

Isaiah 23:14

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Howl, ye ships of Tarshish: for your strength is laid waste.

Analysis

Howl, ye ships of Tarshish: for your strength is laid waste (הִלִּילוּ אֲנִיֹּת תַרְשִׁישׁ כִּי (שָׁעַר מָטָרָם)—The command to heyliku (wail, howl) frames the oracle (verses 1, 6, 14), creating literary closure. **Ships of Tarshish** represents Phoenicia's far-ranging merchant fleet, the source and symbol of their economic empire. Your ma'oz (fortress, strength, stronghold) is shuddad (destroyed, devastated, laid waste)—the passive verb emphasizes they couldn't defend themselves despite their power.

Ships wailing is vivid personification: the instruments of commerce mourn their own obsolescence. With Tyre destroyed, the trading network collapses. Ships without home port, merchants without market, sailors without employer—the entire economic ecosystem disintegrates. This prophetic vision anticipates Revelation 18:17-19: 'And every shipmaster, and all the company in ships, and sailors, and as many as trade by sea, stood afar off, and cried when they saw the smoke of her burning, saying, What city is like unto this great city!' Whether literal Tyre or symbolic Babylon, God's judgment on commercial empires built on exploitation follows the same pattern: sudden, total, irreversible.

Historical Context

Phoenician 'ships of Tarshish' were the ancient world's largest and most advanced vessels, capable of Mediterranean-wide voyages. These technological marvels represented centuries of maritime innovation. Their uselessness after Tyre's fall illustrates how quickly technological advantage becomes irrelevant when the

economic system supporting it collapses. Superior ships without functioning ports are just expensive driftwood.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. What 'ships' (technologies, systems, infrastructures) does modern society trust in that might suddenly become obsolete?
2. How does Revelation 18's parallel to this passage suggest that history repeats its pattern of commercial empire and divine judgment?
3. What is the relationship between economic interconnectedness and systemic fragility—does globalization increase vulnerability?

Interlinear Text

הֵיל יָלוּ	אָנִי וְתַרְשִׁישׁ	כִּי יִשָּׁדָד	מַעֲזִיכָן:		
Howl	ye ships	of Tarshish	is laid waste	for your strength	
H3213	H591	H8659	H3588	H7703	H4581

Additional Cross-References

Isaiah 23:1 (Parallel theme): The burden of Tyre. Howl, ye ships of Tarshish; for it is laid waste, so that there is no house, no entering in: from the land of Chittim it is revealed to them.