

Zephaniah 1:11

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Howl, ye inhabitants of Maktesh, for all the merchant people are cut down; all they that bear silver are cut off.

Analysis

Howl, ye inhabitants of Maktesh—Maktesh (מַקְתֵּשׁ) literally means "mortar" or "hollow"—a bowl-shaped depression used for grinding. This likely refers to a valley or quarter in Jerusalem, possibly the Tyropoeon Valley (the central valley) or a merchant district where the name described the geographical depression. The imperative **Howl** (heylihu, הַלְּלֻה) commands lamentation—wail, shriek in anguish. The merchants who prospered in this commercial center will soon mourn their losses.

For all the merchant people are cut down; all they that bear silver are cut off—Kena'an (קְנָעֵן), translated "merchant people," literally means "Canaan" but came to mean merchant or trader because Canaanites/Phoenicians dominated ancient commerce. This may be wordplay: those who acted like Canaanites (adopting pagan values and practices) will be cut off like Canaanites were supposed to be under Joshua's conquest. **Cut down** (nidmah, נִידָמָה) means destroyed, silenced, brought to ruin.

All they that bear silver (kol-netilei keseph, כָּל-נְטִילֵי כְּסֶף) describes those laden with silver—the wealthy merchants and money-handlers. **Cut off** (nikhret, נִכְרְתָּו) means eliminated, destroyed, excommunicated—the same term used for covenant-breaking (Genesis 17:14). Wealth provides no security when God's judgment arrives. Jesus's parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:16-21) and James's warning to rich oppressors (James 5:1-6) echo this principle: earthly wealth perishes, and

those who trust riches rather than God face eternal loss. Proverbs 11:4 declares, "Riches profit not in the day of wrath."

Historical Context

Jerusalem's commercial districts flourished during periods of peace and prosperity. The Maktesh area likely housed markets, merchant stalls, money-changers, and trading centers where domestic and international commerce occurred. Merchants grew wealthy through trade, but many used dishonest scales (Amos 8:5; Micah 6:10-11), charged exploitative interest rates (Nehemiah 5:1-11), and prioritized profit over justice (Ezekiel 22:12-13). Their prosperity came through covenant violation, making their wealth temporary and their judgment certain.

The Babylonian invasion specifically targeted the wealthy. Babylon exiled skilled craftsmen, merchants, officials, and the wealthy (2 Kings 24:14-16) while leaving the poorest to work the land. The merchant class that had accumulated silver through decades of commerce lost everything—property confiscated, businesses destroyed, wealth plundered, families exiled. Jeremiah 52:15-16 describes how Nebuzaradan "carried away captive certain of the poor of the people...the workmen, and the smiths...but he left certain of the poor of the land for vinedressers and for husbandmen."

This judgment fulfilled Deuteronomy's covenant curses: "Thou shalt carry much seed out into the field, and shalt gather but little in" (28:38); "The stranger...shall get up above thee very high; and thou shalt come down very low" (28:43); "Thy sons and thy daughters shall be given unto another people" (28:32). Wealth accumulated through covenant unfaithfulness provides no protection when covenant curses arrive. The merchants' silver couldn't buy safety, ransom their families, or prevent exile—demonstrating the futility of trusting riches rather than the living God.

Related Passages

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Study Questions

1. How does trust in financial security function as modern idolatry, creating false confidence that God's judgment exposes as futile?
2. What biblical principles should govern Christian commerce and wealth accumulation to avoid the merchants' fate Zephaniah condemns?
3. In what ways does affluence tempt believers toward the covenant compromise that characterized Jerusalem's merchant class?

Interlinear Text

וְיָהִי	וְיָשַׁב	בְּהַמְכֵת	שֶׁ	בְּ	בְּנֵדֶמֶת	כִּل	כִּל	עַם
Howl	ye inhabitants	of Maktesh		H3588	are cut down		H3605	people
H3213	H3427	H4389			H1820			H5971
כִּל	נִכְרָת	כִּל	נִכְרָת	כִּל	כְּסֶף	כְּסֶף	כְּסֶף	
for all the merchant	are cut off	H3605	all they that bear	H5187	silver			H3701
H3667	H3772							

Additional Cross-References

James 5:1 (Parallel theme): Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl for your miseries that shall come upon you.

Jeremiah 25:34 (Parallel theme): Howl, ye shepherds, and cry; and wallow yourselves in the ashes, ye principal of the flock: for the days of your slaughter and of your dispersions are accomplished; and ye shall fall like a pleasant vessel.

Ezekiel 21:12 (Parallel theme): Cry and howl, son of man: for it shall be upon my people, it shall be upon all the princes of Israel: terrors by reason of the sword shall be upon my people: smite therefore upon thy thigh.