3) שִׁירוּ לָנוּ, מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן
Shiru lanu mishir Zion
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion." (JPS 1917)

4) אֵיךְ--נִשִּׁיר אֶת-שִׁיר-יְהוָה: עַל, אֲדָמַת נֶכֶר
Eich nashir et-shir YHVH: al adamat neichar
How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land? (JPS 1917)/ ...on alien soil? (JPS 1985)

"We" are not alone. There are others there, and "they" are clearly not on the side of "we." They carried us away captive. they laid us waste. Then they required of us mirth and command us to perform. To sing a song that we could not or should not sing -- in that place, under those circumstances. The command is made more vivid by being rendered in direct speech, as if quoting: *Sing us one of the songs of Zion.*

Can we sing? Should we sing? *How* should we sing? *How can* we sing, with our instruments put aside? As readers, we are asked to identify with the "we." Thus we become fleetingly part of a community constituted by its difficult experiences in the present and its memories of a better time.

"We" and "they" must share something in common. Language, at least, since the captors request not just a song...but particular type of song....They would have to know of the existence of meaning-laden songs of Zion, the singing of which poses a difficult dilemma for their prisoners.
-- David W. Stowe, *Song of Exile*, p.3. See note below (p.4) on "*How Sweet the Sound and Song of Exile*"

8) בַּת-בְּבֶל הַשְּׂדוּדָה אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁישַׁלְמֶ-לָךְ אֶת גְּמוּלָךְ שֶׁגַּמַּלְתָּ לָנוּ:
Bat-Bavel hash'dudah ashrei shey'shalem-lach et-g'muleich shegamalt lanu
O daughter of Babylon, who will be destroyed; happy he that repays you as you served us.

The verb repay (slm [-- שלם]) in Jeremiah 51:24 is the same as used in Psalm 137:8 ("Happy is the one who repays you" -- [שִׁישַׁלְמֶ-לָךְ]). In fact, all three verbs of Psalm 137:8 are repeated more than once each in Jeremiah 50-51. For instance, Jeremiah 51:56 echoes the specific language of Babylon destroyed (**sdd** [-- שָׂדַד]) and repaid (**slm** [-- שלם]) for her deeds (nmlwt* [gmlwt -- גַּמְלוֹת]*). Likewise, the verb "to smash into pieces" (nps [-- נִפֵּץ]) of 137:9 is repeated nine times in Jeremiah 51:20-23... -- Erin Runions, *The Babylon Complex*

*Runions has "nmlwt" here. This word does not appear in Jeremiah 51:56; I think this is meant to be גַּמְלוֹת, "recompense," which might be transliterated "gmlwt," rather than "nmlwt."
(*Gimmels* and *nuns* can be hard to distinguish in some fonts).

... Having described this nightmarish atrocity, the psalmist brings the lament to an end, as if shocked into silence by his own words. -- Jerusalem Commentary, p. 393

p.3 Psalm 137 for Temple Micah

... Having described this nightmarish atrocity, the psalmist brings the lament to an end, as if shocked into silence by his own words. -- Jerusalem Commentary, p. 393

In midrash from a time when "Edom" was identified with Rome, the mention of Edom in verse 7 is understood to reference the Second Temple. Others take another view:

The Edomites were enemies of Israel and Judah for many generations, and they rejoiced when Jerusalem was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar. They also abetted the Babylonians...They were worse enemies to Israel than the Babylonians, for the Babylonians had no interest in taking of the Land of Israel, whereas the Edomites wanted the people of Israel to be totally removed from their land, so they could settle in their place. [See Ezekiel 35, 25:11-14, and Obadiah] -- Jerusalem Commentary, p.392

Obadiah 8-14:

(8) Shall I not in that day, saith the LORD, destroy the wise men out of Edom, and discernment out of the mount of Esau? (9) And you mighty men, O Teman, shall be dismayed, to the end that every one may be cut off from the mount of Esau by slaughter. (10) For the violence done to thy brother Jacob shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off for ever. (11) In the day that you stood aloof, in the day that strangers carried away his substance, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, you were even among them. (12) But you should not have gazed on the day of your brother in the day of his disaster, neither should you have rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction; neither should you

have spoken proudly in the day of distress. (13) You should not have entered into the gate of My people in the day of their calamity; yea, you should not have gazed on their affliction in the day of their calamity, nor have laid hands on their substance in the day of their calamity. (14) Neither should you have stood in the crossway, to cut off those of his that escape; neither should you have delivered up those of his that did remain in the day of distress.

