

Ezekiel 5:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

When I shall send upon them the evil arrows of famine, which shall be for their destruction, and which I will send to destroy you: and I will increase the famine upon you, and will break your staff of bread:

Analysis

When I shall send upon them the evil arrows of famine, which shall be for their destruction, and which I will send to destroy you: and I will increase the famine upon you, and will break your staff of bread: Famine is personified as "evil arrows" (chitzei ha-raav ha-raim, חִצֵּי הָרָאָב הָרָאִים)—missiles of destruction that God actively shoots at His people. The imagery combines military attack (arrows) with natural disaster (famine), revealing that both are divine judgments. Famine isn't random weather failure but God's targeted weapon "sent" (ashalach, אָשְׁלַח) with destructive purpose.

The phrase "break your staff of bread" repeats 4:16, emphasizing removal of life's basic support. Bread as "staff" (matteh-lechem, מַתֵּה-לֶחֶם) represents the foundational provision sustaining existence. Breaking this staff means removing God's providential care, leaving people to starve. The intensification—"I will increase the famine"—indicates progressive worsening, not sudden calamity but gradual, relentless deprivation.

Theologically, this confronts human self-sufficiency. We cannot live by bread alone but need every word from God's mouth (Deuteronomy 8:3; Matthew 4:4). When people reject God's spiritual provision, He may remove even physical provision to drive them back to dependence on Him. The broken staff points toward Christ as the Bread of Life (John 6:35)—only He provides sustenance that truly satisfies and

never fails. All earthly provision is temporary; only God's word endures forever (Isaiah 40:8).

Historical Context

The 'arrows of famine' struck Jerusalem during Babylon's 18-month siege (589-586 BC). Jeremiah records: "The famine was severe in the city, and there was no bread for the people of the land" (Jeremiah 52:6). Lamentations graphically describes starvation's effects: infants dying for lack of milk (4:4), distinguished people scavenging trash (4:5), and people's skin shriveling from hunger (4:8).

Ancient warfare deliberately used famine as weapon. Besieging armies surrounded cities to prevent food entering, systematically starving populations into submission. Babylon employed this tactic effectively—siege works cut off all supplies, and the encircled population consumed stored food, then animals, then anything remotely edible, finally resorting to cannibalism (2 Kings 6:28-29; Lamentations 4:10).

The progressive nature of famine—gradual worsening over months—created psychological torture alongside physical suffering. Hope diminished as reserves depleted. Each day's smaller ration increased desperation. The 'staff of bread' broke slowly, not suddenly, teaching the people to recognize God's hand in their deprivation and understand that covenant violation had broken their provision's source.

Related Passages

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does God 'sending' famine as arrows reveal His active involvement in what we might call natural disasters?

2. What does the 'breaking of the staff of bread' teach about dependence on God for basic provision?
3. In what ways does Christ as the Bread of Life address our deeper hunger beyond physical food?

Interlinear Text

אֲשֶׁר בְּהָם	אֲשֶׁל חָרְבָּה	אֲתָּה חַצֵּי וְרַעַב	בְּרַעַם וְרַעַב יְמִינְךָ	אֲשֶׁר בְּהָם
When I shall send	H853	arrows	of famine	upon them the evil
H7971	H2671	H7458	H7451	H0 H834
בַּיּוֹם	לְמַשְׁחָה יְתָה	אֲשֶׁר	אֲשֶׁל חָרְבָּה	אֲזֶת מִ
H1961	which shall be for their destruction	H834	When I shall send	H853
	H4889		H7971	
לְשַׁחַתְכֶם	וְרַעַב	אַתָּה וְאַתָּה	עַלְיכֶם	וְשִׁבְרָתִי
to destroy	of famine	you and I will increase	H5921	upon you and will break
H7843	H7458	H3254		H7665
לְכָמָה	מַטָּה	לְכָמָה		
your staff	of bread	H4294		
	H3899			

Additional Cross-References

Ezekiel 4:16 (Parallel theme): Moreover he said unto me, Son of man, behold, I will break the staff of bread in Jerusalem: and they shall eat bread by weight, and with care; and they shall drink water by measure, and with astonishment: