

God is Said to do that which



He Only Permits

Exploring a Neglected Principle
of Bible Interpretation that
Vindicates God's Character

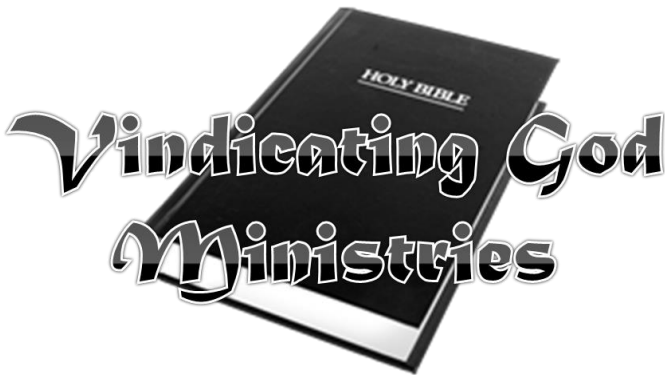


TROY J. EDWARDS

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Interpretation that Vindicates God's Character*

By Troy J. Edwards



Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *King James Version* (KJV) of the Bible.

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Dedicated to

Paul and Kathy Terry

*Your ministry changed many lives and
is having a tripling effect throughout
many generations. He will reward
you.*

Preface

*Behold, they shall surely gather together,
but not by me: whosoever shall gather
together against thee shall fall for thy sake
(Isa. 54:15)*

*So the servants of the householder came
and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow
good seed in thy field? from whence then
hath it tares? He said unto them, **An
enemy hath done this** (Matt. 13:27-28a)*

Is God the creator and distributor of evil? Does God destroy? Does He deceive? Inflict sickness? Stir up pagan nations to destroy His people? Cause natural disasters? Harden hearts? Curse His enemies? Arbitrarily kill? Most students of the Bible would answer “yes” to some or all of the above.

Many false charges have been leveled at God by His critics (atheists, agnostics, satanists, etc.) due to misreading the Bible. Sadly God’s most ardent defenders have been no help. On the contrary the majority of them have exacerbated the problem because they too tend to misread the Bible and defend the indefensible. Usually their “defense” is an arrogant claim towards God’s sovereignty and His right to do as He pleases. This translates into the idea that it pleases God to arbitrarily kill, inflict sickness, cause massive catastrophes, make people sin and then punish them for what He made them do, predestine people to hell before they were ever born, and numerous other things that understandably cause detractors to hate God. Needless to say, this idea about how God operates has only led to increased rebellion against Him.

Part of the problem has been the failure to understand the idiomatic language used in the Ancient Near East, especially among the Hebrew people, from which our God inspired Scriptures have their origin. This failure has led to more misunderstandings about God and His inspired Word than we can attest to. While the Hebrews had numerous idioms I am fully persuaded that the most neglected one among theologians and Bible translators has been what I prefer to label as “the permission idiom”. This is the idiom that, as we will learn in this study, scholars tell us is one in which ***God is said to be the cause of that which He merely allowed or permitted or did not prevent from happening.*** Charles Edward Fraser-Tytler in his book, “*New View of the Apocalypse,*” sums up the position of this book very well:

The blinding of men’s eyes, St John mentions as God’s work; St Paul, as Satan’s; and it is elsewhere mentioned as man’s. “Their eyes they have closed.” In like manner, during the plagues of Egypt, it is several times said, “God hardened Pharaoh’s heart;” and again, it is said, “Pharaoh hardened his heart This Time Also”—implying that he had done so in all. Scripture has many such expressions; and a comparison thereof explains that somewhat difficult question, Why God is sometimes spoken of in Scripture as the author of evil. In Isaiah, God says, “I create evil.” At the same time we know, from the whole tenor of Holy Writ, that God is not the author of evil. Yet Isaiah’s expression is correct and idiomatic. Whatever is done by an agent, is said to be done by the power restraining and directing that agent. In like manner, it is usual in Scripture to attribute to the Supreme Power, acts which are virtually those of his instruments, and which he merely permits, in order to overrule and evolve good from them. There are diversities of agents at work, but one God; and there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. All acts are primarily those of God, from whom all powers and

permission of acting proceed; secondarily, those of his agents. Thus, when one inspired writer tells us that God blinds the minds of men; another, that Satan does so; and a third, that man does so, we perceive that all these statements are strictly correct—the act being done by the permission of the first, the agency of the second, and the willful sin of the third; in other words, God quiescent, Satan active, man willing. We read, God hardened Pharaoh's heart; that is, withdrew all influence for good, whereon evil immediately worked in Pharaoh. When Truth is quiescent, Error is dominant. If the protecting shield of the one be raised, the sword of the other must fall.¹

The neglect of fully studying this idiom has led to much misunderstanding about God and has made Him appear to be the author of all types of horrendous evil. The failure of our Bible translators, original language scholars, theologians and Bible teachers to expound on this idiom has caused many to unfairly malign God's character.

Unless I am misunderstood, allow me to state here that I deeply appreciate the years of research and hard work put forth by those who study the original languages of the Bible and give us numerous Bible translations, word studies and commentaries. I rely heavily upon these materials and am thankful for them. I am indebted to them and the men and women responsible for publishing these works receive my deepest gratitude for helping me to be able to study the Bible with much clarity.

Sadly, many of these great study tools have dealt very little with or neglected altogether the "permission idiom." I have found from my nearly 30 years of research that this has been given very little attention from people outside of some Christian groups who have questionable theology in many areas as well as some pseudo-Christian cults that deny the deity of Jesus and the personhood of my friend and companion, the precious Holy Spirit.

This book was written to fill in the gap. It is the culmination of nearly 30 years of study and research. The seed was planted in me by a great man of God nearly 30 years ago when he stated in one of his books that a particular well known Hebrew Scholar affirmed that the Old Testament passages that say that God did evil and inflicted sickness should be understood in what he called the “permissive sense”. Since then I have been on a journey to find proof of this truth. At one point when I had trouble finding consistent “scholarly” proof I almost gave up. I began to think that perhaps God does, at times, inflict sickness and catastrophes. God in His graciousness began to lead me to proof from both the out of print scholars (thank you Google Books) and the Bible itself to help me see that much of what God is said to have done in many places of the Bible was only *permissive* rather than *causative*.

This was the book I had longed for someone else to write. Sometimes God may have us contribute what we find lacking in the body. I truly believe that this book is going to bless you abundantly. So turn the page and read about this wonderful benevolent God who is not a destroyer.

Chapter One

Introduction: Satanic attack on the Old Testament

For even Christ pleased not himself; but, as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee fell on me. For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope (Rom. 15:3-4)

Paul was specifically referring to the Old Testament in the statement above. In verse 3 Paul had just quoted from Psalm 69:9 and applied it towards the example of Jesus. He then tells his readers that these Old Testament Scriptures were made available to us to learn how to live, to help us exercise patience and to give us hope.

The Old Testament Written for Our Sakes

Earlier in Romans, Paul explains how Abraham obtained God's promise through faith rather than through legalistic works. It was this faith that was imputed unto Abraham for righteousness. Paul then tells us that this was not recorded for Abraham's sake only, but for ours as well:

And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; Who was

delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification (Rom. 4:22-25)

Paul wrote that this Old Testament truth concerning Abraham was written for our sakes. This means that this portion of the Old Testament concerning Abraham being made righteous by faith is still a necessary and relevant portion of Scripture today.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that it is only this portion alone (Genesis 15:6) that is relevant to New Testament Christians. Yet, it would be a fruitless argument in the light of other statements by Paul. Concerning the wilderness experiences of the Israelites post-Egypt, Paul writes:

*Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and **they are written for our admonition**, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:11-12)*

These Old Testament examples were written for our learning and we would do well to read and take heed to them. In summary, Paul tells us that all Scripture is profitable for instruction, correction, reproof, and living righteously:

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16)

That word “all” would have to include both Old and New Testament Scripture. Paul said that it was all useful for walking this Christian walk. Yet, how many times have

we heard someone tell us that they don't read nor care for the Old Testament because they are "no longer under its system of law and works"? Some do not want to hear any presentation of a truth unless it is only supported by the New Testament. Hence many today reject tithing, are quick to get tattoos (in the name of "freedom"), and reject most standards of holiness as mere "legalism".