Ezekiel 35:15

As thou didst rejoice over the inheritance of the house of Israel, because it was desolate, so will I do unto thee; thou shalt be desolate, O mount Seir, and all Edom, even all of it; and they shall know that I am the LORD

These views about Edom and Babylon are included, for example, in R. Nachman of Breslov's "*Tikun HaKelali, General Remedy*," which includes a translation incorporating "interpretation (indicated by parentheses) based on commentaries of our Sages":

- 1) By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat
And we also wept
When we remember Zion
- 2) Upon the willows in her midst
We hung our harps (to hide them from the
Babylonians lest they force us to play)
- 3) For there our captors asked us for words of song,
And those who mocked us (demanded) joy
(Saying) "Sing for us one of the songs of Zion!"
- 4) How could we (possibly) sing the song of the L--d
On the soil of the alien? (We ask in our hearts)
- 5) If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
May my right hand forget
(how to play any instrument)

- 6) May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
If I do not remember you,
If I do not raise Jerusalem
(by mentioning her destruction)
Above my greatest joy (on every happy occasion)
- 7) Remember, O L--d, (to punish)
the sons of Edom (the descendants of Esau)
Who, on the day (of the destruction) of Jerusalem said,
"Raze it! Raze it! even to its very foundation."
- 8) O Daughter of Babylon, destroyed you are (to be)
Happy is the one who will pay you (back)
what you deserve
For what you did to us.
- 9) Happy is he who will take and dash
Your babies against the rock (as you did to our infants)

-- Rabbi Nachman's Foundation

"The Ten Psalms" (16, 32, 41, 42, 59, 77, 90, 105, 137, & 150) are to be recited daily, without interruption, as part of a practice to defeat impure thought and action and dispel despair. The remedy includes finding *halleluyah*/praise in *yelaleh*/cry of agony: "Never are we more inclined to praise G-d than when we discover His presence in the midst of despair." (p.22)

Note on *How Sweet the Sound and Song of Exile*

David W. Stowe wrote both *How Sweet the Sound: Music in the Spiritual Lives of Americans* (2014), and *Song of Exile: The Enduring Mystery of Psalm 137* (2016). Stowe teaches English and Religious Studies at Michigan State and writes about music history or history through music. In conjunction with *Song of Exile*, his website contains images and playlists relating to Ps. 137, and the more general *How Sweet the Sound* discusses Ps.137.

Although Stowe is positioned as an academic at a public university, and never identifies himself as a Christian *per se*, he seems more familiar with "Hebrew Bible" and Jewish commentary from within Christianity than Judaism. He writes, "I rarely meet people who can immediately identify Psalm 137" (*Song of Exile*, p.14), suggesting that he doesn't often meet Jews who recite psalms or use an Orthodox prayerbook. He rarely cites or quotes Jews.

All that said, however, Stowe clearly loves music, knows a lot about it, its history and its politics. He shares lots of information and perspectives that were new to me and might be new to you.

From the Revolutionary War:

In both books, Stowe discusses William Billings (1746-1800), who is considered the first U.S. choral composer. He wrote this piece during the siege of Boston (1775), while the Provincial Congress of Massachusetts was in "exile" in Watertown. A few of Stowe's comments are below right.

"Lamentation over Boston" (1778)

By the Rivers of Watertown we sat down and wept,
we wept when we remember'd, O Boston.
Lord God of Heaven, preserve them, defend them,
deliver and restore them unto us again.
Forbid it, Lord God,
forbid that those who have sucked Bostonian Breasts
should thirst for American Blood.
A voice was heard in Roxbury which eccho'd thro' the Continent,
weeping for Boston because of their Danger.
Is Boston my dear Town, is it my native Place?
for since their Calamity I do earnestly remember it still!
If I forget thee, yea, if I do not remember thee,
Then let my numbers cease to flow, Then be my Muse unkind,
Then let my Tongue forget to move and ever be confin'd;
Let horrid Jargon split the Air and rive my nerves asunder.
Let hateful discord greet my ear as terrible as Thunder.
Let harmony be banish'd hence and Consonance depart;
Let dissonance erect her throne and reign within my Heart.

Musically, Billings may have been influenced by Caleb Ashworth, a Baptist minister and headmaster from Daventry, England, whose anthem, "By the Rivers of Babylon," was published in no fewer than five North American songbooks beginning in 1766.

