

Deuteronomy 32:33

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps.

Analysis

Their wine is the poison of dragons, and the cruel venom of asps—Moses concludes the agricultural metaphor with deadly imagery. The Hebrew *chamat tanninim yeinam* (חַמַּת תַּנִּינִים יַיִנָם, 'poison of dragons their wine') uses *chamat* (חַמַּת), meaning venom, heat, or fury. *Tanninim* (תַּנִּינִים) can mean dragons, serpents, or sea monsters—creatures representing chaos and evil. Wine, which should gladden the heart (Psalm 104:15), instead kills when produced from Sodom's vine (v. 32).

The parallel phrase *ve-rosh petanim akhzar* (וְרֹאשׁ פְּתָנִים אַחְזָר, 'and venom of asps cruel') intensifies with *rosh* (poison, gall) and *petanim* (פְּתָנִים, cobras or asps), deadly venomous snakes. *Akhzar* (אַחְזָר, 'cruel') means fierce, merciless—the venom's effect is agonizing, not quick. The accumulated imagery—poisonous grapes (v. 32), dragon venom wine, cruel asp poison—emphasizes pagan nations' thorough moral corruption.

This completes the indictment: enemy nations may defeat Israel when God withdraws protection (v. 30), and they may recognize God's uniqueness (v. 31), but their own character remains poisonous and deadly. They're instruments of judgment, not models of righteousness. Paul quotes this verse in Romans 3:13 as part of a comprehensive indictment of universal human sinfulness—'all have sinned' (Romans 3:23), both Jew and Gentile need redemption. Only Christ, the true vine (John 15:1), produces life-giving fruit and transforms poisoned hearts.

Historical Context

The venom imagery proved prophetically accurate. Assyria's cruelty was legendary—inscriptions boast of skinning enemies alive, burning cities, and creating pyramids of skulls. Babylon blinded Zedekiah after forcing him to watch his sons' execution (2 Kings 25:7). Greek empires promoted idolatry and immorality. Rome crucified thousands along roadsides as terror tactics. Each conquering nation demonstrated the 'cruel venom' Moses prophesied. Yet God used even these wicked instruments to discipline covenant-breaking Israel, then judged the instruments themselves. This pattern continues—God remains sovereign over all nations, using even the wicked to accomplish His purposes while holding them accountable for their wickedness. The ultimate answer to humanity's poison comes through Christ, who took serpent's venom (sin's curse) on the cross, becoming 'sin for us' (2 Corinthians 5:21) to provide healing (Numbers 21:9; John 3:14-15).

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Study Questions

1. How does the dragon/serpent venom imagery connect to Genesis 3's serpent and Christ's crushing of the serpent's head (Genesis 3:15)?
2. What does it mean that even thoroughly corrupt nations (poisonous wine) remain under God's sovereign control and serve His purposes?

Interlinear Text

חַמַּם תִּ	תַּנִּינִם	יַיִן ׀	וְרֵאשׁ	פְּתֵי יַם	אֲכֹזֵר:
is the poison	of dragons	Their wine	venom	of asps	and the cruel
H2534	H8577	H3196	H7219	H6620	H393

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 58:4 (Parallel theme): Their poison is like the poison of a serpent: they are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear;

Romans 3:13 (Parallel theme): Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips:

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