The False Gospel of Marcion

In the second century after Christ a rich ship owner named Marcion from Sinope (northern Turkey), who embraced gnostic heresies began to teach that the Old Testament was inferior to the New Testament and should not be in the canon of Scripture that currently makes up our Bible. Marcion believed that the canon should be made up primarily of the New Testament epistles, particularly those of Paul's. He was rightfully opposed and excommunicated from the church during his time.

The sad fact is that many in the church today seem to have embraced the lie of Marcionism. Some might refer to it as *dispensationalism*. Dispensationalism has revealed important truths that help us to understand Scripture. Some of those important truths has been the understanding that the Bible as a whole is a progressive revelation. Therefore all dispensationalists are *not* Marcionites. *Ultra*-dispensationalists, however, can be classified under this false teaching.

Ultra-dispensationalists not only reject the Old Testament as relevant for today, but even the words of Christ himself. Not too long ago debated someone on Twitter who claimed that "...we are not told that we must forgive someone before God will heal us." I asked, "What about Mark 11:22-26?" He told me that this was *before* the cross and that under the New Testament, forgiving someone before receiving healing in the body is no longer

a requirement. He then misquoted a statement by Paul to make his point.

This is the reason that I opened this first chapter by quoting Paul. Many Marcionites, both past and present, embrace Paul's epistles. Yet as Peter, another contributor to the New Testament canon, wrote concerning those who misuse Paul's writings, "*....they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction*" (2 Pet. 3:16).

Confronting Legalism versus being Anti-OT

Paul tells us that the Old Testament was inspired by God and is still relevant for teaching and for righteous living. Yet, at the same time Paul was strongly against certain legalistic practices in the New Testament church that were practiced in the Old Testament. Certainly many of the things required by the Law of Moses, especially those which were ceremonial, were fulfilled by Jesus Christ and are no longer a requirement for God's people today.

Yet, please note that these things were *fulfilled*, not *abolished* (Matt. 5:17). Jesus still expects God's people to keep the commands of God (Matt. 5:19). Take the subject of circumcision as an example. Paul fought hard against the legalists of his day who taught that salvation and acceptance of God required circumcision. The blessing of Christ's redemptive work is available to the circumcised and uncircumcised alike (Rom 4:8-12). However, this *establishes* the law rather than doing away with it (Rom. 3:30-31).

Most importantly Paul writes, "*Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God*" (1 Cor. 7:19). Doesn't Paul fit the model of what some claim to be "legalistic" today? Yet throughout the epistles of Paul and others we are

reminded to keep and adhere to the Old Testament commands of God (Eph. 6:1-3; 1 Pet. 3:8-12).

God's primary New Testament commandment is love and it is this God-like love walk that *fulfills* (not *abolishes*) the law of God (Rom. 13:8-10). Yet there is nothing really new about this since Jesus said that love of God and fellow man is the *foundation* of the law and the prophets (Matt. 22:36-40). When the Old Testament is properly studied we find just as much of God's love and grace shining through it as we do in the New Testament.

When we study the New Testament we find just as much "wrath" and requirement to adhere to God's commandments as we do in the Old Testament. Many in some of today's "grace" movements believe that the keeping of commands is *legalism*. Sadly, and my heart breaks as I write this, many people who claim to be saved will find themselves in the lake of fire due to deception (Rev. 21:8; 22:14-15). The purpose of Jesus' redemptive work and the grace that it imparts is to save us from sin and to give us the power to live righteously (Matt. 1:21; Rom. 6:1-23). God's grace was never given as a license to sin (Gal. 5:13-26; Jude 1:4).

So while Paul and other inspired New Testament writers fought against the idea that strict adherence to the law of Moses was the basis of salvation for New Testament believers (Rom. 3:1-5, 19-28; Gal. 2:16-21), neither did they come even close to teaching that the Old Testament was irrelevant for the believer today. There was more to the Old Testament than just the Law of Moses. Regardless, both testaments promote grace as well as a requirement to live a holy life if we expect to be with Christ in eternity (Heb. 12:14).

Distorted Old Testament Understanding of God

I believe the main thing that Satan has used to detract believers and unbelievers alike from the Old

Testament has been his ability to distort its message and present a warped picture of God that is not even within its pages. The God supposedly depicted in the Old Testament was the primary reason for Marcion rejecting it as God's Word. It also seems to be why some liberal theologians reject it and why atheists use it as a weapon against Christians.

For example, some Liberal theologians, attempting to win over atheist intellectuals, depict the God of the Old Testament as "a dirty bully." Independent Baptist minister John R. Rice quotes one of those liberals who goes out of his way to present God in this manner:

Hugh Walpole, in *Wintersmoon*, tells of a father and son at church. The aged rector read from the Old Testament, and the boy learned of a terrible God who sent plagues upon people and created fiery serpents to assault them. That night, when the father passed by the boy's bedroom, the boy called him, put his arms around his father's neck, and, drawing him close, said, 'Father, you hate Jehovah. So do I. I loathe him, dirty bully!' We have long since rejected a conception of reconciliation associated historically with an idea of a deity that is loathsome. God, for us, cannot be thought of as an angry, awful, avenging Being who because of Adam's sin must have his shylockian pound of flesh. No wonder the honest boy in justifiable repugnance could say, 'Dirty bully.'¹

Rice correctly notes that this writer, "...takes the position that the God of the Bible, the God of the Old Testament is a dirty bully, a hateful, avenging deity who demands the Shylockian pound of flesh to pay for sin. The atonement is hateful to this unbelieving bishop."² I share in Rice's disdain for this liberal theologian's caricature of God which is the product of an erroneous understanding of the Old Testament.

Like Rice, I hold a “Fundamentalist” position concerning God, the Bible and other doctrines. Yet, I do not believe that Rice does us any favors when he chooses to affirm a harsh view of God:

And as certain as the Bible is true, God himself must take responsibility for sending the curses, the plagues, the tears, the bloodshed, the old age, the pain and death which come as the inevitable result of sin. God hates sin! His fury is poured out on unrepentant sinners! He is a jealous God visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, even to the third and fourth generation of them that hate Him. It is true that sin has in it the seeds of death, but it is God who set up that righteous and holy plan that sin must be punished. It is true that the wages of sin is death, but it is God who is the paymaster and who sees that a sinner receives his just due.³

In his attempts to repudiate the false liberal and atheistic depictions of the Old Testament God, Rice presents another view that is not totally true to a full study of Scripture either, thus going to an opposite and unbalanced extreme. Rice presents God as the originator and personal inflictor of pain, sickness, old age, bloodshed and curses. He acknowledges the truth that sin is the cause of death but puts its results on God rather than on the one who the Bible says is the original murderer, inflictor of sickness, and held the power of death (John 8:44; 10:10; Luke 13:16; Acts 10:38; Heb. 2:14-15).

Someone may ask, “But isn’t Rice simply affirming what the Bible, especially the Old Testament, says?” The answer is “no” and this will be proven as we study the Biblical truth expounded upon in this book. In this book you will see that men like Rice, despite their theological education, do not take the time to study the proper method for interpreting the Old Testament. This

method is right within the pages of both the Old and New Testaments. When you read this book you will see how obvious it is and wonder how you and others missed it.

For centuries Satan has given people the wrong concept of God by blinding them to the true method of interpreting the Old Testament. It is not a new tactic on his part. We will see in the next chapter how Satan has been twisting the truth about God to man since the beginning of mankind. He has, since the time of Adam and Eve, presented God as a harsh cruel deity who is self-centered and bent on doing others harm (Gen. 3:1-7). The Old Testament has been one of his favorite tools by which to do this. He has been successful since he has used it to turn men into atheists and to get Christians to reject a significant and vital portion of God's Word as relevant for their lives.

Rice is to be credited for his sincere effort to be true to the Bible and to boldly proclaim its truth without compromise. However, he mischaracterizes God in the statement quoted above. It is based on a failure to understand a Biblical truth that has been neglected by too many Evangelicals, Fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and Charismatics in our day. Satan enjoys these false presentations of God based on the misunderstanding of His Word.