Pushing his paraphrase well beyond the vitriol of the Hebrew psalmist, Billings introduces graphic imagery of Babylon thirsting for both milk and blood...Here Billings intersperses a trope from Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Roxbury..."
— *Song of Exile*, p.70

-- Text of "Lamentation over Boston" is from ChoralWiki; contemporary performances are available on YouTube.

While American composers would continue to set the text during the first decades of the nineteenth century, the single most influential deployment of Psalm 137 would wait until the middle decade of the century, when Frederick Douglass would give it an entirely new, and lasting, political valence.

-- Stowe, *Song of Exile*, p.74

Douglass identified eloquently with a sense of exile. "The land of my birth welcomes me to her shores only as a slave, and spurns with contempt the idea of treating me differently," he wrote to his mentor, William Lloyd Garrison [in 1846]...."So that I am an outcast from the society of my childhood, and an outlaw in the land of my birth, 'I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner as all my fathers were.'" [Ps. 39:14; Douglass is using the KJV, identical here to 1917 JPS] -- *Song of Exile*, p.75

“What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” -- Frederick Douglass, 7/5/1852

...The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth July is yours, not mine. *You* may rejoice, *I* must mourn. **To drag a man in fetters** into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him **to join you in joyous anthems**, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak to-day? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, lowering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people!

“**By the rivers of Babylon...**let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.” [Ps. 137:1-6 in full, from KJV; cut here to save space]

Fellow-citizens; above your national, tumultuous joy, I hear the mournful wail of millions! whose chains, heavy and grievous yesterday, are, to-day, rendered more intolerable by the jubilee shouts that reach them. **If I do forget**, if I do not faithfully remember those bleeding children of sorrow this day, “may my right hand forget her cunning, and may my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth!” **To forget them**, to pass lightly over their wrongs, and to chime in with the popular theme, would be treason most scandalous and shocking, and would make me a reproach before God and the world. My subject, then fellow-citizens, is American Slavery....

Full speech -- very long (folks used to be much more patient!) -- widely available in print and on the web one source: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>

There is an intriguing ambiguity in the analogy Douglass draws between Babylon and American slave power. It seems that Douglass wants to associate enslaved Africans with Judah, and to identify the United States with Babylon. But Judah itself was corrupt, according to the Hebrew Bible, its conquest by Nebuchadnezzar the result of his own sin. It's always risky to speculate how audiences hear particular points, especially without evidence of response. But it seems plausible that many whites in the audience [Ladies' Antislavery Society of Rochester, NY] would have identified with Judah: members of a people chosen by God, but badly corrupted by their nation's complicity in slavery, in danger of the sort of divine retribution that was inflicted on Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

-- *Song of Exile*, p.77

Stowe notes that "forcing enslaved Africans to perform music had been a notable feature of life under slavery and links insisting on "joyous anthems" from a Black man with the tradition of minstrelsy.

In a section of *Song of Exile* called "Africa as the New Israel," Stowe compares ideas about Babylon with differences of opinion around Back-to-Africa, Rastafarianism, and other political philosophies centered in Africa:

Here we remember a similar divergence of opinion among the people of Judah in the sixth century B.C.E. Despite Psalm 137's tone of nostalgic yearning, with its profession of loyalty to Jerusalem, many of the Judean exiles took the advice of Jeremiah and assimilated. Even when the Persian conquest of Babylon gave them the opportunity to return to Judah, they remained in the land of exile; that's where their lives were. -- *Song of Exile*, p.80

In the same section, Stowe discusses a performance of Dvorak's Ps. 137 by Roland Hayes (1887-1977), once world-famous African American tenor and composer. Sterling Allen Brown (1901-1989), professor of literature and folklore at Howard, published an "eyewitness account of a recital...before a racially mixed (though separately seated) audience." Here Stowe quotes extensively from Brown:

[Brown:] Roland sings....

By the waters of Babylon --

The whites start at the wild summoning of beautiful distress. Why is there arranging of them in a cantor's song -- sung by a Negro? What histrionic ability in this man to so feign passionate despair?

We sat down and wept

Yea we wept

When we remembered Zion

The Negroes brood; are stirred by something deep within, something as far away as all antiquity, as old as human wrong, as tragical as loss of worlds. What does he mean--and why are we so stirred --

...required of us a song

And they that wasted us

Required of us mirth.

Dvorak's setting for Ps. 137 was composed in Czech (see p. 7 here), also with English and German translations matching the vocal line. It is one of ten psalm texts in "Biblical Songs," which Antonin Dvorak (1841-1904) composed in 1894, first performed in 1895.

