

Joel 2:5

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Like the noise of chariots on the tops of mountains shall they leap, like the noise of a flame of fire that devoureth the stubble, as a strong people set in battle array.

Analysis

Like the noise of chariots on the tops of mountains shall they leap (Hebrew keqol markavot al-rashey heharim yeraqedun, כְּקוֹל מִרְכָּבוֹת עַל-רָאשֵׁי הַהָרִים יִרְקְדוּן)—Joel adds auditory imagery to the visual. Qol (קוֹל, "noise/sound") emphasizes the overwhelming cacophony of billions of locusts in flight and devouring. markavah (מִרְכָּבָה, "chariot") was ancient warfare's ultimate weapon—fast, deadly, terrifying. Chariot wheels thundering across mountains created deafening roar. The verb raqad (רָקַד, "leap/dance") describes the locusts' jumping, hopping movement—rapid, erratic, relentless.

Like the noise of a flame of fire that devoureth the stubble (Hebrew keqol lehavat esh okhelel qash, כְּקוֹל לְהַבַּת אֵשׁ אֹכֶלֶת קֶשֶׁשׁ)—fire imagery returns, now emphasizing sound. Anyone who's heard wildfire consuming dry vegetation knows the crackling roar Joel describes. Qash (קֶשֶׁשׁ, "stubble") refers to leftover stalks after harvest—dry, worthless, perfect fuel for rapid fire. The comparison teaches two truths:

1. locusts consume vegetation as rapidly and completely as fire burns stubble
2. God's judgment consumes the wicked like fire burning chaff (Matthew 3:12, Malachi 4:1).

As a strong people set in battle array (Hebrew ke'am atsum arukh milchamah, כְּעָם עָצוּם אָרוּךְ מִלְחָמָה)—atsum (עָצוּם) means mighty, powerful,

formidable. *arukh milchamah* describes troops arranged for battle—organized ranks, disciplined formation, ready for combat.

This phrase emphasizes that the locust army isn't random swarm but organized force executing God's battle plan. The same language appears in 2:11 where God commands His army. This demonstrates that all of creation serves God's purposes—even insects become instruments of divine judgment.

Historical Context

Ancient warfare involved chariots (for elite units), infantry, and cavalry. Chariots were expensive, requiring specialized construction, trained horses, and skilled drivers. Nations with chariot forces—Egypt, Assyria, Babylon—dominated their enemies. The sound of approaching chariots inspired terror. Solomon amassed 1,400 chariots (1 Kings 10:26), violating Deuteronomy 17:16's prohibition. Israel's later kings trusted chariots more than God—a recurring prophetic indictment (Isaiah 31:1, Hosea 14:3).

Fire was ancient warfare's most destructive force. Invading armies burned crops, orchards, cities, and villages. Stubble fires spread rapidly, consuming everything combustible. The comparison to fire devouring stubble communicates totality and speed—within hours, everything green becomes ash. This imagery appears throughout Scripture as metaphor for divine judgment: Isaiah 5:24, Obadiah 18, Nahum 1:10, Malachi 4:1, Matthew 3:12, 13:30.

Military language for locusts may seem metaphorical to modern readers, but ancient observers saw literal parallels. Locust swarms move in formation, advance relentlessly, overwhelm defenses, and leave destruction comparable to invading army. The comparison works both ways: locusts are like army; invading army is like locusts. Deuteronomy 28:49-52 describes future invasion in locust-like terms: "a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand... shall besiege thee." Joel's prophecy found fulfillment both in natural plague and military conquest.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. How does the combination of visual and auditory imagery (appearance like horses, sound like chariots and fire) emphasize the overwhelming totality of God's judgment?
2. What does the description of locusts as "strong people set in battle array" teach about God's sovereignty in orchestrating judgment?
3. How should the church respond to modern disasters—natural or human-caused—in light of Joel's teaching that God uses even catastrophes to call people to repentance?

Interlinear Text

כְּקוֹל	מִרְכָּבֹת	עַל	רֹאשֵׁי	הַהָרִים	יִכָּלְדוּ	
Like the noise	of chariots	H5921	on the tops	of mountains	shall they leap	
H6963	H4818		H7218	H2022	H7540	
כְּקוֹל	לִהְיוֹת	אֵשׁ	אֲכָלָהּ	קִשְׁטֵה	כְּעַם	עַצֹּם
Like the noise	of a flame	of fire	that devoureth	the stubble	people	as a strong
H6963	H3851	H784	H398	H7179	H5971	H6099
וְיִכָּלְדוּ	מִלְחָמָה:	עַרְוָה				
array	set in battle					
H6186	H4421					

Additional Cross-References

Revelation 9:9 (Parallel theme): And they had breastplates, as it were breastplates of iron; and the sound of their wings was as the sound of chariots of many horses running to battle.

Isaiah 5:24 (Parallel theme): Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom

shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

Isaiah 30:30 (Parallel theme): And the LORD shall cause his glorious voice to be heard, and shall shew the lighting down of his arm, with the indignation of his anger, and with the flame of a devouring fire, with scattering, and tempest, and hailstones.

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