

Psalms 140:3

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders' poison is under their lips. Selah.

Analysis

They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders' poison is under their lips. Selah. This verse shifts from enemies' planning (v. 2) to their speech weaponry, using vivid metaphors from the snake world. "They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent" (shanenu leshonam kemo-nachash, שָׁנָנוּ לְשׁוֹנָם כְּמוֹנָחָשׁ) compares slanderous speech to serpent's attack. Shanan (שָׁנָן) means "to sharpen, whet"—making a blade keen for cutting. The tongue, "sharpened," becomes weapon inflicting wounds through words (Proverbs 12:18, 18:21). Nachash (נָחָשׁ, "serpent") evokes Eden's deceiver (Genesis 3:1-5) and represents cunning, deadly danger.

This imagery recalls James 3:8: "the tongue... is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison." Verbal assault can destroy reputations, relationships, and lives without physical violence. Slander, lies, mockery, and manipulation cut deeply. David's enemies didn't merely oppose him militarily; they attacked through character assassination, spreading lies to turn public opinion and royal favor against him (Psalm 31:13, 35:11, 109:2-3).

"Adders' poison is under their lips" (chamat akhshuv tachat sefatemo, חָמָת עַכְשָׁוִב תְּחִתְּשָׁפְתִּים) intensifies the metaphor. Chamat (חָמָת, "poison, venom") is deadly toxin. Akhshuv (עַכְשָׁוִב) is a specific venomous snake, likely asp or viper. Tachat (תְּחִתָּה, "under") suggests hidden danger—poison concealed beneath lips, ready to inject when opportunity arises. Paul quotes this verse (via the Septuagint) in Romans 3:13 as evidence of universal human sinfulness: "their throat is an open

sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips."

"Selah" (נַחַ) appears, marking pause for reflection on this sobering description of verbal evil.

Historical Context

The ancient Near Eastern world understood the deadly danger of snake venom—medicine couldn't counteract it, and bites often proved fatal. Serpent imagery pervades Scripture as symbol of deadly evil, from Eden's serpent (Genesis 3) to Revelation's dragon (Revelation 12:9). Jesus called the Pharisees "serpents" and "generation of vipers" (Matthew 23:33), echoing John the Baptist's rebuke (Matthew 3:7). The association between serpents and deceptive, poisonous speech appears repeatedly (Psalm 58:3-4, 64:3, Jeremiah 8:17, 9:8). David's specific enemies—like Doeg the Edomite who informed Saul about Ahimelech helping David, resulting in the massacre of 85 priests (1 Samuel 22:9-19)—exemplified this serpentine tongue. Absalom's rebellion succeeded initially through smooth, deceitful words that 'stole the hearts' of Israel (2 Samuel 15:2-6).

Related Passages

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Hebrews 11:1 — Definition of faith

Study Questions

1. How does the metaphor of 'sharpened tongues' and 'poison under lips' capture the deadly danger of verbal sin like slander, gossip, and deception?
2. What does it mean practically to guard against having 'poison under your lips,' and how can believers use speech for healing rather than harm (Proverbs 12:18)?
3. How does Paul's use of this verse in Romans 3:13 to describe universal human sinfulness convict you personally about your own speech patterns?

Interlinear Text

שָׁבַבּ	וְ	לְשׂוֹנָם	כְּמוֹ	נָּחָשׁ	עַכְשָׁ וּבְ	סְמָמָת	עַכְשָׁ וּבְ
They have sharpened	their tongues	H3956	H3644	like a serpent	poison	adders	
H8150				H5175	H2534	H5919	
תְּמַתְּמָתְתָה	שְׁפָתִים	סֶלָה					
H8478	is under their lips	Selah					
H8193		H5542					

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 58:4 (Parallel theme): Their poison is like the poison of a serpent: they are like the deaf adder that stoppeth her ear;

2 Corinthians 11:3 (Parallel theme): But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtilty, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ.

Proverbs 23:32 (Parallel theme): At the last it biteth like a serpent, and stingeth like an adder.

Jeremiah 9:3 (Parallel theme): And they bend their tongues like their bow for lies: but they are not valiant for the truth upon the earth; for they proceed from evil to evil, and they know not me, saith the LORD.

Jeremiah 9:5 (Parallel theme): And they will deceive every one his neighbour, and will not speak the truth: they have taught their tongue to speak lies, and weary themselves to commit iniquity.

Matthew 12:34 (Parallel theme): O generation of vipers, how can ye, being evil, speak good things? for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.

Isaiah 59:13 (Parallel theme): In transgressing and lying against the LORD, and departing away from our God, speaking oppression and revolt, conceiving and uttering from the heart words of falsehood.

Psalms 57:4 (Parallel theme): My soul is among lions: and I lie even among them that are set on fire, even the sons of men, whose teeth are spears and arrows, and their tongue a sharp sword.

Proverbs 12:18 (Parallel theme): There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword: but the tongue of the wise is health.

Genesis 3:13 (Parallel theme): And the LORD God said unto the woman, What is this that thou hast done? And the woman said, The serpent beguiled me, and I did eat.

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