[Stowe:] Here Brown connects Babylon's taunt to the exploitation of black vernacular culture, dating back to antebellum blackface minstrelsy but taking on new guises during the Harlem Renaissance:

[Brown:] ...And a thousand of our girls prostitute their voices singing jazz for a decadent white and black craving, and a number of lyricists turn off cheap little well-made bits of musical bric-a-brac, and Mose, having trundled a white man's fertilizer, walks wearily home, strumming a guitar. And a street car conductor jogs a black bricklayer to hear a comic monologue.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Roland Hayes is singing with eyes closed, and head thrown back:

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem

Let my right hand forget her cunning

What is it that he sees, this mystic seer clutched by the ferocity of the final phrases....What is it that is denied to us...That frightens us, appals [sic]?

This is no pose, this tense attitude, this head flung haughtily back, these closed eyes....

Many did not notice that he had left the stage.

[Stowe:] Brown describes the audience response as tepid: whites uncomprehending, blacks feeling "somehow rebuked."...When Hayes sings --literally in that moment when his voice is reaching the ears of its audience--racial divisions dissolve. "Roland Hayes sings, and boundaries are but figments of imagination, and prejudice but insane mutterings," he writes. "And what is real is a great fellowship of all in pain, a fellowship in hope. Roland Hayes sings, and for that singing moment, however brief, the world forgets its tyranny and its submissiveness."

Brown ends his essay quoting the first verse of Psalm 137.

-- *Song of Exile*, pp.85-86; quoting from Sterling Allen Brown, June 1925, *Opportunity* 30

Paul Robeson (1898-1976) also sang Dvorak's Psalm 137 and commented in *Jewish Life* (1954) :

From ancient Judea these words of the 137th Psalm had crossed the vast reaches of time and distance to stir the hearts of the Negro slaves in our southland; and the downfall of slave-holding Babylon was cited by our Frederick Douglass in his famous address....

Half a century later the gifted Dvorak came to our country, studied the melodies and lyrics of Negro song, and drew upon its richness for his own creations -- and so, in this way, the words of this very song must have traveled back across the ocean with him; and I am told the song was especially popular among the Czech people during their years of suffering under the terror of nazi occupation.

But history moves on: Hitler is gone; Prague lives and builds in a new people's democracy--and now I, an American Negro, sing for her this ancient Hebrew song in the language of the people of Huss and Dvorak, Fuchik and Gottwald:

*Pri rekach babylonckych
Tam jsme sedavali a plakovali*

-- Paul Robeson, 1954, quoted in *Song of Exile*, p.88. (full Robeson citation below)

[Paul Robeson recording](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLIUE8BWPao) -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLIUE8BWPao -- stops at verse 5

To follow Robeson's recording, Czech rendering of Psalm 137, from BibleHub.com:

- 1) Při řekách Babylonských tam jsme sedávali, a plakávali, rozpomínajíce se na Sion.
- 2) Na vrbí v té zemi zavěšovali jsme citary své.
- 3) A když se tam dotazovali nás ti, kteříž nás zajali, na slova písničky, (ješto jsme zavěsili byli veselí), říkajíce: Zpívejte nám některou píseň Sionskou:
- 4) Kterakž bychom měli zpívati píseň Hospodinovu v zemi cizozemců?
- 5) Jestliže se zapomenu na tebe, ó Jeruzaléme, zapomeniž i pravice má....

Jeremiah Chapter 29

- (1) Now these are the words of the letter that Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem unto the residue of the elders of the captivity, and to the priests, and to the prophets, and to all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had carried away captive from Jerusalem to Babylon,
- (2) after that Jeconiah the king, and the queen-mother, and the officers, and the princes of Judah and Jerusalem, and the craftsmen, and the smiths, were departed from Jerusalem;
- (3) by the hand of Elasah the son of Shaphan, and Gemariah the son of Hilkiah, whom Zedekiah king of Judah sent unto Babylon to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, saying:
- (4) Thus saith the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all the captivity, whom I have caused to be carried away captive from Jerusalem unto Babylon:
- (5) Build ye houses, and dwell in them, and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them;
- (6) take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply ye there, and be not diminished.
- (7) And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray unto the LORD for it; for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace.

From the *Jerusalem Commentary* [not copying Hebrew characters, which the commentary includes before each transliterated word; adding line breaks for reading ease] --

In this lamentation, there are repeated words and expressions like those in the Song of Ascents.

