# On Dashing Little Ones against the Rock: Psalm 137

Psalm 137 closes with a prayer for Yahweh to 'remember' against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, when they had urged its attackers on to demolish it (7); 'remembering' in Hebrew signifies not a mental process which may only occur by accident, but a deliberate act of keeping in the forefront of one's mind which will mean doing something about the matter in question. The psalm goes on with a tearful imprecation upon the devastators themselves, personified as 'Lady Babylon' ('Daughter of Babylon', the phrase as it characteristically appears in English translations, is a Semitism). It declares a blessing on the man who requites Babylon, treating her as she had treated the Judaeans now in exile; a blessing, more specifically, on the man who takes Babylon's children and smashes them against a rock.

The prayer is one that makes the modern reader shudder. What explains it? What makes someone pray like that?

## A Common Misapprehension

It is not the case that the psalmist prays like this because he is (inevitably) unaware that Yahweh is a God of love. The common Christian assumption is that the psalmist's hatefulness reflects the fact that he lived before Christ. He belonged to a stage in God's revelation when people did not yet know about the love of God, and had not yet heard Christ bid his disciples love their enemies. So inevitably he was hateful to those who had tormented him. Popular though this view is, it is deeply misguided.

The OT itself assumes that God has a positive purpose for nations other. than Israel. Books such as Exodus and Deuteronomy which describe God's judgement on peoples such as the Egyptians, the Amalekites, and the Canaanites, are set in the context of an exposition of God's loving concern for the whole world described in Genesis 1-12. In Isaiah chapters 13 to 23, the prophet's declaration of judgement on the nations of his day (Chapter 1317·20 constitutes the specific promise which Psalm 137 claims) appears in the context of a vision of all the nations coming to Jerusalem to hear Yahweh's word and find the way of peace (Isaiah 2.1-4; see also 19. 18-25). The Old Testament assumes that God's positive concern extends to all the nations, even though it focuses on Yahweh's dealings with Israel (because these, Genesis 1-12 shows, were to be the means of his fulfilling his purpose for the world by restoring the blessing intended for the whole world from the beginning).

The Old Testament does not assume that you can do what you like to your enemies. Israel's possession of Canaan is postponed for generations because it will not be fair for her to attack its inhabitants when they do not deserve it (Genesis 15.6). The individual Israelite is to return his enemy's ox if he finds it straying, or to help him with it if it gets into trouble (Exodus 23.4-5). So it is unlikely that the psalmist simply assumes that one is free to be hostile and vengeful in relation to any enemy.

Indeed, the belief that God is loving and that he expects people to be loving in their relationships with others is not even distinctive to the Old Testament and the New Testament. All the major world-religions believe that God is love and believe that men should love even their enemies. This is true not only of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (which are related to each other); it is especially characteristic of Buddhism - was it not from this source that the Beatles learnt that 'All you need is love'? And of course it is what the average pagan Englishman believes.

In contrast to this, Christ and the New Testament writers agree with the Old Testament that love, longsuffering, and forgiveness are not the only side to God's character and activity. He is also the judge who punishes his enemies. Jesus addresses people as serpents and a vipers' brood and speaks of eternal punishment, of outer darkness, of weeping and gnashing of teeth, and of being sentenced to hell (e.g. Matthew 23. 33; 24.50-51, 25.30, 46). The theme of hell is one which Jesus introduces into the Bible, and it makes his teaching nastier than that of the Old Testament. Subsequently it is the Paul who would later write I Corinthians 13 who speaks of God righteously repaying those who have afflicted the Thessalonian Christians, when Christ appears in flaming fire inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and who refuse to acknowledge the gospel, who will thus suffer the punishment of eternal destruction and exclusion from the Lord's presence (2 Thessalonians 1.5-9). Paul did not invent this idea, but neither did he get it from the Old Testament (which does not speak of hell in this way).

Consequently, when we pray 'Come, Lord Jesus' (e.g. Revelation 22.20; I Corinthians 16.22), we are *ipso facto* praying for the holocaust which must accompany that coming. Indeed, explicit prayer for this final punishment of one's enemies appears in the New Testament, just as prayer for their this-worldly punishment appears in the Old Testament. The most dramatic instance is John's vision of the martyrs crying, 'How long, sovereign Lord, holy and true, must it be before thou wilt vindicate us and avenge our blood upon the inhabitants of the earth?' (Revelation 6.10). Far from being rebuked, this prayer receives a reassuring response, both in its immediate context, and in the lurid portrayals of God's final judgement on evil (often seen as epitomized by Babylon) which appear in succeeding visions.

Of course, when we bring our prayers to God, we regularly have to face the possibility that he may say that this is not an occasion when this prayer can be granted. Indeed, this is a reassurance to us that we can take risks in prayer—God can handle them. Sometimes, the main importance of a prayer for vengeance may be that it gets one's hostile feelings off one's chest in a way that is less harmful to the one whose act provoked it than the action would be! In the Old Testament, Psalm 139 follows a prayer for judgement with a commitment to being open to God's testing of one's heart (see further below), and one of Jeremiah's prayers met with a rebuke(see Jeremiah 15.15-21), though the passage does not indicate that it is the element of seeking vengeance in this prayer which God challenges. Indeed, Jeremiah's protest at God deceiving him is more likely the reason for God's rebuke. Nevertheless, the believer who would be inclined to model his prayer on Old Testament prayers for judgement or on New Testament curses has to face the challenge of Luke 23.24 and the question, which kind of prayer is appropriate to this kind of context. But prayer for the judgement of wrongdoers is not alien to New Testament faith.

