

Lamentations 2:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

He hath cut off in his fierce anger all the horn of Israel: he hath drawn back his right hand from before the enemy, and he burned against Jacob like a flaming fire, which devoureth round about.

Analysis

One of Scripture's most terrifying images: "He hath drawn back his right hand from before the enemy" (heshiv achor yemino mipnei oyev, הָשִׁיב אַחֹר יְמִינוֹ מִפְּנֵי אוֹיֵב). God's right hand symbolizes power, deliverance, and covenant protection (Exodus 15:6, 12, Psalm 20:6, 89:13). Throughout Israel's history, God's right hand fought for them. Now it's withdrawn, leaving them defenseless. The verse continues: "he hath cut off in his fierce anger all the horn of Israel" (vaygadda ba-charon af kol keren Yisrael). The "horn" (keren, קֶרֶן) represents strength and dignity, like an animal's horn used for defense and attack. To cut off all horns leaves one utterly powerless. "Fierce anger" (charon af, חֲרוֹן אַף) literally means "burning of nose/nostrils"—the Hebrew idiom for intense wrath. The climax is shocking: "he burned against Jacob like a flaming fire, which devoureth round about" (vayivarcharon be-Ya'akov ke-esh lehava aklah saviv). God's presence, which once appeared as fire to guide and protect (Exodus 13:21-22), now burns as consuming judgment. The same fire that destroyed Sodom (Genesis 19:24) now falls on covenant people. This demonstrates that proximity to God without holiness brings judgment, not safety (Hebrews 12:29: "our God is a consuming fire").

Historical Context

Throughout the exodus and conquest, God's right hand delivered Israel. The Song of Moses (Exodus 15:1-18) celebrates: "Thy right hand, O LORD, is become glorious in power: thy right hand, O LORD, hath dashed in pieces the enemy" (verse 6). David's psalms repeatedly invoke God's right hand for salvation (Psalm 17:7, 18:35, 60:5, 108:6, 138:7). But covenant warnings predicted this reversal. Leviticus 26:17 threatens: "I will set my face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you." Deuteronomy 28:25: "The LORD shall cause thee to be smitten before thine enemies...and shalt be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth." What happened in 586 BC was promised consequence, not divine failure. The imagery of consuming fire recalls Mount Sinai, where God appeared in fire (Exodus 19:18, 24:17, Deuteronomy 4:11-12, 5:22-25). Hebrews 12:18-21 describes the terror Israel experienced at Sinai. God's holiness is fearsome; approaching Him wrongly brings destruction. The Nadab and Abihu incident (Leviticus 10:1-2) demonstrated this—offering "strange fire" before the LORD caused fire to devour them. Yet the same God who burns as consuming fire also refines as purifying fire. Malachi 3:2-3 promises: "he is like a refiner's fire...and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver." The exile's fire purged idolatry from Judaism; post-exilic Jews never again fell into systematic idol worship as pre-exilic Israel had.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

1 Corinthians 13:4 — Characteristics of love

Study Questions

1. What does it mean that God 'drew back his right hand,' and how does this image help us understand what happens when divine protection is withdrawn?
2. How should the reality that God's presence can consume (as fire) as well as comfort affect our approach to worship and holy living?

3. In what ways does Christ restore God's right hand of salvation to believers, and how does Romans 8:31-39 assure us it will never be withdrawn?
4. What does the cutting off of 'all the horn of Israel' teach about the comprehensive nature of judgment when God actively opposes His own people?

Interlinear Text

גָּדַע	בְּחִירִי	אַף	כָּל	קֶרְנוֹ	יִשְׂרָאֵל	הַשֵּׁי יָב
He hath cut off	in his fierce	anger	H3605	all the horn	of Israel	he hath drawn
H1438	H2750	H639		H7161	H3478	H7725
אָחֻר	יְמִינוֹ	מִפְּנֵי	אֹיֵב	וַיִּבַּע	רַ	בְּיַעֲקֹב
back	his right hand	from before	the enemy	and he burned		against Jacob
H268	H3225	H6440	H341	H1197		H3290
שֵׁ	לִהְבֶּה	אֲכָלָהּ	סָבִיב:			
fire	like a flaming	which devoureth	round about			
H784	H3852	H398	H5439			

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 74:11 (Parallel theme): Why withdrawest thou thy hand, even thy right hand? pluck it out of thy bosom.

Isaiah 42:25 (Parallel theme): Therefore he hath poured upon him the fury of his anger, and the strength of battle: and it hath set him on fire round about, yet he knew not; and it burned him, yet he laid it not to heart.

Psalms 75:5 (Parallel theme): Lift not up your horn on high: speak not with a stiff neck.

Psalms 75:10 (Parallel theme): All the horns of the wicked also will I cut off; but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted.

Psalms 79:5 (Parallel theme): How long, LORD? wilt thou be angry for ever? shall thy jealousy burn like fire?

Psalms 89:46 (Parallel theme): How long, LORD? wilt thou hide thyself for ever?
shall thy wrath burn like fire?

Jeremiah 48:25 (Parallel theme): The horn of Moab is cut off, and his arm is
broken, saith the LORD.

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