

Habakkuk 3:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Before him went the pestilence, and burning coals went forth at his feet.

Analysis

Before him went the pestilence, and burning coals went forth at his feet. God's approach brings both plague and fire—imagery of divine judgment. "Before him went the pestilence" (בְּפָנָיו יָלַךְ דָּבָר) / lefanav yelekh dever) — (dever) is plague, epidemic disease. This recalls the plagues on Egypt (Exodus 9:3, 9:15) and judgments throughout Israel's history. Plague goes before God as herald of His coming, demonstrating that nature itself obeys His command.

"Burning coals went forth at his feet" (וַיֵּצֵא רְשָׁף לְבָגְלָיו) / veyetze reshef leraglayw) — (reshef) can mean lightning, burning flame, or the name of a pagan deity. Here it depicts destructive fire following God's footsteps. Some translations render it 'burning pestilence' or 'plague,' creating parallelism with the first phrase. Either way, the image is God's approach bringing devastation to His enemies.

The verse portrays God as divine warrior marching to battle—pestilence his vanguard, fire his rearguard. This isn't arbitrary destruction but judicial punishment against wickedness. For Babylon, God's approach meant doom. For Judah, though judgment came through Babylon, ultimate hope remained because God fights for His people against all who oppose Him.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern warfare often involved disease outbreaks and scorched-earth tactics. Habakkuk uses this imagery to describe God's warfare against His

enemies. The plagues on Egypt demonstrated God could wield disease as weapon. The Assyrian army's mysterious overnight destruction (possibly by plague, 2 Kings 19:35) showed God's power to strike with pestilence. Fire was standard military tool—cities burned, fields destroyed.

When Babylon invaded Judah, disease and famine accompanied siege warfare. Jeremiah describes pestilence, sword, and famine as the triad of judgment (Jeremiah 21:7, 27:13). Yet Habakkuk's vision looks beyond Judah's judgment to God's ultimate campaign against all evil. Eschatologically, Revelation depicts Christ's return with similar imagery—riding forth conquering (Revelation 19:11-21), bringing judgment on God's enemies.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does depicting God as divine warrior with plague and fire emphasize the seriousness of sin and certainty of judgment?
2. What comfort can believers find in knowing that all creation—even disease and fire—serves God's purposes?
3. How should the reality of God's judgment against evil affect how Christians live and proclaim the gospel?

Interlinear Text

Before	H1980	the pestilence	went forth	and burning coals	at his feet
H6440		H1698	H3318	H7565	H7272

Additional Cross-References

Deuteronomy 32:24 (Parallel theme): They shall be burnt with hunger, and devoured with burning heat, and with bitter destruction: I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them, with the poison of serpents of the dust.

Numbers 14:12 (Parallel theme): I will smite them with the pestilence, and disinherit them, and will make of thee a greater nation and mightier than they.

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