

Psalm 120:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper.

Analysis

God's judgment against the deceitful tongue is described with vivid military imagery: 'Sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper.' The 'sharp arrows' represent God's precise, inescapable judgment - arrows find their target at distance, suggesting that liars cannot escape divine justice. The 'coals of juniper' (or 'broom tree' in some translations) reference wood known for intense, long-lasting heat. Juniper coals were prized for their enduring fire. The imagery suggests that divine judgment will be both sharp/sudden (arrows) and prolonged/consuming (coals). This poetic justice reflects the principle of *lex talionis* (law of retaliation) - the deceitful tongue that spreads verbal fire will experience consuming fire in return. The punishment fits the crime: as false words wounded, so sharp arrows wound; as slander spread like fire, so judicial fire consumes.

Historical Context

Arrows and fire were common weapons in ancient warfare. The combination emphasizes both offensive assault (arrows) and total destruction (fire). Juniper/broom trees grew abundantly in the wilderness and were highly valued for fuel. The imagery would resonate with an agricultural society familiar with these elements of daily and military life.

Related Passages

1 John 4:8 — God is love

John 15:13 — Greatest form of love

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does the imagery of 'sharp arrows' and 'coals of juniper' communicate both immediacy and duration of judgment?
2. What does this poetic justice reveal about God's character as righteous judge?
3. How does the principle of proportionate punishment (measure for measure) apply to sins of speech?
4. In what ways does New Testament teaching about judgment affirm or nuance this Old Testament perspective?
5. How should awareness of divine judgment against deceit shape our own speech patterns?

Interlinear Text

רְתִמִּים: גָּפְלִים שְׁנוֹגִים גַּבְּרוּן חָצֵן
arrows of the mighty Sharp with coals of juniper
H2671 H1368 H8150 H5973 H1513 H7574

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 45:5 (Parallel theme): Thine arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies; whereby the people fall under thee.

Proverbs 19:9 (Parallel theme): A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall perish.

Proverbs 18:21 (Parallel theme): Death and life are in the power of the tongue: and they that love it shall eat the fruit thereof.

Proverbs 16:27 (Parallel theme): An ungodly man diggeth up evil: and in his lips there is as a burning fire.

Proverbs 19:5 (Parallel theme): A false witness shall not be unpunished, and he that speaketh lies shall not escape.

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