If Rice and others had followed this Biblical truth that I am about to show you then he would not make God the harsh distributor of pain and sickness. If the liberal he quotes had not been so quick to side with atheists and had studied this truth, he could have presented a loving God from the Old Testament and would not have seen any need to deny this portion of the Bible as God's Word.

True Biblical Old Testament Interpretation

In the following chapters we want to present to you a Biblical method of interpreting difficult Old

Testament passages that maintains a picture of the God of love, compassion and mercy yet without denying any portion of the Bible as God's holy and written revelation to man. I believe that this principle of interpretation can present the truth about God from the Old Testament as seen in Jesus Christ and as the New Testament writers present Him without denying it's relevancy for the Christian today. Furthermore, adhering to this principle can maintain the passionate truth held by Fundamentalists that the entire Bible is God's inspired Word without presenting the harsh picture of God that is found in some of their writings.

It is the principle that will destroy the lies propagated by rabid atheists who look to the Old Testament to make their false case against God. It will even refute the false doctrines of deterministic ideologies such as Calvinism in which the Old Testament is cherry picked in order to present a God who causes every bad thing in this world to happen. Instead you will see the true God of the Bible as seen in Jesus Christ who makes every attempt to work with men to turn them from their wicked ways and bring them out of the snare of Satan.

This truth we will show you comes directly from the Bible itself. You will see that it is not something new or novel. It has been taught for centuries. However, it has been criminally neglected in our day with the exception of a few fringe groups who most might reject anyway due to some other strange unbiblical teachings that they hold to.⁴

There are other great Bible teachers who do not fall into these fringe groups and believe this truth but have only made small references to it. Up until now, I am not aware of any of these otherwise wonderful Bible teachers giving us a complete and thorough understanding of the truth that I am about to present to you.

Finally, while we attempt to present a picture of the God of the Bible who is exactly like Jesus: loving,

kind, gentle, caring, and compassionate, let no one get the false idea that they will find in these pages the teaching of a God who winks at sin. This book will not make you feel comfortable living an unholy life. It will hopefully have the opposite effect as I emphasize throughout this book the destructiveness of sin and the present and eternal dangers of persisting in it.

The major difference between me and Fundamentalists such as John Rice certainly is not in our disdain for sin. I believe he and I share this repugnance for immorality. The major difference between us is that he believes that God, by the use of omnipotent power, bring about sin's results while I believe that God is constantly trying to lead sinners to repentance and out of the snare of Satan who is given the right to destroy us when we sin. As we will see, sin places us into Satan's territory where he has access to us.

So stay with me and learn how the Old Testament you thought you knew presents a God that you will long to know, love, serve, and worship. It will also help you to see why holiness and righteous living is important and protects you, not from God, but from the enemy of both God and man. As long as God is blamed for man's afflictions, men will hate Him, continue in sin in defiance of Him and Satan will rejoice. When the truth is seen that men do to themselves what God is making every effort to protect them from, they will learn to love Him and see that repentance is their best option.

Chapter Two

The Character Assassination of God

As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own stedfastness (2 Pet. 3:16-17)

When a person falls into error they can fall from their own steadfastness. If you believe that God seldom answers prayer then you will not persevere in faith as the Bible instructs. If you believe that God authors temptation and sin then you will not stand against it but you will quickly submit to it. If you believe that God authors sickness then you will not resist with God's promises of healing but give in to it. If you believe that God authors tragedy, disaster and other evils then your only response is a "God is in control – que sera, sera" one. Faith requires steadfastness and perseverance. But if God is our problem then who do we persevere against?

Peter says that a lack of steadfastness is the result of being led away by ministers who teach erroneously. The Holy Spirit has never denied the fact that there are some things in His Word that are *hard* to understand. However, He never said that they were *impossible* to understand. An unlearned and unstable person is on dangerous ground in attempting to understand God's Word. Many of them embrace error and they lead others astray with their error.

Most Errors Center On God's Character

A lot of today's theology has made God the author of all types of evil. For example, some daringly claim that God has ordained sin. While some theologians will state this outright, others use double-speak. They will deny that they teach that God ordains sin but at the funeral of a little girl killed by a pedophile they will say, "God took _____ home because He needed another little flower in heaven." They will even cite Scripture for it, but it is Scripture that has been *wrested*.

James wrote much of his epistle in an attempt to vindicate God's character. James says, "*Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man*" (James 1:13). James tells us that God does not tempt man with evil. If we claim that God took a child who was raped and strangled by a pedophile or who was killed by a drunk driver then we are accusing God of tempting someone with evil. James said that to believe that God is the author of evil is to err:

*Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from **the Father of lights**, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning (James 1:16-17)*

John also agreed when he wrote, "*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all*" (1 John 1:5). Yet, many people present a picture of God which is dark and gives anything but good gifts – and they have Bible verses to prove it. But even if their teachings are peppered with Bible quotes, they are in error if it does not line up with the revelation of God's character that has been revealed to us by Jesus Christ (1 John 5:18-20). Failure to know the

truth about God is due to our leaders and ministers failing to know Him. Failure to know Him leads to our personal destruction:

My people are being destroyed because they don't know me. Since you priests refuse to know me, I refuse to recognize you as my priests. Since you have forgotten the laws of your God, I will forget to bless your children (Hosea 4:6; New Living Translation)

Because people do not really know God they have accepted the lie and are allowing a multitude of preventable circumstances to destroy them. Too many proclaim the devil's works as acts of God because they really do not know God. Notice that it is not God who destroys people. It is our ignorance and willing rejection of His Word that brings destruction upon us.

Sadly the Bible no longer has a preeminent place in the instruction of God's people in many of our churches. Many churches that claim to teach the Bible are still telling people that God is the One who, in His sovereignty, brought about the negative life issues that people have to deal with.

God is often *misunderstood* because He is often *misrepresented*. This is due to the error that is being propagated about Him. God wants His people to understand Him:

*But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he **understandeth and knoweth me**, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord. (Jer. 9:24)*

Some seem to think that faith in God works whether or not we understand Him. However, the Bible disputes this idea. If we have wrong ideas about God then this will lead us to accepting many things that never come from His hand. Notice that God is One who exercises *loving-kindness*. He is both loving and kind. He is not mean, capricious, and vindictive. He wants to love on us and show us kindness.

God expects His people to both understand and know Him. Many people are afraid of God and many hate Him because they have been taught a distorted concept of His nature. To know God is to love Him. In order to truly know Him we must understand Him. Just like us, God does not want to be misunderstood. Those who wrest and pervert God's Word are responsible for His character being falsely maligned.

Perverting the Word and God being Misunderstood

Perverting the Word always leads to God being misunderstood. If we allow anything other than God's Word to reveal who He is then Satan will take advantage of us as he has already done to the majority of the church. Satan attacks the Word, especially as it pertains to God's character and reputation. His successful distortion of the truth concerning God's goodness is exactly what brought the downfall of man from the very beginning.

God lovingly warned (not threatened) man concerning the consequences of eating from one particular tree: "*But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die*" (Genesis 2:17). Eve's failure to fully know God's Word and Adam's failure to properly teach her led to their destruction by Satan:

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil (Gen. 3:1-5).

The twisting of God's character starts with twisting His Word. Before Satan was able to deceive Eve through his character assassination, the first couple had no doubts about God's goodness, love and integrity. After Adam and Eve accepted Satan's attack on God's Word, it became easy to lose trust in God's goodness and love. As S. D. Gordon wrote:

The first thing he did was to raise a doubt about God's love. "Hath God said you shall not eat of any of the trees? What a hard God He is! Lovely trees! Delicious fruit! It was made to be eaten; it will nourish your body. What a cruel God He is! Can't you eat of this fruit? What an awful God you have got!" That is the suggestion, a doubt about God's love.... Satan begat doubt. It was doubt of God's love that was the first born. Doubt of God's love gave birth to doubt of God Himself.¹

Notice what happened to the first couple after they acted on Satan's character assassination? *They became afraid of God.* When God called out to Adam and asked him where

he was, God receives this sad, heart-breaking response: *“And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself”* (Gen. 3:10).

