

Psalm 137

A New Translation

The translation offered below is designed to enhance appreciation of the poetry and prosody of the underlying Hebrew text. The notations provided relate to the operation of the general rule and the length rule.¹

A translation free of notation is offered first. Unobtrusive differences in the use of blank spacing define stress units, versets, lines, strophes, and stanzas.

Even if one possesses little or no knowledge of Hebrew, the translation may prove helpful in getting a sense of how ancient Hebrew poetry works. A single dominant accent is signaled by attaching words in translation, and serves to point to underlying prosodic units in the Hebrew. Minimal use of capitalization and punctuation are intentional. Capitalization serves to mark the onset of a strophe as defined in the general rule.

The goal has been to furnish a global approximation of the poetry and prosody of the Hebrew text, even if the results are necessarily piecemeal. The rich texture of the original cannot be mapped onto a translation except in fits and starts. I sometimes retain, in imitation of the Hebrew, examples of chiasm, inversion, and ellipsis which perforce result in a less idiomatic rendering.

It is not possible, of course, to reproduce every case of two stresses in a row in the original or to suppress every case of two stresses in a row in translation without analogy in the original. Nevertheless, some attempt has been made to mimic the overall frequency of stress clash in the Hebrew text. The reproduction of metrical feet in translation is a daunting task. Some attempt has been made to represent shorter feet in Hebrew with shorter feet in English, and longer with longer, but no attempt has been made to avoid dactyls and first class paeons, though of course they are non-existent in Hebrew.

Lines are numbered in sequence according to their place in a 12 line unit.

Symbols

	A strophe made up of three lines
	1:(1:1) in structure; the strophe
	 concludes a strophe;  a sub-stanza;  a stanza;  a section
2:(2:2)	A line consisting of three versets, each of which contains two stress units, the last two of which form a pair
3	Line 3 of a 12, 14, 18, 22, or 28 line poem or subunit thereof
40/90/216 17/6/2/1	A poetic composition made up of 40 lines, 90 versets, and 216 stress units, with a total of 17 strophes, 6 stanzas, and 2 sections

¹ For an introduction to the general rule and the length rule, see John F. Hobbins, "Regularities in Ancient Hebrew Verse: An Overview," at www.ancienthebrewpoetry.typepad.com.

Psalm 137

By the rivers of Babylon
there we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion
on the willows in its midst
we hung our lyres
For there our captors
demanded words of song
our mockers mirth
sing for us
a song of Zion
how can we sing a song of Yahweh
on foreign soil?

If I forget you, Jerusalem
let my right hand wither
let my tongue cleave to my palate
if I do not remember you
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest delight

Remember, Yahweh,
against the Edomites
that day of Jerusalem
when they said, lay bare, lay bare
the foundation of it
Lovely Babylon, the doomed
how happy he who rewards you
with the portion you apportioned us
how happy he who seizes and dashes
your infants against the rock

Psalm 137*

1	☞	By the rívers of Bábylon thére we_sát and_wépt when_we_remébered Zíon	(2:3):2	
2	☞	on the_wíllows in_its_mídst we_húng our_lýres	<u>2:2</u>	
3	☞	For thére our_cáptors demáded words_of_sóng our_móckers mírth	(2:2):2	
4	☞	síng for_ús a_sóng of_Zíon	2:2	
5	☞	hów can_we_síng a_sóng_of_Yahweh on_fóreign sóil	<u>3:2</u>	
6	☞	If_I_forgét_you, Jerúsalem let_my_ríght_hand_wíther	2:2	
7	☞	let_my_tóngue cléave to_my_pálate if_I_do_nót reméber_you	3:2	
8	☞	if_Í_do_not_sét Jerúsalem above_my_híghest delíght	<u>3:2</u>	8/18/40
9	☞	Reméber, Yahwéh, agáinst the_Édomites that_dáy of_Jerúsalem	(2:2):2	
10	☞	when_they_sáid, lay_báre, lay_báre the_foundátion óf_it	<u>3:2</u>	
11	☞	Lovely_Bábylon, the_dóomed how_háppy he_who_rewárds_yóu with_the_pórtion you_appórtioned_ús	2:(3:3)	
12	☞	how_háppy he_who_séizes_and_dáshes your_ínfants against_the_róck	<u>3:2</u>	4/10/24

12/28/64 5/2/1

*My thanks to David Curzon for going over a draft of this translation, and for helping me to avoid unnecessary archaisms and awkward expressions.