## The Psalmist's Challenge

If the reason why we feel uncomfortable in the presence of Psalm 137 is not that its attitudes do not match up to those of the New Testament, this raises the question: does the problem with the psalm lie in us? If this is the case, this Psalm challenges us in various ways about our own prayer.

The psalmist prays the way he does because of the depth of his need and because of his relationship with God. Another common misapprehension about this psalm is that its author must have been nasty or insensitive. But it is striking that several of the most hateful and vengeful passages in the Psalter appear in the psalms that are also remarkable for their depth and sensitivity. In Psalm 139 a prayer for the death of the wicked and a declaration of hatred for them (verses 19-22) comes in the context of a moving testimony of God's knowing all about me and being able to reach me anywhere, and a declaration of openness to his testing (verses 1-18, 23-24). Similarly Psalm 137 begins with a sensitive lament expressing the sadness and grief of an exile recalling his homeland but taunted by his oppressors: 'Sing us a song about Jerusalem, then!' 'How can we sing the Lord's song here?' The author of this song is one who cares about the city of God, the praise of God, and the name of God. He is not simply nasty, insensitive, or unspiritual.

The psalms in general are characterized by extremes of feeling. They scale heights of trust, joy and love, and plumb depths of grief, anger, and despair; and they invite those who use them to scale these heights and plumb these depths with them, rather than to be content with prayers which are neither one thing nor the other. They suggest that the reason we do not pray in this way is that we do not feel things in the same way the psalmists do. Of course, we may not have been besieged, starved, compelled to watch our children die and our homes burn, bundled off into exile and taunted by our new 'hosts', as the psalmist had. In one sense we can hardly be blamed for not praying with the urgency that the psalmist shows, but we need to learn from his depth and sensitivity.

He also prays this way because he is confronted by a people who are under God's judgement. We have seen that each Testament pictures the nations both as intended to find God and as destined to be punished for resisting him; and that each Testament pictures the people of God praying for the punishment of the wicked as well as concerned for their restoration and blessing. Both expectations and desires are apparently valid. Presumably it is a nation's own attitude to God that decides which destiny it experiences. If they repent, they can be forgiven; but if they turn their back on God, they must be punished.

The Bible assumes that it sometimes becomes quite clear which destiny a particular nation has opted for. In the case of the Canaanites in the time of Joshua, of Israel in the time of Jeremiah, of Babylon in the time of Cyrus, and of Israel again in the time of Paul (see I Thessalonians 2.16), it was punishment. A prayer for forgiveness is thus presumably only granted when those for whom one prays turn from their sin; and a prayer for vengeance only when they do not. The Nineveh of Jonah's story shows that one aim of telling people that they are to be judged is to draw them back to God.

In *A Rumour of Angels* (Pelican edition, p. 86), Peter Berger observes that even 'unbelievers' periodically find that their 'sense of what is humanly permissible is so fundamentally outraged that the only adequate response to the offence as well as to the offender seems to be a curse of supernatural dimensions'. The Bible confirms that 'hope and damnation are two aspects of the same, encompassing vindication' (p 88) and assures us that there *is* justice. If we do not find ourselves wishing to call down a curse of divine magnitude on some perpetrators of evil, this may reflect our spiritual sensitivity, our good fortune in not being confronted by evil of such measure, or it may reflect our moral indifference. Perhaps it is odd that we do not pray more angrily about those who oppress our fellow-believers in Iran (the ones whose safety is not safeguarded by their north Atlantic nationality) or who oppress ordinary people in El Salvador.

Yet perhaps another reason why a psalm such as this does not come easily to our lips is that it presupposes an equation of political nation and people of God which is not our situation. God was then working out his redemptive purpose through political history in a sense in which he is no longer. We don't pray this way because as the church we aren't involved in political history in the same sense as Israel was. On the other hand, we do still believe (don't we?) that our God is the Lord of history and purposes to vindicate his justice in this world.

But what about the children? Once again, the suffering of Babylon's children envisaged here is of a piece with the rest of the biblical story. Israel's escape from Egypt explicitly involved the death of Egypt's children. Israel's occupation of Palestine explicitly involved the death of Canaan's children. The promise of Isaiah regarding Babylon explicitly refers to the death of her children. Israel's own experience of the fall of her city explicitly involved the death of her children: babies eaten by their mothers, princes executed before their father's eyes. And Israel's (and our) redemption cost Bethlehem the death of her children.

If we are concerned for the children of Babylon, we ought to be concerned about the napalm children of Vietnam, the kwashiorkor children of Uganda, and the battered babies of Britain. If we are concerned for the children of Babylon, what have we done about the suffering children of our own society? And how have we prayed for them? Or is our concern about suffering children only a topic for armchair theology? It would be nice if history could proceed without bringing suffering to 'innocent children', but life is not like that. A nation's children share the blessings of their parents, from whom indeed they derive their very life. Inevitably a nation's children equally share the deprivation and the calamities of their parents. The suffering of children in war is bound into the corporate nature of human life in a sinful world. Indeed, a nation's future is its children, so that if a nation is to be made to suffer, its children must be part of that. The suffering of children is an inevitable part of history.

And that is true whether the agency concerned to make a nation suffer is human or divine. It was God who had made humanity a corporate affair in which children are bound more closely to their parents than is the case with other creatures. So when God brings judgement on a nation, that judgement has to involve its children.

It is not God's desire that judgement should fall on either adults or children. Another function of a psalm such as this one is to draw us to repentance lest ours is the fate it refers to. But if a people refuses his grace and resists his purpose, this is its judgement, adults and children