

# Singing the Lord's song in a foreign land

Psalm 137, Matthew 2, Psalm 2

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**Introduction:** Hope you had a good “Reyes” weekend – we never celebrated Epiphany when I was growing up, but our sons never missed an opportunity, and since they were growing up in Spain, they recognized the Spanish celebration as a great opportunity, whichever version of the *Reyes Magos* you adhered to! The Spanish have a saying: “*Cada uno en su casa es rey*” (“Everyone in his own house is a king”; but today they’d have to update this saying to “*Cada uno en su casa es rey o reina*”: “Everyone in his or her house is king or queen”). Who’s reigning in your household? And in your life this new year? Who’s on the throne of your heart? We want to talk about kings this morning; although the title of the message says, “*Singing the Lord’s Song in a Foreign Land*,” the underlying question here is, “who’s your king?!” This question came up as far back as the early days of Israel when the people looked around at other nations and decided they wanted to be more like *them!* (That’s dangerous!) In fact, they thought that to have a king like other nations was the solution to all their problems. Of course, in effect they were telling God they didn’t want Him for their King – they wanted a visible human king, and it was the beginning of so many problems, since the first king (Saul) turned out not to have the spiritual maturity for the job. And it’s so important for us to realize that we don’t have the spiritual maturity to be king of our own lives! But as you’ll remember, their second king set a higher standard – a man after God’s own heart – in spite of some serious flaws and failures that later revealed he didn’t have the maturity to rule God’s people either. But God promised King David that one of his descendants would ultimately come to reign on his throne forever, and He would be the perfect King, desired of all nations, the one who was truly fit to govern rightly.

**1)** So nearly ten centuries later, when all the conditions were right, in the fulfillment of God’s timing, He sent this descendant from the line of David, born of the virgin Mary in the city of David, and His life was immediately in danger from the local king by the name of Herod (“the great”: great in jealousy, ambition, and ego, a real megalomaniac!). His reputation for killing those who seemed a threat to him was well deserved, and his victims included one of his wives (his favorite), both of his sons by her, and too many others to count. But surely the most heinous deed he’s remembered for was condemning to death all those little boys around Bethlehem two years old and under, when he discovered that the Wise Men had not returned to inform him about the new king whose star they had seen in the east. “**The slaughter of the innocents**,” it’s called, motive for Matthew’s prophetically recalling Rachel’s uncontrollable weeping over her sons. The Greek liturgy claims Herod killed 14,000 boys, while Syrian Christian tradition speaks of 64,000, and medieval authors often put the number at 144,000. Of course, this far exceeds the population of a small town like Bethlehem; so the whole incident is called into question by liberal scholarship, whereas those who take the biblical testimony seriously recognize it as totally in keeping with Herod’s character, and no real evidence for doubting it has been forthcoming except for liberal debunking of the scriptural testimony. Conservative scholars suggest that given the probable population of Bethlehem at the time, the number killed was likely

somewhere between 10 and 20 male children, which would explain why historians of the period wouldn't have taken note or given it importance. Even so, it's a heinous crime that King Herod commits, cause for copious lamenting, but for some reason it's called "blessed" when the psalmist imagined a similar treatment for the innocents of Babylon from Ps. 137, read this morning, though of course we omitted reading those terrible final verses because of the overt violence they describe. I've never preached a sermon on this Psalm, but I trust you do remember how it ends, apparently glorifying vengeance and even infanticide, in the most gruesome form (dashing babies against the rocks). It calls the perpetrator of such evil "happy" (Heb. *asher*), precisely because it's done against Israel's arch-enemy Babylon. How do *you* deal with **Psalm 137 as "the word of God"**? (Usually we think of God's word in terms of His commandments, teaching, or examples to follow...)

**2)** We have to start with context. This psalm is a reflection of the broken hearts and dreams of the Jewish people exiled in Babylon after the destruction of their beloved Jerusalem. You remember how the Chaldean destruction of Jerusalem was the most devastating point in Israel's history, when all her sinful idolatry finally caught up with her; what we sow is what we reap (Num. 32:23, "**be sure your sin will find you out**"). It was the most tragic day in Judah's history, but her prophets had been foretelling it for generations. Her kings had for the most part been corrupt (notable exceptions included Jehoshaphat, Jotham, Hezekiah, and Josiah). So now Judah was under a pagan king (Nebuchadnezzar), living in a foreign land, and it seemed to these exiles that the **songs of Zion** had been forfeited because of their disgraceful status as slaves, and the request of their captors for them to sing songs of Zion felt like mockery and humiliation. So their best response was to hang up their harps (no more singing), dig their heels deeper into their devotion to Jerusalem, curse their enemies (Edom), and proclaim desire for vengeance against Babylon; the most vivid expression of spiritual zeal became the dashing of babies against the rocks.

