

Psalm 78:48

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

He gave up their cattle also to the hail, and their flocks to hot thunderbolts.

Analysis

Divine Judgment Through Natural Disasters: This verse falls within Asaph's lengthy historical psalm recounting God's works and Israel's repeated rebellion. The Hebrew verb "gave up" (yasgar, יָסַג) means "to deliver over" or "hand over," indicating God's active judgment, not mere natural disaster. He deliberately exposed Israel's livestock to destructive forces as covenant curse fulfillment (Exodus 9:22-25 describes the seventh plague; Deuteronomy 28:22-24 warns of such judgments for disobedience).

Hail and Thunderbolts as Divine Weapons: "Hail" (barad, בָּרָד) recalls the devastating plague that struck Egypt, destroying crops and animals (Exodus 9:18-26). The phrase "hot thunderbolts" (reshaphim, רֶשֶׁף) literally means "burning flames" or "lightning bolts," emphasizing the terrifying, destructive power of the storm. Some translations render it "lightning" or "fiery bolts." The Hebrew resheph also referred to plague or pestilence in other contexts, suggesting multiple layers of judgment.

Echoes of Egyptian Plagues: Asaph parallels Israel's wilderness experience with Egypt's plagues, reminding readers that the same God who judged Pharaoh's hardness also disciplines His covenant people when they rebel. This isn't random natural disaster but purposeful divine pedagogy. God uses creation itself as an instrument of correction, demonstrating His sovereignty over nature and His faithfulness to covenant warnings. The imagery prepares readers for

understanding how God governs history through both blessing and judgment, always aiming toward redemptive purposes.

Historical Context

Psalm 78 is a maskil (instructional psalm) by Asaph, a Levitical musician appointed by David (1 Chronicles 15:17, 16:4-5). Scholars date it to the divided kingdom period (950-722 BC), possibly after the northern kingdom's fall (722 BC) when Asaph's descendants continued his musical tradition. The psalm serves as covenantal instruction, rehearsing Israel's history from Egypt through the monarchy to warn against repeating ancestral sins.

Verse 48 specifically recalls the seventh plague (Exodus 9:13-35), when God sent unprecedented hail mixed with fire upon Egypt, destroying livestock, crops, and people who didn't take shelter. This plague demonstrated Yahweh's superiority over Egyptian weather gods like Seth (storm deity) and agricultural deities. Pharaoh temporarily relented but then hardened his heart again (Exodus 9:34-35), illustrating the pattern of rebellion Asaph sees repeated in Israel.

The psalm's historical recital served liturgical and didactic purposes in Israel's worship. By rehearsing divine judgments, it warned each generation against covenant unfaithfulness. Archaeological evidence from the Bronze Age Late Period (1550-1200 BC) shows that severe weather events, including hail storms, were indeed catastrophic to ancient Near Eastern agriculture and livestock economies. The psalm's vivid imagery would have resonated powerfully with an agrarian society dependent on weather patterns and acutely aware of natural disasters' devastating potential.

Related Passages

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does God's use of natural disasters as judgment in Scripture inform Christian perspectives on contemporary natural calamities?
2. What is the relationship between God's sovereignty over nature and human sin or covenant unfaithfulness?
3. How should believers balance understanding natural disasters as divine judgment versus expressions of a fallen creation groaning for redemption (Romans 8:22)?
4. In what ways does rehearsing God's historical judgments serve as warning and instruction for contemporary believers?
5. How do the plagues against Egypt demonstrate both God's justice toward oppressors and His covenant faithfulness to deliver His people?

Interlinear Text

לְרַשְׁפִים: וְמִקְרֵב מִבְּעֵינָם וְלִבְבָךְ דְּלִבְבָךְ רַזְגָּה
He gave up also to the hail their cattle and their flocks to hot thunderbolts

H5462 H1259 H1165 H4735 H7565

From KJV Study • kjvstudy.org