There are also plays on words and near rhymes:

sham, "there" -- *gam*, "also";

yashavnu, "we sat" -- *bakhinu*, "we wept" -- *b'zokhreinu*, "as we remembered";

yashavnu, "we sat" -- *shoveinu*, "our captors";

talinu, "we hung" -- *tolaleinu*, "our mockers";

lechikki, "to the roof of my mouth" -- *ezkerekhi*, "I make mention of you."

There are also alliterations:

Bavel, "Babylon" -- *yashavnu*, "we sat" -- *bakhinu*, "we wept"

-- *b'zokhreinu*, "when we remembered."

Sham, "there" -- *she'elenu*, "they required of us" -- *shoveinu*, "our captors" -- *shir*, "song"

-- *simchah*, "music" -- *shiru*, "sing"-- *mishir*, "of the song" -- *eshkahekh*, "I forget you"

-- *Yerushalyim*, "Jerusalem" -- '*al rosh simchati*, "at the head of my joy"

-- *hashedudah*, "marked for devastation" -- *ashrei* "happy"

-- *sheyshallem*, "who will repay" -- *sheggamalt*, "for what you have done."

-- Jerusalem Commentary, p. 392

Musical References

"Rivers of Babylon"

(1) A Jamaican rocksteady band, called "The Melodians," released "Rivers of Babylon" in 1970. Popular and covered many times, the song is composed of verses from psalms, as interpreted by Rastafari: Ps. 137:1-4, with "King Alpha" in place of "the Lord," in verse 4, and Ps. 19:15 with "O FarI" in place of the closing words. This version is on the soundtrack to the movie, "The Harder They Come" (1972), starring Jimmy Cliff (see also #2). Composer credit: Brent Dowe (1949-2006) and Trevor McNaughton (1940-2018); more next page.

[The Melodians "Rivers of Babylon"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-5E6_qtXAw) -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-5E6_qtXAw 1970

(2) Jimmy Cliff (b. 1948), who was already known as a reggae musician before starring in, and contributing soundtrack pieces for, "The Harder They Come," has been performing a more chant-like version of The Melodians' tune for decades. "Rivers of Babylon" begins at 2:56 on this video --

[Cliff "Bongoman/Rivers of Babylon"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bng_cn0Ely) on tour -- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2bng_cn0Ely

(3) Boney M, a Caribbean-German pop group recorded a very upbeat, also popular, version in 1978 that changes the Rastafarian "King Alpha" back to the Psalm's "the Lord's song,"* and "O FarI" to "here tonight."*

(1)/(2)/(3) By the rivers of Babylon

Where we sat down

And there we wept

When we remembered Zion

Where the wicked carried us away, captivity

Required from us a song

How can we sing King Alpha's [the Lord's]* song

In a Strange Land

ah-ah-ah-ah... chant it out brothers and sisters

ah-ah-ah-ah... chant it out brothers and sisters

Well, let the words of our mouth

and the meditation of our heart

be acceptable in thy sight, O FarI [here tonight]*

ah-ah-ah-ah... chant it out brothers

ah-ah-ah-ah... chant it out sisters

ah-ah-ah-ah... chant the chant of freedom

and say and say and say By the Rivers...

chant it for your mothers and fathers

chant it for peace in the world

chant it for the ancestors

*Notes on lyrics, song origins follow

Music References cont.

The Rasta version replaces the spirit of resignation and self-pity of the Babylonian exiles with militant defiance expressed through shouts and songs. In the phrase, "Chanting down Babylon," Babylon signifies oppressive power, whether referring to colonial domination, racial subjugation, or economic exploitation -- and often all three. [Citation here is to *Chanting down Babylon*] -- *Song of Exile*, p. 52

The musical style was called rocksteady -- "much slower than the ska," according to [Tony] Brevett [member of The Melodians, d. 2013]. "We used to listen to a lot of foreign artists. Sam Cooke is one of my favorites. The Temptations, we used to listen to them. The Beatles most of all. We said we wanted to create songs just like those guys. And with the slower rhythms of rocksteady, we could sing much more harmony, like country-and-western style harmony." -- *Song of Exile*, p.54

...Shortly before his death in 2006, Brent Dowe said that he set the psalm to reggae to raise the public awareness of Rastafari, with its calls for justice and liberation. When "Rivers" first hit the airwaves, according to Dowe, the government banned it, regarding its overt Rastafarian references as subversive and inflammatory. [Record producer] Leslie Kong then publicly criticized the government, pointing out that the song came straight from the Bible, and the ban was lifted; within three weeks it hit number-one on the local charts. -- *Song of Exile*, p.54-55