Adam was never afraid of God’s voice prior to this event. Before this they enjoyed wonderful fellowship with God. After feeding on Satan’s character assassination, they are now afraid of Him. Satan painted God as a cruel selfish tyrannical person and so when God came into the garden to fellowship with Adam and Eve, they thought that He was about to bring the hammer down on them for their disobedience.

Adam lost His love for God and His revelation of God’s love for him: *“There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love”* (1 John 4:18). When we become afraid of the loving God and run away *from* Him instead of running *to* Him it is because we have believed Satan’s perversion of God’s Word concerning God’s reputation and character rather than what God’s Word says about these things. We have a children’s song that says, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” The Bible is God’s written revelation to us today. If we doubt the Bible as God’s Word then it becomes easier to doubt anything else about God, including His existence.

Believing Satan’s Character Assassination

Secondly, Adam blamed God for his condition. When God asked Adam what happened he responds by saying, *“And the man said, The woman **whom thou gavest to be with me**, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat”* (Gen. 3:12). Oh how sad. Adam accuses God of having set him up by giving him this woman. He claims that God is the reason for having placed him in this fallen condition. What a perversion of God’s Word and God’s

true intents. God's own Word concerning His reasons for giving Adam this woman are much more altruistic than Adam gave Him credit for:

*And the Lord God said, **It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him....** And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field; **but for Adam there was not found an help meet for him.** And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man (Gen. 2:18, 20-22)*

God stated in His Word that His motives for Adam were unselfish, loving, good and kind. However, the satanic nature that took over Adam caused him to see God as *setting him up for a fall* by giving him this woman. He totally set aside what God's Word stated was the true reason for God giving him the woman. This distortion of God's character in Adam's mind opened the door for Satan to defeat him and Eve.

Adam lost his knowledge of God. He began to see God as unkind and capricious and no longer valued God's Word to him. This caused a separation between Adam and God and he died spiritually that day because he separated himself from the protective life of God (Gen. 2:17; Isa. 59:1-2; Eph. 2:1-6), thus placing himself under Satan's kingdom of evil, darkness and death (Rom. 5:17; Col. 1:12-14; Heb. 2:14-15; 1 John 5:18-19).

Adam failed to teach Eve correctly and then stood by as Satan wrested God's Word and gave a warped

presentation of His character. He obviously accepted this distortion of truth about God since his first act of sin was to blame God for his problems.

The Need for Correct Bible Interpretation

The only way to resolve these issues and to stop the perversion of God's Word that often leads to maligning His character is to use the very principles found within the Scriptures themselves to properly interpret them and explain to people so that they can understand. We find an example of this in the book of Nehemiah:

*These men from the tribe of Levi taught the people about the law as they were all standing there. The Levites were Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, and Pelaiiah. They read the Book of the Law of God. They made it easy to understand, and **explained what it meant**. They did this so that the people could understand what was being read. (Nehemiah 8:7-8; Easy to Read Version)*

We are not only to read the Scriptures but we need to know the meaning of what we read. Therefore we are to understand and interpret them properly. Solomon said, *“To understand a proverb, **and the interpretation**; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings”* (Prov. 1:6). Many of our Christian leaders and Bible teachers have not explained the difficult passages of the Bible to make it easy for us to understand. On the contrary, they have made the Bible appear to be more complex.

Even worse, they have given us a picture of God that makes Him undesirable to the common mind. These leaders have done much damage to God's reputation due to their failure to properly understand His Word. **Failure to understand is the reason for defeat in our lives:**

*When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and **understandeth it not**, then cometh the wicked one, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side (Matt. 13:19)*

Failing to get an understanding will bring defeat. It will cause us to lose out on all that God has for us. Many Christians today are living far below the rights and privileges that God has made available to them. Apart from understanding and knowing God we are unable to defeat Satan because we will not be able to deal with His lies. Paul said, "*Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against **the knowledge of God***" (2 Cor. 10:5) How would we know when a lie is exalted against the knowledge of God unless we have true Biblical knowledge of God?

Satan knows this and that is why he has so distorted our understanding about God that we easily skip over His lovingkindness and begin to focus on negative ideas about Him. Many believe that understanding God is unessential to faith. On the contrary, they have difficulty believing anything other than a God who is shrouded in mystery. God is not the author of "mystery religion". It is Satan who darkens the understanding of people (Eph. 4:18; 2 Cor. 4:3-4).

In my Air Force days during a tour of duty in South Korea I was eating with two of the ministers in charge of the Gospel service we held in our base chapel. I

brought up the fact that it didn't appear to me that our people were being fed properly and that they needed a better understanding of God's Word. They must have found this insulting (although that was not my intent) because they began to hammer into me.

"What do you mean they need to *understand* brother?" asked the pastor. "People don't necessarily need to understand because God won't always give us an understanding. Many times I read God's Word and I still don't understand it. Sometimes I may not understand it unless God gives it to me." The other one added, "Yes brother, one does not have to understand the Word all the time." I can only guess that this ignorance was the reason why our Friday night Gospel service dwindled down to nine people (six were preachers). This could also be the reason why I never saw one true convert while I was there, and also why we lacked much spiritual power.

Sadly, this is the attitude of so many of our ministers today. They consign difficult to understand passages into a "mystery" or they interpret them in light of a theological bias that is ready to paint God as a monster. Satan takes advantage of people who lack understanding. He is able to take away any Biblical principles of victory taught them when they hold erroneous ideas about God's character.

Chapter Three

The Eastern – Hebrew Idiom of Permission

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation (2 Pet. 1:20)

Part of the blame for erroneous ideas about God's character may be due to the neglect of a very important Bible interpretation principle. Too often God has been blamed for the evil that is in this world. He has been blamed for sickness, crime, natural disasters, tragedies, accidents, death and even sin itself. Someone might say, "but there are a lot of Bible verses that say that He does all of that." It is true that many places in the Bible it *appears* to be teaching that God causes these things, but that is because our Bible interpreters, theologians, and ministers neglected to apply the *Ancient Near Eastern Hebrew idiom of permission*. 19th century theologian George Bush said, "God is often said to do that which he merely commands, causes, or permits to be done."¹ Failure to recognize this truth have caused many to wrest the Scriptures to their own destruction and the destruction of so many other people.

Neglect of an Important Bible Interpretation Principle

The Bible, especially the Old Testament, is permeated with *idioms* that are unique to the culture that the ancient Hebrews lived in. The idiom of permission is one of them. As one scholar has noted:

In the language of Scripture, natural consequences are sometimes spoken of as though they were pre-ordained and irrevocable decrees. What happens solely through the permission of the Almighty, in the ordinary course of his Providence, is described

as though it had taken place through some special and irresistible intervention of his hand. This is a mode of writing peculiar to the Hebrew idiom; an idiom which prevails every where throughout the New Testament, as well as the Old. Thus, when the sacred writers represent God as “blinding the eyes of men that they should not see, and hardening their hearts that they should not understand;” their meaning generally is, that he does not powerfully interfere to prevent those evils which are the natural fruits of our own folly, perverseness, and impenitence.²

Hence, passages that appear to make God the cause of some negative event should be understood in the light of the permissive idiom prevalent in that culture. But what is an idiom anyway? In his excellent book, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible*, E. W. Bullinger says that an idiom is “the peculiar usage of words and phrases”.³ Bullinger also states that it is, “The language peculiar to one nation or tribe, as opposed to other languages or dialects.”⁴

Bullinger lists a number of idioms unique to Ancient Israel and their surrounding culture. One of those idioms is the fact that “Active verbs were used by the Hebrews to express, not the doing of the thing, but the *permission* of the thing which the agent is said to do.”⁵ Bullinger then proceeds to give a number of Scriptural examples in which God, in our translations, is said to be the author of a sinful act and then demonstrates how this should be understood in a permissive sense.

