

“By the Rivers of Babylon”

by Wayne Walker

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion” (Psalm 137:1). God brought the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage, through the wilderness, to enter the promised land. Israel became a great nation under the reigns of David and Solomon, but afterward the kingdom divided, the people went into apostasy, and they were taken into Babylonian captivity. Psalm 137 records how some of them, the faithful or the repentant or perhaps both, sat by the rivers of Babylon to weep when they remembered Zion. They hung their harps on the willows when those who took them captive asked them to sing a song because they could not sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land.

When I was a sophomore in high school, we read a short story from our literature book whose title, “By the Waters of Babylon,” seems to have been taken from this Psalm. It was written by Stephen Vincent Benét and first published on July 31, 1937, in **The Saturday Evening Post** as “The Place of the Gods.” In 1943 it was republished under its present title in **The Pocket Book of Science Fiction**. At the beginning of the story, set in the future following the destruction of industrial civilization, one might think that it takes place somewhere in the Middle East or North Africa, because the story is about ruins and a great river such as the Euphrates or the Nile. But when the details are examined, the reader comes to see that the story occurs somewhere in the Northeastern United States, with the river Ou-dis-sun (Hudson), a statue that says “ASHING” (George WASHINGTON), and a building marked “UBTREAS” (the Subtreasury Building of New York City). The plot produces a very eerie, almost chilling effect.

Benet evidently was comparing the feelings that the people of this futuristic setting would feel at the destruction of their industrial civilization to the response that the Israelites felt in their captivity following the conquest of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. In like manner, when a person is separated from God by sin, there can be no true joy in his life. However, there is always hope. At the end of the short story, the main character, a young man named John who is the son of a priest, states, “We must build again.” A remnant of the Israelites returned to Jerusalem that they might rebuild. And even though we have sinned, *“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life”* (John 3:16). Yes! We too can start over and build again.

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