



Slavery History: Dungeon at Elmina Castle, Ghana

MAAFA SERVICE

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, February 17, 2008

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Lection – Psalm 137 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. (v. 2) On the willows there we hung up our harps. (v. 3) For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” (v. 4) How could we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? (v. 5) If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let

my right hand wither! (v. 6) Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. (v. 7) Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall, how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!" (v. 8) O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! (v. 9) Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

MAAFA is a Kiswahili term meaning the "Great Disaster" (of 15th-19th century European, North American, South American, and Caribbean slavery). Some African American congregations conduct MAAFA services to honor the heroic struggle of black Africans who were violently seized from their ancestral lands and pressed into inhumane chattel slavery. These services also memorialize the millions of black Africans who died in the "Middle Passage"—the brutal, trans-Atlantic voyage—in the hulls of slave ships.

While MAAFA services acknowledge this grim period in world history, they primarily accentuate the determination and resistance of those victimized by slavery. Furthermore, these services invite participants to relinquish to God the bitterness, hatred, and guilt concerning these atrocities, in order to be more spiritually ready for protest against the present manifestations of "slavery" around the globe. Finally, by remembering the "Great Disaster," congregations challenge the tendency of countries and cultural groups to ignore or de-emphasize the tragedy and lingering effects of chattel slavery. MAAFA services are now held throughout the United States.¹

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Psalm 137

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Violence and disorientation are becoming more commonplace in our world. As I write this commentary on Psalm 137, United States-led military forces continue to fight Iraqi insurgents. Ironically, much of this warfare has occurred "by the rivers of Babylon," the famed Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, that flowed through ancient Babylon and now flow through contemporary Iraq (Psalm 137:1). While Iraq occupies the headlines, this war only begins the long list of social unrest and hostility across the globe. Recently, violence has also occurred in Haiti, Liberia, Palestine, Damascus, and Sudan. This international violence enables us to identify more readily with the realities of being a victim of large social forces beyond one's control.

Many African Americans, when reading Psalm 137, have equated the experience of exile detailed in the text with the "exilic" experience of slavery and segregation.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The Babylonian exile constitutes the historical background of Psalm 137. In 587 BCE, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and carried many Judean elites (the smartest and strongest) into captivity.

Memory is a major theological theme in this text. The passage examines the complex and painful process of remembering. The psalm divides into three stanzas: vv. 1-4; 5-6; and 7-9. In each stanza, a form of the Hebrew verb “to remember” (*zācar*) occurs (vv. 1, 6, and 7).

Remembering creates three different responses: anguish, accountability, and anger. In vv. 1-4, the exile produces anguish in the entire community. Notice the prevalence of first person plural language (“we”) in these verses. Remembering the former greatness of Zion and the destruction of the Lord’s temple by a foreign power, the community adopts the posture of mourning—sitting. Also, the taunts of the imperial captors increased their anguish. The Babylonians’ request for the exiles to “sing us one of the songs of Zion” was a vicious request for a type of “minstrel show.” Can we see this happening today?

In vv. 5-6, the remembering assumes a more personal dimension. Notice the shift to first person singular language (“I”). Remembering Jerusalem is painful, but the psalmist realizes the danger of cultural and religious amnesia. This psalmist holds himself accountable, lest he engage in the unthinkable act of forgetting Zion. Jerusalem was the religious center of Israel, and its temple a place of spiritual nurture. Possibly, the writer was formerly employed at the Temple as both a musician and a singer—hence the references to the activity of his right hand in v. 5 and of his tongue in v. 6. So accountable is he to his cultural and religious heritage that he would endure physical suffering that would render him useless as a musician and singer. His heritage is more important than his well-being. Without his heritage he is dead anyway.

The communal and personal remembering of the first two stanzas compels the psalmist to exhort God to remember in the last stanza. Verse 7 begins with a command, not from God, but to God. The psalmist boldly demands that God not get amnesia. This last stanza boils with an anger born of injustice. The psalmist begs God to remember the injustices of the Edomites, who assisted the Babylonians during the destruction of Jerusalem (see the book of Obadiah). Edom was a small country to the southeast of Judah.

The psalmist also harbors disturbing fantasies of violence against Babylon, which involve the murder of children. Interpreters of this last stanza are right to denounce its violence. Yet by failing to engage these troubling verses, preachers may forfeit an opportunity to examine the dynamics of pain and imperial oppression. The psalmist honestly announces how violence enacted upon his community incites a violent impulse in him. Is this still happening in our community? What comes out of the mouths and minds of oppressed children and their parents? Is it the words of urban “poets” like Tupac Shakur and Biggie Smalls, the words of martyred prophets like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, or all of the above?

Rage—and the fantasies it creates—properly channeled can be a powerful tool for resisting political and economic slavery. The raw articulation of pain, especially in a worship context, has enormous healing potential. However, the danger of fantasies of revenge is that they can so quickly become obsessions that drive persons to the very violence they hate. By articulating the fantasies about revenge and violence in sermons and worship services, and then linking such fantasies to the violence that causes imperial domination in the first place, we may eventually reject the seductive invitations of violence.

Unfortunately, by virtue of middle and upper class status, some African Americans have ironically become “Babylonian captors” who directly or indirectly oppress other people. Let us be honest about the pain of oppression and ask if we are the oppressed, the oppressor, or both at the same time. If we are the Babylonian enemy persecuting others, let the willingness of oppressed people to endure harm for the sake of their heritage (vv. 5-6) and their fantasies of violent retaliation (vv. 8-9) persuade us to cease and desist our domination of them. Do not become what you hate.²

Celebration

This text teaches us to celebrate the power of remembering one’s God-given heritage, even in desperate circumstances.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: The rushing waters of the “rivers of Babylon”; the sobs of exiles sitting by those waters (v. 1); the mocking tone of the Babylonians’ request (v. 3)

Sights: Countless harps hanging in the willows, the size and color of the willow trees (v. 2)

Smells: The rotting flesh of countless babies dashed against rocks, which is a foul reminder of the sinfulness of violence, even retaliatory violence (v. 9)

III. Sermon Quotations

- A rattlesnake, if cornered, will sometimes become so angry it will bite itself. That is exactly what the harboring of hate and resentment against others is—a biting of oneself. We think that we are harming others in holding these spites and hates, but the deeper harm is to ourselves.³
- Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows. Aristotle said that some people were only fit to be slaves. I do not contradict him. But I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters.⁴
- Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies toughness in a descending spiral of destruction... The chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars—must be broken, or we shall be plunged into the dark abyss of annihilation.⁵

Notes

1. For further information on MAAFA, consult The Afrocentric Experience online at: <http://www.swagga.com/maafa.htm> accessed January 6, 2007

2. Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition. New York: Continuum, 2000.
3. Jones, E. Stanley. Reader's Digest December 1981.
4. Lewis, C. S., and Walter Hooper. "Equality." Present Concerns. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986. pp. 17-25
5. King, Martin Luther. Strength to Love. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.