

Psalms 140:9

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

As for the head of those that compass me about, let the mischief of their own lips cover them.

Analysis

As for the head of those that compass me about, let the mischief of their own lips cover them. David invokes poetic justice—requesting that enemies' own evil schemes rebound upon them. "As for the head of those that compass me about" (rosh mesibai, ראש מסבֵּי) uses rosh (ראש, "head") possibly meaning

1. chief/leader of enemies, or
2. metaphorical 'head' as in 'sum total' of surrounding enemies. Sabab (סבב, "compass, surround") in Polel form means "to encircle completely." David is surrounded by enemies pressing in from all sides—a desperate military situation.

"Let the mischief of their own lips cover them" (amal sefatemo yekassemo, אָמַל שְׁפֹתֵיהֶם יִכְסֶּם) requests that enemies' verbal sins become their judgment. Amal (אָמַל, "mischief, trouble, harm") is evil produced through deliberate effort. Saphah (שָׁפַח, "lips") represents speech—the slander, lies, and false accusations mentioned in v. 3. Kasah (כָּסָה, "cover") suggests overwhelming, like floodwaters covering.

David asks that the very lies they spoke against him overwhelm them instead.

This imprecatory prayer reflects 'measure for measure' justice principle pervasive in Scripture (Exodus 21:23-25, Deuteronomy 19:18-21, Esther 7:10, Proverbs 26:27). It's not personal vendetta but appeal to divine justice: let the punishment fit the crime. Those who weaponized speech should suffer from their own weapon.

Psalm 7:15-16 expresses similar principle: "He made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made. His mischief shall return upon his own head." Romans 2:5 warns that the unrepentant "treasurest up unto thyself wrath."

Historical Context

Biblical history repeatedly demonstrates this principle of enemies' schemes backfiring. Haman built gallows for Mordecai but was hanged on it himself (Esther 7:9-10). Daniel's accusers plotted his death via lions' den law, then were thrown to the lions themselves with their families (Daniel 6:24). Those who accused Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were consumed by the furnace's flames (Daniel 3:22). Jesus warned: "with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again" (Matthew 7:2). Judas's thirty pieces of silver, gained by betraying Jesus, purchased the field where he died (Matthew 27:3-8, Acts 1:18-19). God's justice often operates through natural consequences—sin carries inherent penalty. David's prayer asks God to let this natural justice run its course rather than allowing evil to prosper unpunished.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. How does the principle of 'mischief of their own lips covering them' reflect God's justice that lets consequences naturally flow from choices?
2. Is it appropriate for Christians to pray imprecatory prayers asking God to judge enemies, or should we only pray for their salvation (Matthew 5:44)?
3. How does Jesus's warning 'with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you' (Matthew 7:2) both comfort victims and warn perpetrators of evil?

Interlinear Text

רֹאשׁ	מְסִבִּי	עַמִּי ל	שִׁפְתֵי יֵמֹו
As for the head	of those that compass me about	let the mischief	of their own lips
H7218	H4524	H5999	H8193
:כָּסוּמוֹ!			
cover			
H3680			

Additional Cross-References

Psalms 7:16 (Parallel theme): His mischief shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate.

Proverbs 18:7 (Parallel theme): A fool's mouth is his destruction, and his lips are the snare of his soul.

Proverbs 12:13 (Parallel theme): The wicked is snared by the transgression of his lips: but the just shall come out of trouble.

Psalms 64:8 (Parallel theme): So they shall make their own tongue to fall upon themselves: all that see them shall flee away.

Psalms 94:23 (Parallel theme): And he shall bring upon them their own iniquity, and shall cut them off in their own wickedness; yea, the LORD our God shall cut them off.

Proverbs 10:11 (Parallel theme): The mouth of a righteous man is a well of life: but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked.

Proverbs 10:6 (Parallel theme): Blessings are upon the head of the just: but violence covereth the mouth of the wicked.

Esther 7:10 (Parallel theme): So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then was the king's wrath pacified.