Was this God's attitude they were expressing? At one level, their prediction of disaster on the enemies of God is irrefutable – it would indeed come to pass in God's timing, because the enemies would also reap what they had sown! Those who oppose God and His ways are also opposing goodness, justice, truth; the only possible outcome for them is to reap the consequences of such foolishness (Jer. 6:19 says that when God judges people, He simply lets them experience the fruit of their own evil schemes). In fact, what we find in this psalm is true of many places in the prophets as well, where the writer, in dialogue with God, actually lays bare his soul, his deepest angers and resentments, and God can handle it ... even when it doesn't represent God's highest standard. In other words, God allowed His servants to vent with Him, to pour out their souls to Him and give voice to their angers and fears, even the worst and ugliest parts. Does God allow you and me to do that?! Of course, He does – it's preferable that you should pour out all the junk in your soul before God than on your family or work-mates, etc. But on another level, we realize that God's own attitude toward enemies is quite a different story from what this Psalm depicts, because we see how it plays out in the example of the King who conquered by giving up His life instead of destroying His enemies on the spot according to their just deserts. However, we can't expect Old Testament writers to manifest the same understanding and nobility toward fellow humans as in the New Testament standard (= anachronistic).

**3)** So many kings have come and gone since Nebuchadnezzar's day, since Herod's day. Down through history as humanity has awaited the return and/or arrival of that promised King who would rule with justice and faithfulness, undoubtedly the majority of all human kings have been unworthy, but many a legend of *worthier warrior-kings* has sparked the human imagination, from every continent and nation around the world. Disney has promoted magical kingdoms for decades (since 1955), and my kids were playing *Age of Empires* since computer war games 1<sup>st</sup> began to be promoted (kingdoms and lords, transformers, earth wars, playground wars, empire warriors, gang nations, etc.) – everybody looking for that special formula: the true winner, the ideal ruler who brings peace and justice for all. In the West, specifically the British tradition, that ideal was especially represented in the

story of King Arthur, supposedly a 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century Romanized Celtic who fought against the invading Anglo-Saxons. The legend that grew up around him received its most complete form in *Le Morte d'Arthur* (1485), the classic English-language chronicle by Sir Thomas Malory, and centuries later, elaborated in T.H. White's series of novels under the title, *The Once and Future King* (1938-40); later immortalized in the stage and movie productions of Camelot. But since Malory's version, the story has included this tomb inscription for him: "*Hic iacet Arthurus, rex quondam, rexque futurus*" ["Here lies Arthur, once and future king"]. What an enduring legend was constructed around the memory of this warrior-king, who must have been an amazing leader – if he actually even lived! In spite of the many claims that King Arthur was a real historical person, the current consensus among specialists on the period holds him to be more of a mythological or folkloric figure. At best he was just a "dream king."

4) And who wants a fairy tale king?! John Gray, British atheistic philosopher, wrote a book in 2023 entitled *The New Leviathans*, where he declares unabashedly that, Christianity has historically been the anchor for free societies in the West. But in pursuit of worldly kings and worldly patterns, Western nations have moved farther and farther away from their traditional Christian roots, and now pursue individual freedom to such an extreme that they're denying humanity's identity as made in the image of God; hence they are systematically "deconverting," abandoning the Christian faith. And this atheist asks with genuine concern, what on earth is going to happen to these nations? How will they avoid becoming utterly destabilized? And his prediction for the West is that we are headed into a time of serious social decomposition and moral chaos, racing toward a very dark precipice!

But what's the missing piece in Gray's vision of the future? In his atheist philosophy, there is no concept of redemption; in his agnostic DNA, there is no gene that carries the spark of hope! In his unbelief, there is no true king of this universe – we're a headless monster hurtling through space at breakneck speed with no destination. But we know the once and future King for real, the once and coming King, the real King of history always reigning on high, already reigning in hearts that confess His name. Because the King we worship and follow is neither a legend nor a fairy tale, but the authentic Lord of human history – Author of its most important chapter – with mountains of evidence regarding His true existence and legacy (more manuscript evidence than for any other ancient figure in history, as well as the marks He left on history itself, including Scripture itself, the mere existence of the church, and Sunday as the Lord's day). Our only hope for meaning and redemption comes from this One that Scripture calls "King of kings" and "Lord of lords" (Rev. 1:5-6, 17:14, 19:13, 16; 1 Tim. 6:13-15; for other titles and claims, cf. Is. 9:6-7, Dan. 7:13-14; Jn. 18:36, Ac. 2:30-32, Eph. 1:20-21).

**Conclusion:** According to **Psalm 2**, this is the King whom God Himself installed on the throne of Zion; the kings of earth are warned to serve and submit to Him; and "**blessed are all who take refuge in Him.**" So no matter what land you live in today, if you're a Christian and serious follower of this King, ***you live in a foreign land***, a country not ultimately your real home. And you are indeed called to sing the Lord's songs there: songs of praise and adoration for the King who is worthy, songs of comfort and joy for the saints in Christ, songs of loving exhortation to carry the Good News in word and deed to those who walk in darkness – the songs of Zion! For we are truly the Israel of God, inviting all the peoples of the world to enter His loving Kingdom. May we learn together to call on His name and live under His rule in the foreign land of this new year ... and to sing His song!