How important is it to recognize the idioms in the Hebrew culture and language? Bullinger, repudiating the idea of a literal translation of the Bible, tells us of the danger that comes apart from translating “the thought and meaning of the phrase” vice a word for word rendering:

All this is perfectly clear that, unless the translation be idiomatic, there must be grave mistakes made; and that, if a translation be absolutely literal, it will be a fruitful source of errors.⁶

Another theologian, David Russell, agreed:

According to the idiom of the Scripture language, words of an active signification are often used to express, not the doing of the thing said to be done, but the permission, or the prediction of it.... Now, in translating a language, the idioms of which are different from those of that in which we wish them to be understood —the idioms ought not to be retained, for if they are, the meaning of the words is not given.⁷

At the risk of sounding dramatic, I believe that neglecting the permission idiom has also destroyed the lives of many Christians and non-Christians. Neglect of this truth has caused men to scour the Bible, invent aberrant theologies that promoted erroneous understandings of God's character and nature. This has caused men to hate God and Christians to worship a false concept of Him.

Neglecting this Idiom Leads to Error

Failure to understand that the Bible uses idiomatic language has indeed led to some grave errors such as Calvinism, in which God is made to sovereignly control each and every single event in the world. It has led to atheism, in which God is denied because atheists cannot see themselves worshipping a God who can do some of the things they read about in Scripture. It has led others to fatalism, discouragement, and failure in their Christian walks. James Kendall explains the importance of the Ancient Near Eastern idiom of speech that was adopted by the Hebrews that we have neglected:

There is likewise an idiom peculiar to the language of every nation, more especially of the Eastern nations, which it is necessary, as far as may be, to learn; otherwise we shall make the sacred writers say more, or less, than they intended to say; and shall be liable to wrest some things, which they do say, to their dishonour and our own destruction. **For instance, in the language of Scripture God is sometimes said to do what he only permits to take place under his moral government;** to do what he gives power or opportunity to his creatures to do themselves; to do what he foretells will take place by the agency of others; to do what naturally results from his having withdrawn those influences of his grace, which have long been abused, resisted, and quenched. Now to understand such passages literally and without any qualification would be to make a pure and holy God, with whom is no iniquity, and who cannot look upon sin; the principal and immediate agent in the most horrid crimes recorded in the inspired volume; and this, too, in the face of the most solemn prohibitions of the inspired writers themselves, who forbid any man to say, or even think, when he is tempted, that he is tempted of God; for God cannot be tempted of evil, neither tempteth he any man.⁸ (Emphasis mine)

Kendall believed that, apart from knowledge of this idiom we will charge Biblical writers with teaching ideas about God that were never intended and charge God Himself with horrible crimes. Kendall further states that apart from understanding this idiom the Biblical writers are dishonored and we will eventually destroy ourselves by our warped views of God.

John Hale Murray wrote a book to help Bible readers understand mistranslated passages of the Bible. He notes that the neglect of these idioms has led to some grievous errors of translation:

One peculiarity of the Hebrew tongue is that it abounds in figures of speech that must necessarily be understood, to gain its intended meaning. The simple mode of life in which the earliest Israelites lived, doubtless made them great observers of nature; any reference to which, from their familiarity with it, made them require no explanations. Our difficulty here is to reconcile this with our ideas and language; and the neglect of these idioms with our translators, where they have given a literal verbal translation, without the customary sense of the original, has led them into many errors.⁹

Sadly, this neglect has a negative impact upon the character of God. Murray writes, “Our translators have not only made mistakes in what affects men, but in what regards the honour of God, in making him the author of sin in wicked men, that he might find occasion to destroy them.”¹⁰ We can add that neglecting this idiom has made God the author of the results of sin as well such as sickness, natural disasters, accidents, tragedies, poverty and other kinds of troubles men and women endure in this life. Basically God has been made the author of the works of the devil that He came to destroy (1 John 3:8).

Alexander McClelland has also noted that failing to understand this idiom had led some to accuse God of “unholy volitions” in many of the theological circles throughout New England in earlier centuries:

He “hardened Pharaoh’s heart:” He “shuts the eyes of sinners, and makes their ears heavy, lest they see with their eyes and hear with their ears.” They contain, however, nothing alarming; the whole doctrine which they teach, being approved by the light of reason itself; that God, in righteous judgment gives the presumptuous sinner up to his own evil impulses, permitting him to “harden himself even under those means which he useth for the softening of others.” Misapprehension of this

idiom led many excellent men in New England, to profess without scruple or limitation, their belief, that unholy volitions were the immediate effect of divine agency.¹¹

Thomas Jackson also expounded on this subject. He wrote, “It is then so common in Holy Scripture to speak of God as actually doing that which He simply permits, and does not absolutely hinder men from doing, that this may be justly regarded as an idiom of eastern speech.”¹² Jackson, explaining Jesus’ commission to the apostles in which they appear to have authority to forgive or allow sins to remain in John 20:22-23 says that this should be understood on the basis of this idiom. He notes that “inattention” to it has led numerous people into “grievous error.”

.... this authority our Saviour expresses according to a well-known idiom of the Jews’ language. It is no wonder, then, that God is said to do that which He permitted men to do, when they had by their sins provoked Him to withdraw from them the restraints of His providence and grace. Inattention to Scripture forms of expression is one of the most fruitful sources of theological error.¹³

As Jackson and others have stated, and experience shows, God has been mischaracterized and maligned, often by sincere men and women, due to the neglect of this idiom. Some have no knowledge of this Hebrew idiom of permission and those who do don’t always take it seriously or they apply it inconsistently, especially since it often conflicts with their ideological perspective of God’s sovereignty.

Is God the Author of Rebellion, Rape, and Murder?

Neglecting the Hebrew permissive idiom has led both to atheism and the false teachings permeated within

Calvinism. Calvinism and its false teachings are often responsible for many men and women becoming atheists or agnostics. John Calvin and others promoted some horrible and aberrant doctrines that give us a very distorted picture of God. For example, after David's adultery and subsequent murderous act God says through the prophet Nathan:

Thus saith the LORD, Behold, I will raise up evil against thee out of thine own house, and I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun (2 Sam. 12:11)

Now we know that this word was fulfilled when David's son, Absalom, rebelled against his father and raped his wives publicly (2 Samuel 16:21-22). John Hale Murray noted how John Calvin's neglect of the Hebrew permission idiom has led him to "piously" charge God with the most grievous acts:

Our translation here represents God as the author of evil, which made Calvin say that "the incest of Absalom was the work of God." "Thus saith the Lord, behold I will raise up evil against thee—I will take thy wives, and give them and he shall lie with them." In the original these expressions do not denote any positive actions on the part of God, as if he prompted wicked men to do the things with which he threatened David. This would indeed be to make God the author of evil. He meant that, as a punishment to David, God would withhold his restraint from David's enemies, because David had grossly violated God's laws. God permits the evils to be done which his omnipotence could prevent; and does not, in certain cases, restrain the wickedness of men, in their being the means of chastising the sins of his own people.¹⁴

In R. A. Torrey's Treasury of Scripture Knowledge we find this note on 2 Sam. 12:11:

That is, in the course of my providence I will permit this to be done. Such phrases in Scripture do not mean that God either does or can do evil himself; but only that he permits such evil to be done as he foresaw would be done, and which, had he pleased, he might have prevented.¹⁵

Interpreting 2 Sam. 12:11 permissively rather than causatively based on the Hebrew idiom is affirmed by a number of scholars. Allow me to cite just one more out of the many that we could quote:

"I will raise up evil" Viz. according to the Hebrew idiom, I will permit evil to rise up "against thee out of thine own house," and who can read of the rebellion of Absalom, the defilement of his daughter by her brother, and of his concubines by his son, and the deaths of his children, without owning the wonderful fulfilment of this denunciation? "I will take," *i. e.* permit thy wives to be taken; and so v. 12. "I will do," I will permit it to be done; "in the sight of this sun," *i. e.* as v. 12. shows, not secretly, but openly and publicly; see ch. xvi. 21, 22.¹⁶

Once more we see that when the Hebrew idiom of permission is consistently applied, God is not the author of rebellion, rape and murder in the case of Absalom and his actions against his father. God was merely prophesying the events that were to take place due to David's sin. Quite often the person who prophesies an event is said to be the one who brought it about (Isaiah 6:9-10; Jer. 1:10; Eze. 43:3; Matt. 10:34-36). Basically David had sowed the wind and was reaping the whirlwind (Hosea 8:7). God merely told David what would happen

as the natural consequences of his sin (and the fact that he opened the door to Satan) but used the idiomatic language of the Hebrews that they were familiar with.

