

Jeremiah 6:29

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

The bellows are burned, the lead is consumed of the fire; the founder melteth in vain: for the wicked are not plucked away.

Analysis

The bellows are burned, the lead is consumed of the fire; the founder melteth in vain: for the wicked are not plucked away.

Jeremiah employs metallurgical imagery to describe Judah's incorrigible wickedness. The Hebrew mapeach ("bellows") pumped air to intensify furnace heat for refining silver. Nachar ("burned") suggests the bellows themselves are damaged from excessive use. Ophereth ("lead") served as flux to separate silver from impurities - consumed entirely without achieving purification. Tzaraph ("founder," refiner) labors futilely because the wicked (ra'im) cannot be separated (nataq - "plucked away," removed).

The refining process metaphor appears throughout Scripture (Malachi 3:2-3; 1 Peter 1:7) but here inverts expectations - refinement fails because Judah lacks any precious metal to purify. Despite maximum heat (prophetic warnings, divine discipline), no purification occurs. The people are entirely dross, reprobate silver (v. 30), rejected by the Divine Refiner.

This devastating assessment precedes Babylonian exile - God's ultimate "smelting" of Israel through conquest and captivity. Theologically, it addresses the limits of divine patience and the reality of hardened hearts. Yet even this judgment serves redemptive purposes; the exilic "furnace" (Deuteronomy 4:20) would eventually produce a purified remnant.

Historical Context

Jeremiah prophesied circa 627-586 BCE during Judah's final decades before Babylonian destruction. This oracle addresses the nation's impenitence despite Josiah's reforms (2 Kings 22-23, circa 622 BCE) and escalating Babylonian threats under Nebuchadnezzar II. The metallurgical imagery reflects ancient Near Eastern refining technology, well-known in Jerusalem's craft industries.

Archaeological discoveries from Iron Age Israel reveal sophisticated metalworking, including silver refining using bellows-operated furnaces. Lead served as a flux - when heated, it combined with impurities, separating pure silver. The process required intense heat (above 960°C), sustained bellows work, and skilled refiners. Jeremiah's audience immediately understood the industrial metaphor's implications.

The historical context involves Judah's religious syncretism despite Deuteronomic reforms. High places, Baal worship, and child sacrifice continued (Jeremiah 7:31, 19:5), provoking divine judgment. The prophet's frustration echoes through this passage - despite maximum prophetic effort (bellows burned out), the people remain unreformed. The 586 BCE Babylonian conquest fulfilled this warning, vindicating Jeremiah's unpopular message. For Judah's remnant, this harsh reality ultimately produced repentance and spiritual renewal (Ezra-Nehemiah).

Related Passages

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Study Questions

1. What does the failed refining process reveal about the possibility of hearts becoming so hardened they cannot respond to God's corrective discipline?
2. How should we understand God's 'giving up' on refining when this seems to contradict His patience and desire for repentance (2 Peter 3:9)?

3. In what ways does the metallurgical imagery help us understand the purpose and limits of divine judgment as purifying discipline?
4. What is the relationship between prophetic warning (bellows/heat) and human response - can God's refining process ultimately fail?
5. How does this passage's severity balance with biblical promises of God's unfailing covenant love and eventual restoration of Israel?

Interlinear Text

צָרָ וְلִשְׁוֹא	עַפְתָּתָה	תְּמִימָה	מִאָשָׁה	מִמְּפָתָח	נִמְמָתָר	רָאשָׁה
are burned	The bellows	of the fire	is consumed	the lead	in vain	melteth
H2787	H4647	H800	H8552	H5777	H7723	H6884
צָרָ וְ	עַפְתָּתָה	תְּמִימָה	מִאָשָׁה	מִמְּפָתָח	נִמְמָתָר	רָאשָׁה
melteth	for the wicked	H3808	are not plucked away			
H6884	H7451		H5423			

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