

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON (PSALM 136)

*Sung after the Polyeleos on the Sundays of the Prodigal
Son, the Last Judgment, and Forgiveness Sunday*

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept when we
remembered Sion. *Alleluia.*

Upon the willows in the midst thereof did we hang our instruments. *Alleluia.*
For there, they that had taken us captive asked us for words of song;
And they that had led us away asked us for a hymn, saying: sing us one of the
songs of Sion. *Alleluia.*

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? *Alleluia.*
If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten.
Alleluia.

Let my tongue cleave to my throat, if I remember thee not,
If I set not Jerusalem above all others, as at the head of my joy. *Alleluia.*
Remember, O Lord, the sons of Edom, in the day of Jerusalem, Who said:
Lay waste, lay waste to her, even to the foundations thereof. *Alleluia.*
O daughter of Babylon, thou wretched one,
blessed shall he be who shall reward thee wherewith thou hast rewarded
us. *Alleluia.*

Blessed shall he be who shall seize and dash thine infants against the rock.
Alleluia.

General Points:

- Psalm 137 (Greek numbering: Psalm 136)
- the Septuagint makes it one of the lamentations of Jeremiah, naming him for the author of it.
 - Slavonic Psalter: “For David, by Jeremiah, in the Captivity”
- Many in Kingdom of Judah were deported to Babylon
- Laments the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BC.
- Babylon = “confusion”

Usage:

- It is only sung in church the three Sundays that precede Great Lent.
- Matins for: Sunday of the Prodigal Son, Sundays of Meatfare and Cheesefare,
- It's significant that this same hymn is chanted at the beginning of the service of monastic tonsure.
- After singing the Polieley of the Psalms: "Praise the name of the Lord" and "O give thanks unto the Lord", sing also Psalm 136: "By the rivers of Babylon", "with the beautiful alleluia", i. e. in the known chant with special tenderness, with sweet singing.

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and we wept when we remembered Sion. *Alleluia.*

- The rivers of Babylon are the Euphrates river, its tributaries, and the Chebar river.
- Lamentation for Jerusalem, the holy city, as compared with the city of Babylon
- **By the waters**
 - represent the vices of the world, which can carry us away as a mighty river (Cassiodorus)
 - NOTE: sitting **BY** the waters, **not IN** the waters
 - IN the waters – being carried away by sin
 - BY (over) the waters
 - lamenting our sinful condition
 - observing how passions can easily carry us away, as a mighty river.
 - We have been “rescued” to some extent from the passions, but are still in great danger
- **there we sat down and we wept**
 - Cassiodorus – a midway position
 - Upright – would be arrogant
 - Prostrate – would denote a fall
 - Sitting – the sinner is aware of his sins and is struggling against them
- **when we remembered Sion**
 - Sion – represents salvation
 - To the Jews a place – Jerusalem, where the temple was.
 - Actually refers to Theosis, the Holy Spirit abiding in the believer:
 - Psa 132:13 KJVA For the LORD hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation.

So much of the OT contains Jewish traditional phrases, historical events that actually have a symbolic meaning pointing to the New Testament.

“Sion” is one of those ideas.

Is there any more perfect psalm to contemplate on the threshold of Great Lent?

Upon the willows in the midst thereof did we hang our instruments. *Alleluia.*

- did we hang our instruments
 - Instruments – for entertainment.
 - Hung on the willows because they did not want to play them during their weeping.
- Upon the willows
 - tree that grows by the water
 - deep roots, not easily washed away by floods
 - compared to saints: Isa 44:2-4 KJVA Thus saith the LORD that made thee, and formed thee from the womb, which will help thee; Fear not, O Jacob, my servant; and thou, Jesurun, whom I have chosen. (3) For I will pour water upon him that is thirsty, and floods upon the dry ground: I will pour my spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring: (4) **And they shall spring up as among the grass, as willows by the water courses.**
- in the midst thereof
 - in the midst of Babylon – the world
 - Christian lives in the world, but must remain rooted, not carried away by it, like a willow.

For there, they that had taken us captive asked us for words of song;
And they that had led us away asked us for a hymn, saying: sing us one of the
songs of Sion. *Alleluia.*

- For there, they that had taken us captive
 - Taunting of the pagans
 - “they” are our passions
- asked us for words of song
 - That which takes us captive will never satisfy
 - Ecc 5:10-16 KJVA He that **loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver**; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity. (11) When goods increase, they are increased that eat them: and what good is there to the owners thereof, saving the beholding of them with their eyes? (12) The sleep of a labouring man is sweet, whether he eat little or much: **but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep.** (13) There is a sore evil which I have seen under the sun, namely, riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt. (14) But those riches perish by evil travail: and he begetteth a son, and there is nothing in his hand. (15) As he came forth of his mother's womb, naked shall he return to go as he came, and shall take nothing of his labour, which he may carry away in his hand. (16) And this also is a sore evil, that in all points as he came, so shall he go: and what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind?