Jimmy Cliff, who sings the Rasta lyrics as is, is not Rastafarian himself but has said, "I don't see how I could be a Jamaican and not embrace a sense of what is the concept of Rasta...[but] I couldn't align myself with one particular movement or religion" (Reggae News, 5/9/13). Many others who cover(ed) "Rivers of Babylon" are not Rastafarian; they sometimes keep, sometimes change the lyrics: e.g., Sweet Honey in the Rock uses "our holy song" and "our sacred song" and then "over I." [Sweet Honey](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNOTU-Sp8DE) -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNOTU-Sp8DE>

"Waters of Babylon"

(4) Don McLean (b. 1945) composed a three-part round for the opening verse of Ps. 137, called "Waters of Babylon." Released on the 1971 album "American Pie," it has been popular in folk and some worship circles. ["Waters of Babylon" from "American Pie"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsqSNIR5DsU) -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JsqSNIR5DsU>

(4) By the waters
The waters of Babylon
We lay down and wept
and wept for thee Zion
We remember thee
Remember thee
Remember thee Zion

(5) McLean's version appears in the first season of "Mad Men," however anachronistically for a TV series set in the early '60s. The scene, a trio singing in a Greenwich Village coffeehouse, interspersed with more images, received critical acclaim as a kind of commentary about New York City as Babylon. The scene is also discussed in *Song of Exile*. ["Mad Men" closing scene \(S1, E6\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Er-HekkplmA) -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Er-HekkplmA>

(6) McLean's tune is also sung in Hebrew. No further details about the performers, but here is a [Hebrew cover by "Shooky & Dorit"](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OZZsfd7B-k) -- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3OZZsfd7B-k>

(6) *al naharot bavel*
al naharot bavel
sham yashavnu gam
bachinu bachinu
v'zochreinu
v'zochreinu
v'zochreinu et-tzion

(7) Here, for more variety, are three choral settings, versions of which were part of local Kolot HaLev choir's performance 10 years ago (many versions on-line):

- Super Flumina Babylonis -- Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina -- (Latin)
- Al Naharot Bavel -- Salomone Rossi -- (Hebrew) --
- Chorus of the Hebrew Slaves -- from Verdi's Nabucco (Italian)

(8) The Paul Robeson recording linked above (p.7) appears to be from the album "Absent," released in 2008. Based on the story in *Jewish Life*, 1954, a good guess might be that this performance was in the early 1950s. (YouTube and Amazon are short on details). The Czech translation is above, along with the YouTube link.

More notes on Rastafarian belief and vocabulary

Anthropology professor Alston Barrington (Barry) Chevannes (1940-2010), who is credited with bringing Rastafarian beliefs into academia, offers this succinct explanation:

The Rastafari ever since the movement's rise in the 1930s have held to the belief that they and all Africans in the diaspora are but exiles in 'Babylon,' destined to be delivered out of captivity by a return to 'Zion,' that is, Africa, the land of our ancestors... -- *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology*

From *Chanting down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader*

...It is neither a Christian nor an African traditional religion...Rastafari is more than a religion. It is a cultural movement, 'a system of beliefs and a state of consciousness,' that advances a view of economic survival and political organization and structure that challenges the dominant cultural political 'narrative' (ideology) in the 'politics of Babylon.'" [citation: Post 1978, no further details]

...[Repatriation can mean] voluntary migration to Africa, returning to Africa culturally and symbolically, or rejecting Western values and preserving African roots and black pride....the concept of Babylon has broadened to include all oppressive and corrupt systems of the world."

-- from "Introduction" by Nathaniel Samuel Murrell

Through reggae rhythms, the Rastafarians have attempted to bring about change in society by chanting down their metaphorical Babylon. But what does it mean to "chant down Babylon in a ridim"? How can music and art combat the oppressive economic systems under which the world's poor and often oppressed languish? David "Ziggy" Marley, heir to Bob Marley's musical vision, [said in telephone conversation]:

Babylon causes the system, you know? It's a devil system -- And by "chanting down" I mean by putting positive messages out there. That is the way we'll fight a negative with a positive, if Babylon system press and push negative things, but we push positive things...the thing is: action is under the words. It's how you live your life that is the important thing....

-- from "Chanting Change Around the World through Rasta Ridim and Art" by William David Spencer

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