Other Bible Examples Erroneously Interpreted

Another example of how both Calvinists and atheists wrest the Scriptures to promote their various ideologies is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The Calvinists (and sadly even some non-Calvinists) have used Pharaoh's hardening to deny free-will. Atheists have used it to paint a picture of a fictional deity who makes people do evil and then punishes them for it. It is true that the Scriptures say that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but if the Ancient Near Eastern Hebrew idiom had been used to interpret this, there would be no difficulty with such passages:

But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart, as the Lord had said. Exod. viii. 15 ; and chap. ix. 34. He sinned yet more, and hardened his heart. God purposed not to interpose by his mollifying grace, and, in the idiom of the eastern language, employed in the Bible, and which, when viewed under established rules of fair interpretation, cannot be easily misunderstood, is therefore said to harden the tyrant's heart. The purpose of God was not to prevent it.¹⁷*

In other words, Pharaoh hardened his own heart by his own choice. Because God did not intervene in a supernatural way to override Pharaoh's free-will choice, He is said to have done the hardening. M'Leod continues:

...did he harden Pharaoh's heart: he *foretold* the fact, he *permitted* the event. Man's agency, and that of God, are as distinct as their being or personality. Our acts are not *his*. Setting aside the blasphemy of asserting God to be the author of our sins, the moral tendency of the revolting sentiment is to be

deprecated. If God causes all our sins, he will not punish us for his doings. Man, if he believe all this, will not fear to sin. It is happy for our world that all the original principles of man's constitution are not obliterated. "The work of the law written in the heart," testifies against the wild notion of God being the author of sin.¹⁸

Had Calvin researched and studied as he should have then he would not be the author of the system of theology that is largely responsible today for mischaracterizing God and giving numerous men a valid excuse to become atheists and agnostics. An example is found with Thomas Paine, who many believed to have been a very influential atheist. He is said to have admitted that he did not even know Hebrew, thus leading him to make some serious errors concerning Biblical truth:

The agency of evil spirits in tempting men to sin, and in tormenting them, is distinctly recognized in 1 Sam. xvi. 14-23. xviii. 10—and as clearly distinguished from that of the Most High. "The Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord troubled him." Compare 1 Kings xxii. 21-23. What were these evil spirits and lying spirits, but Satan, or fallen angels under his sway? Was there ever a Jew stupid enough to suppose that these evil spirits were one and the same being as the Lord God of Israel? And yet Mr. Paine says, "The belief of a good and an evil spirit, existing as distinct and separate beings, is not a dogma to be found in any of the books of the Bible." It is not necessary for us to characterize that assertion. He has told us that he knew nothing about the Hebrew language: he might have spared himself the confession. Nobody that knows anything about Hebrew idioms wants to be told that the Hebrew writers frequently speak of a person's doing a thing, or appointing a thing, which he only permits or does not prevent. Calvinists themselves,

however inconsistently, are obliged to make this admission.¹⁹

Hence, we find that the problem with atheists has been their lack of diligent study as well. Many of them want to excuse their infidelity so they will not do the difficult work necessary to understand what is actually being said when God is said in Scripture to initiate some horrendous things.

If atheists had been made aware of the truth concerning the Hebrew permissive idiom then many of them would either reject this satanic philosophy of denying God's existence or they would at least be without any legitimate excuses for hating Him as much as they do. Atheism is the fault of Calvinists who propagated their system of theology and gave men a horrid picture of God because they wrested the Scriptures. Calvinists cannot plead ignorance concerning this as some of them show through their writings that they are fully aware of this truth.²⁰

Why did the Hebrews use this Idiom?

Richard Twopeny notes that the Hebrews were not required to make the distinction between "permission" and "causation" that we need to make today:

This simple and strongly marked outline of religion, did not require them to make any distinction, between the things permitted by the Almighty to happen in his dominion and, under his controul, which were the consequence of the misbehaviour of his creatures, and those things of which he was the immediate agent. Neither were they in the habit of expressing this distinction by their language; for they used their transitive conjugations or voices indifferently, either for simple permission or actual causation.²¹

Twopeny also states that, "...the Hebrew language is little fitted to express the distinction between the event and the final cause, which it always confounds."²² Therefore, it is the responsibility of translators, theologians, and Bible teachers to have knowledge of this idiom and to properly apply it to Scripture, especially when said Scripture appears in its literal rendering to cast aspersions on God's loving and righteous character.

Despite the people and their original language with all of its idioms, the Bible is still the inspired Word of God. The German scholar Johann Dathe wrote, "For when the Deity has condescended to speak by the mouth of men, he has always left them to use the modes of expression current and intelligible in the age in which they lived."²³

God used the language, expressions and idioms of His people to speak His Word. We failed to interpret these idioms so that they may be understood in the Western mind, therefore, mischaracterizing God and charging Him as the direct cause of evil.

Atheists, Calvinists and others have used the divinely inspired Scriptures to malign God's character. It is a sad testimony to the fact that they have not followed proper Biblical interpretation principles. However, since some scholars discovered that the ancient Hebrew Scriptures contained an idiom that was permissive this has helped to answer the charges some have made against God. This is not a recent discovery. For centuries men have attempted to vindicate God's character by reinterpreting the Scriptures in light of the permissive sense.

Chapter Four

Two Often Mistranslated Hebrew Words

*And I will bring a sword upon you, that shall avenge the quarrel of my covenant: and when ye are gathered together within your cities, I will **send** the pestilence among you; and ye shall be **delivered** into the hand of the enemy (Lev. 26:25)*

In the last chapter we learned that numerous scholars agree that in the Ancient Near Eastern idiom, God, due to His omnipotence and sovereignty, is held responsible for all that happens, even if said circumstances were not what He desired. This is despite the fact that God is not the direct cause of the circumstances or had any significant involvement in them. Had our translators recognized and interpreted this permission idiom for the Western mindset, God would not be accused of so much evil.

Along with the idiomatic language of permission, scholars also affirm that there are several Hebrew verbs used throughout the Old Testament that imply *permission*. Thomas Pearce wrote:

“When God is said to harden men’s hearts,—to deliver them up to a reprobate mind,—to send them strong delusions, that they should believe a lie, and the like;— it is infinitely far from being meant of an efficacious impulse in God Almighty.” “That all those verbs,— to harden, to blind, to deliver up, to send delusions, to deceive, and the like,—are by an ordinary Hebraism only permissive in signification, though active in sound, is placed without all controversy.”¹

Phillip Melanchthon, who worked closely with Martin Luther during the Protestant reformation, wrote:

“He gave them upthat is, he permitted them to rush by their own will, or as impelled by the devil: for this signification of permission is extremely frequent in the Hebrew verbsThis simple and true grammatical interpretation removes the labyrinths of multitudinous questions.”²

Thomas Scott in a well-known commentary also notes, “Verbs active in the Heb[rew] often signify only permission.”³ Hebrew scholar Robert Young wrote, “Active verbs frequently express a permission of it.”⁴

Two of the most common Hebrew verbs implying permission are *shalah* (*shalach*) and *nathan*. Lev. 26:25 uses both words in relation to the punishment that God will administer upon Israel. “Send” is the Hebrew word *shalah* (*shalach*) and “delivered” is the Hebrew word “*nathan*” (*natan*). Both verbs are often translated in a *causative* sense. Yet both words can and should be understood from a standpoint of “permission” rather than “causation”. The failure to translate these verbs properly has caused damage to God’s reputation.

Nathan (natan)

Some cite Leviticus 26:25 as proof that God personally inflicts sickness and other evils. However, when both words are translated properly then passages such as Leviticus 26:25 are correctly understood as God removing His protection and *allowing* the sickness and the falling into the hands of the enemy to take place.