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

- The strange land is the land of sin
- like the prodigal son in a Far Country
- We cannot sing the Lords song unless we have become pure.
- 1Jn 3:21 Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God.

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten.
Alleluia.

- A good thing to remember when in times of temptation

Let my tongue cleave to my throat, if I remember thee not,
If I set not Jerusalem above all others, as at the head of my joy. *Alleluia.*

- Here is an opportunity to check our priorities.
- Is our salvation set above “all others”?
- We should weep and lament our weakened state.

Remember, O Lord, the sons of Edom, in the day of Jerusalem, Who said:
Lay waste, lay waste to her, even to the foundations thereof. *Alleluia.*

- Day of Jerusalem – day of its destruction by the Babylonians
- Oba 1:10-14 KJVA For thy violence against thy brother Jacob shame shall cover thee, and thou shalt be cut off for ever. (11) In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in the day that the strangers carried away captive his forces, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, even thou wast as one of them. (12) But thou shouldest not have looked on the day of thy brother in the day that he became a stranger; neither shouldest thou have rejoiced over the children of Judah in the day of their destruction; neither shouldest thou have spoken proudly in the day of distress. (13) Thou shouldest not have entered into the gate of my people in the day of their calamity; yea, thou shouldest not have looked on their affliction in the day of their calamity, nor have laid hands on their substance in the day of their calamity; (14) Neither shouldest thou have stood in the crossway, to cut off those of his that did escape; neither shouldest thou have delivered up those of his that did remain in the day of distress.
- Edomites – descendants of Esau

O daughter of Babylon, thou wretched one,
blessed shall he be who shall reward thee wherewith thou hast rewarded us. *Alleluia.*

- **O daughter of Babylon**
 - Daughter – the flesh
 - flesh heaps the confusion of sins upon us.

Blessed shall he be who shall seize and dash thine infants against the rock.
Alleluia.

- **dash thine infants against the rock**
 - Cassiodorus, commentary on the psalms –
 - little ones are the harmful vices of the flesh
 - Little ones – THOUGHTS
 - in dashing them , we are beginning to control them.
 - **Against the rock** – we do not linger over them, we destroy them
 - <http://books.google.com/books?id=2M08R28pzasC&dq=jerome+psalms+commentary&pg=PP1&ots=A5oqAHjlc&source=citation&sig=8eycgRkwvtKkdNjXGGQyoG8hJ8k&hl=en&prev=http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=Jerome+psalms+commentary&sa=X&oi=print&ct=result&cd=2&cad=bottom-3results#PPA364,M1>
 - the rock is Christ
 - 1Co 10:1-4 KJVA Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; (2) And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; (3) And did all eat the same spiritual meat; (4) And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.
 - Easy to kill “little ones” but if passions allowed to grow, much harder to uproot
 - Same idea is present in Psa 100:8 (Sept) KJVA I will early destroy all the wicked of the land; that I may cut off all wicked doers from the city of the LORD.
 - Isa 13:6-19 KJVA Howl ye; for the day of the LORD is at hand; it shall come as a destruction from the Almighty. (7) Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart shall melt: (8) And they shall be afraid: pangs and sorrows shall take hold of them; they shall be in pain as a woman that travaileth: they shall be amazed one at another; their faces shall be as flames. (9) Behold, the day of the LORD cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it. (10) For the stars of heaven and the constellations thereof shall not give their light: the sun shall be darkened in his going forth, and the moon shall not cause her light to shine. (11) And I will punish the world for their evil, and the wicked for their iniquity; and I will cause the arrogancy of the proud to cease, and will lay low the haughtiness of the terrible. (12) I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir. (13) Therefore I will shake the heavens, and the earth shall remove out of her place, in the wrath of the LORD of hosts, and in the day of his fierce anger. (14) And it shall be as the chased roe, and as a sheep that no man taketh up: they shall every man turn to his own people, and flee every one into his own land. (15) Every one that is found shall be thrust through; and every one that is joined unto them shall fall by the sword. (16) **Their children also shall be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses shall be spoiled, and their wives ravished.** (17) Behold, I will stir up the Medes against them, which shall not regard silver; and as for gold, they shall not delight in it. (18) Their bows also shall dash the young men to pieces; and they shall have no pity on the fruit of the womb; their eye shall not spare children. (19) And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah.

DO not be afraid of VIOLENT imagery.

Luk 14:26 If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.

Mat 11:12 And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

This document is at:

http://www.orthodox.net/catechism/prayers-of-the-church-lenten-prayers_by-the-waters-of-babylon_psalms136.doc
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These notes accompany the talk at:

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