

Jeremiah 17:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars;

Analysis

The indictment against Judah employs striking imagery of permanence and depth. The Hebrew cheret barzel (חֶרֶט בַּרְזֶל, "pen of iron") and tziporen shamir (צִפּוֹרֶן שָׁמִיר, "point of diamond") emphasize the indelible nature of sin's record. Unlike temporary inscriptions, these materials create permanent engravings, signifying that Judah's guilt is not superficial but deeply engraved.

The sin is recorded in two locations: "the table of their heart" and "the horns of your altars." The heart represents the inner person—will, affections, and moral consciousness. That sin is engraved there indicates total moral corruption (cf. Rom 1:21-25). The altar horns, traditionally places of refuge and atonement (Ex 27:2, 1 Kgs 1:50), now bear witness to covenant violation. Their idolatry has defiled the very instruments of worship meant for God's glory.

From a Reformed perspective, this verse illustrates the doctrine of total depravity—sin affects every aspect of human nature, penetrating to the heart's core. Only God's new covenant promise to write His law on hearts (Jer 31:33) can erase what human effort cannot remove. The permanence of sin's record underscores humanity's desperate need for Christ's atoning sacrifice, which alone can cleanse the conscience (Heb 9:14).

Historical Context

Jeremiah prophesied during Judah's final decades before Babylonian exile (627-586 BC), primarily under kings Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah. Despite Josiah's reforms (2 Kgs 22-23), idolatry remained deeply rooted. Archaeological discoveries at Tel Arad and other sites confirm widespread syncretism—Yahweh worship mixed with Canaanite practices. The "horns of your altars" likely refers to both the Jerusalem temple's altar and illicit high places throughout Judah, where the people offered sacrifices to foreign deities alongside Yahweh.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. How does this verse's imagery of indelible sin challenge modern notions that past wrongs can be easily forgotten or self-corrected?
2. In what ways might our worship be corrupted by syncretism with cultural values, paralleling Judah's defiled altars?
3. How does Christ's blood provide the only solution to the permanent record of sin described in this passage?

מִזְבְּחֹתֵיכֶם:
of your altars
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Proverbs 3:3 (Parallel theme): Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart:

2 Corinthians 3:3 (Parallel theme): Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart.

Proverbs 7:3 (Parallel theme): Bind them upon thy fingers, write them upon the table of thine heart.

Leviticus 4:25 (Sin): And the priest shall take of the blood of the sin offering with his finger, and put it upon the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and shall pour out his blood at the bottom of the altar of burnt offering.

Hosea 12:11 (Sin): Is there iniquity in Gilead? surely they are vanity: they sacrifice bullocks in Gilgal; yea, their altars are as heaps in the furrows of the fields.