In his *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, Stephen D. Renn, under the topic “Allow,” mentions three Old Testament Hebrew words: *yalak*, *nathan*, and *shalah*. In this chapter we will examine the latter two, starting with *nathan* (or *natan*). Renn defines *natan* as follows:

natan is a very common verb with the predominant meaning “to give,” plus a wide variety of senses throughout the nearly two thousand occurrences of the term. In Exod. 3:19; 23:13, however, it expresses the meaning “to let, allow,” in negative contexts of refusing to give permission.⁵

John Hale Murray, in his book, *A Help for English Readers to Understand Mis-translated Passages in Our Bible*, is very critical of the Calvinist interpretation of Scripture. In certain passages used by Calvinists to support their mischaracterizations of God, Murray notes the failure to properly render the Hebrew word *nathan* (*natan*) and writes, “But the words here used signify only a permission of the things spoken of, and not the very doing them. The Hebrew word ‘nathan,’ means to suffer or permit.”⁶ Hale then lists a number of passages where the word “*nathan*” is understood as “permission”.

Another scholar says that this word expresses the mode in which God is actually said to punish evil doers:

The verb [*nathan*] signifies *to permit*, as appears from Esther ix. 13: “Let it be given [*nathan*] to the Jews,” i.e. be permitted them. See Ps. xvi. 10. This permission is given by God’s withdrawing His grace, and surrendering the sinner to the dominion of his own desires. It was in this way that He allowed Pharaoh’s heart to continue hard, notwithstanding the many tokens of divine displeasure which the Egyptian king experienced; and this is no uncommon mode by which God in conducting His moral government punishes those who go on obstinately in their sin.⁷

Nathan often expresses God normal “modus operandi” in relation to how He is said to punish rebellion. It is important to know that *nathan* is translated throughout the King James Version as follows: “**to give**, bestow, **grant**,

permit, ascribe, employ, devote, consecrate, dedicate, pay wages, sell, exchange, lend, commit, entrust, **give over**, **deliver up**, yield produce, occasion, produce, requite to, report, mention, utter, stretch out, extend.”⁸

Many of these words, especially those we have bolded, are permissive. Often these words can be found in Scriptures which refer to God’s actions against rebellious men. A thorough examination of these passages would help us to understand that God is not the inflictor of the results of sinful actions.

Archaic King James Language

Before examining those passages that contain the word “nathan” we should probably look at another problem that has confused many Bible readers which is the archaic language of the King James Version. While there are many wonderful English translations available (and many that are not so good), the KJV still holds a prominent place in our teaching, preaching and writings (including my own). Certain English words used during the time in which the KJV was translated do not have the same meaning today that they had back then.

One of those words is the word “suffer.” The KJV Bible uses this word in multiple ways. Some of those ways have not changed over the centuries such as when we suffer a pain, a loss, or a consequence of our choices. The meaning is the same today as it was back then. However, the KJV also uses the word as a synonym for *permit*, *allow* or *let*.

Explaining the different ways that the word “suffer” is used in Scripture, **The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia** elaborates on the word that we would understand as “allow” or “permit:”

“Suffer” in the sense of “let,” “allow” (rendering primarily Heb. *natan*; Greek *aphiemi*, *epitrepo*) is an archaic usage; it is not found in the RSV or other

modern versions but is frequent in the AV and RV (e.g., Ex. 12:23: “suffer the destroyer to come”; Mk. 10:14 par.: “suffer the little children to come to me”; 1 Tim. 2:12: “suffer a woman to teach” [cf. RSV, NEB, “permit,” “allow,” “grant,” “let”]).⁹

We do not use the word “suffer” in this way today so when we come across it in the Bible (at least in the KJV and other older English translations) we have a tendency to overlook and even dismiss it. However, I believe that our overlooking and dismissing this word has caused us to miss the vital truth in Scripture that explains how many of the horrendous acts often attributed to God are *permissive* rather than *causative*.

God Putting Lying Spirits in False Prophets

Had *nathan* (*natan*) been consistently translated throughout Scripture we would not have the denigration of God’s character that we often find in both atheistic and theological circles. No better example can be found than 1 Kings 22:20-23 where God is said to have put a lying spirit into the mouth of some false prophets:

*And the LORD said, Who shall persuade Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramothgilead? And one said on this manner, and another said on that manner. And there came forth a spirit, and stood before the LORD, and said, I will persuade him. And the LORD said unto him, Wherewith? And he said, I will go forth, and I will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, Thou shalt persuade him, and prevail also: go forth, and do so. Now therefore, behold, **the LORD hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets, and the LORD***

hath spoken evil concerning thee. (1 Kings 22:20-23)

The spirit “came forth.” He was not summoned by God. He came on his own. The spirit himself decided to become a *lying spirit*. It was merely seeking “*permission*” to go about this task. This spirit needed no commanding or persuasion from God. Speaking of Satan Jesus said, “*When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it*” (John 8:44b). God tells Jeremiah that He does not command prophets to lie:

Because they have committed villany in Israel, and have committed adultery with their neighbours' wives, and have spoken lying words in my name, which I have not commanded them; even I know, and am a witness, saith the LORD. (Jer. 29:23)

If God is to be found trustworthy, it is important that He is not seen as One who commands or causes someone to sin. So how do we resolve what appears to be a contradiction between the inspired Word of God in 2 Kings 22:20-23 and other passages? The word “put” in verse 23 is the Hebrew word “*nathan*”. There is no logical reason why this word cannot be understood as “*permission*” in 1 Kings 22:23. As one theologian has written:

“The Lord hath put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets.” This is the common translation, “But the original Hebrew does not sanction such a rendering. For it makes Jehovah the author of this sin, by exerting an influence over the minds of the idolatrous priests to persuade Ahab to ascend to Ramoth-gilead, that he might destroy him.” “The

word *naathan*, is rendered *hath put* i.e. *the Lord*.”
But it is perfectly proper that the passage should
receive the same rendering, as in other places.¹⁰

The author’s statement is easily supported by the wide context of Scripture. King Ahab received the truth from the prophet Micaiah and ignored it, thus demonstrating his willingness to be deceived (Isaiah 30:9-10). If we persist in rebellion and we persist in believing lies, then God is obligated to permit us to have the very thing we have chosen (2 The. 2:10, 11).

However, God’s part is only from a *permission perspective* (Rom. 1:24-28) since He is not the One who sends these deceivers (Jer. 14:15; 23:32; 29:31). Therefore when the Hebrew word “*nathan*” that has been translated “put” in 1 Kings 22:23 is properly translated as “allow” or “permit” then the passage should read, “...*the LORD hath permitted a lying spirit in the mouth of all these thy prophets.*” God simply permitted what Ahab already wanted.

Did God give His People Bad Laws?

In the book of Ezekiel we find another passage often referenced by atheists to excuse their rejection of the God of the Bible, as well as by some theologians who promote the doctrine of hyper-sovereignty:

Because they had not executed my judgments, but had despised my statutes, and had polluted my sabbaths, and their eyes were after their fathers' idols. Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live (Eze. 20:24-25)

The impression drawn from this passage is that God intentionally gives His own people bad laws that would eventually lead them into sin and destruction? When we interpret Scripture with Scripture, we see that God does no such thing:

The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes (Psalm 19:7-8)

In Ezekiel 20:25, the statutes that God supposedly gave the people led to them polluting their gifts (v. 26). In Psalm 19:7-8 God's laws and statutes converts the soul and are the subject of rejoicing. Paul also wrote, "*Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good*" (Rom. 7:12). Furthermore, John reveals God's loving attitude towards His people when he writes, "*For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous*" (1 John 5:3).

Therefore, Ezekiel is simply another case where a misinterpreted word has thrown everything out of proportion. Look at the word "gave" in Ezekiel 20:25. It comes from the Hebrew word "*nathan*". Some English translations such as The Holman Christian Standard Bible translate the word correctly: "*I gave them over to worthless customs and laws.*" God reluctantly "gives rebellious people over" to their own lusts (Psalm 81:10-16; Rom. 1:24-28).

This is the truth that is being taught in Ezekiel 20. In verse 21 we learn that the Israelites refused to walk in the laws that God gave that were good and led to life. Therefore He *allowed* them to continue in the statutes of

the heathen whose practices they adopted. After so much pleading, God eventually removes all restraint and allows people to have what they want. However, this is *permissive* and not *causative*. Rendering the Hebrew word “*nathan*” properly alleviates the confusion that this passage has produced.

Is God the Author of Sickness?

While there are some Hebrew scholars willing to defend God against the charges of being the author of immorality, most are reluctant to defend Him against being the author of sickness and disease. Yet, in a number of Old Testament passages where God appears to be a sickness-inflictor, if the Hebrew word “*nathan*” (and, as we will see momentarily, “*shalah*”) had been translated in the permission sense then God would not so often be blamed for cancer, AIDS, arthritis, and numerous other diseases and handicaps.

In Leviticus 14:34 God tells Moses and Aaron that He could possibly *put* a plague of leprosy on someone’s house in Canaan:

*And the Lord spake unto Moses and unto Aaron, saying, When ye be come into the land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession, and I **put** the plague of leprosy in a house of the land of your possession.... (Lev. 14:33-34)*

That would be pretty cruel of God to put a plague on the house of one of His own. However, concerning this passage, one Bible expositor familiar with the Hebrew language believed that the passage is to be understood from the background of “...the Hebrew idiom God is often said to do what he merely permits to be done.”¹¹

However, this would not need the comment of a Bible expositor for clarification if words were translated properly. “Put” is from the Hebrew word “*nathan*”. When the word is translated in the sense of permission then it should properly read, “...and I **allow** the plague of leprosy in a house of the land of your possession.” What a difference the translation of one word makes in light of vindicating God’s good character. In Deuteronomy we read:

*And the LORD will take away from thee all sickness, and will put none of the evil diseases of Egypt, which thou knowest, upon thee; but will **lay** them upon all them that hate thee (Deut. 7:15)*

Reading this passage gives us the impression that God will personally inflict Israel’s enemies with sickness. For some, this is not a concern since it is the enemies of God’s people that sickness would be inflicted upon. Yet, the fact that God would inflict sickness on anyone makes God the author and engineer of sickness and death.

Nonetheless, the word “lay” is “*nathan*” and it should be translated either as “permit” or “give them over to”. When this is done then God is vindicated from the charge of inflicting sickness on His enemies. Just as we can justify, based on God’s moral character, that He does not put lying spirits in people’s mouths or give bad destructive laws, neither does the author of life inflict death-dealing diseases. The Wycliff Translation translates “lay” in a sense that removes any responsibility from God:

The Lord shall do away from thee all ache (The Lord shall take away all thy aches and pains); and he shall not bring to thee

the full evil sicknesses of Egypt, that thou hast known, but to all thine enemies these sicknesses shall come (Wycliffe Bible)

In this translation God is vindicated from being the direct inflictor of these diseases. It is from a lack of *prevention* rather than a lack of causation. This is consistent with the teaching of Scripture. God does not create sickness to lay on His enemies but simply “gives them over” to the satanic forces that inflict it (Ex. 12:23; Psalm 78:49-51). He simply allows them to have the sicknesses that come as a natural result of rebelling against Him and losing His life-protection over sickness and disease (Psalm 91:1-10).

Shalah (shalack)

Shalah (or shalack) is another word too often translated in the Bible in a way that distorts God’s reputation. One lexicon defines it as “to send, send away, let go, stretch out, to let loose.”¹² Stephen D. Renn further elaborates on the definition of this word:

shala is a common verb meaning “to send,” plus a variety of related nuances throughout the nearly 850 occurrences of the term. In a number of contexts, however, the meaning “let (someone or something) go” in the sense of “allowing” them to go is indicated.¹³

Gesenius gave a similar definition of this verb. One publication notes, “In like manner, in Psalm lxxxi. 12, Shalach is rendered by Gesenius, ‘relax, loosen, let go, especially one who has been in any way detained; give over into the power of anything.’”¹⁴ Rotherham, in *The Emphasized Bible*, makes reference to Gesenius’ Lexicon and gives us a further explanation of how this verb expresses permission rather than causation:

That Hebrew Grammars distinctly avow *occasion* or *permission* to be sometimes the sense of verbs which ordinarily signify *cause* can be verified by a reference to the Hebrew Grammar of Gesenius, say in the admirable translation of Dr. Benjamin Davies p. 120. After stating that the verbal form (conjugation) called [he cites the Hebrew here] denotes intensity and repetition, this grammar adds: "It often takes the modifications expressed by *permit, to declare or hold an, to help.*" Of this, a good example is found in the verb *shalach*, "to send." Notice its modification with reference to the raven and the dove in Gen. viii. 7, 8. Noah "sent" them "forth"; that is, he simply "let them go." The only *cause* was *permission*, the removal of restraint. Again, when Eliezer said (Gen. xxiv. 51:; "Send me away," all he meant was, "Let me go," "Do not hinder me."¹⁵

As noted by Rotherham, *shalah* (*shalach*) is most often translated as "send" in the King James Version. Some Bible verses appear to denigrate God's character when this verb is not understood in its permissive meaning.

The Sickness Curses in Deuteronomy 28

In Deuteronomy 28 we are told that God is going to send numerous types of curses upon the Israelites if they disobey Him:

*The LORD shall **send** upon thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke, in all that thou settest thine hand unto for to do , until thou be destroyed , and until thou perish quickly; because of the wickedness of thy doings, **whereby thou hast forsaken me.** The LORD shall make the pestilence cleave unto thee, until he have consumed thee from off the land, whither thou goest to possess it. The LORD shall smite thee*

with a consumption, and with a fever, and with an inflammation, and with an extreme burning, and with the sword, and with blasting, and with mildew; and they shall pursue thee until thou perish (Deut. 28:20-22)

The “sending” in this passage is “shalah” (shalach”). The context shows that it should be “permissive” rather than “causative”. You see, the Lord will “send,” or rather, “allow” all of these sicknesses and diseases to come on the disobedient ones because they have *forsaken Him*. Sadly, *forsaking God* automatically causes one to be forsaken: “...*if ye forsake him, he will forsake you*” (1 Chron. 15:2b). This is exactly what we are taught within the wide context of this passage:

*“And the Lord said unto Moses, Behold, thou shalt sleep with thy fathers; and this people will rise up, and go a whoring after the gods of the strangers of the land, whither they go to be among them, **and will forsake me, and break my covenant which I have made with them.** Then my anger shall be kindled against them in that day, **and I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them,** and they shall be devoured, **and many evils and troubles shall befall them;** so that they will say in that day, **Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us? And I will surely hide my face in that day for all the evils which they shall have wrought, in that they are turned unto other gods.**” (Deut. 31:16-18)*

The forsaking of God leads to His forsaking the disobedient one. This, of course, means the loss of His protection. Therefore, the word “send” in relation to the sicknesses and diseases that God warned would come from disobedience could (and we believe “should”) have been translated “allow” or “permit” based both on the meaning of the word and the context. The passage could (and should) justly be interpreted to say, “*The LORD shall permit upon thee cursing, vexation, and rebuke,*

The Curse of Defeat in Deuteronomy 28

Therefore, the “curse” in Deuteronomy 28 does not mean that God personally inflicts the consequences of disobedience but He permits these things to happen as the result of removing His protection. Let us see this from another example in Deuteronomy 28:

Therefore shalt thou serve thine enemies which the LORD shall send against thee, in hunger, and in thirst, and in nakedness, and in want of all things: and he shall put a yoke of iron upon thy neck, until he have destroyed thee. The LORD shall bring a nation against thee from far, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flieth; a nation whose tongue thou shalt not understand; A nation of fierce countenance, which shall not regard the person of the old, nor shew favour to the young: (Deut. 28:48-50)

This word was fulfilled through a number of nations that destroyed Israel to include, among several, the King of Babylon (Chaldeans):

And the LORD sent against him bands of the Chaldees, and bands of the Syrians, and bands of the Moabites, and bands of the children of Ammon, and sent them against Judah to destroy it, according to the word of the LORD, which he spake by his servants the prophets. (2 Kings 24:2)

Both passages use the words “send” and “sent” which in the Hebrew is the permissive verb “shalah” (shalach). This means that God removes His protection and *allows* His enemies to have their way with the disobedient ones. Lest one accuses God of being uncaring and cold, one needs to read further to see how God did everything He could to reach His people before He finally “gave them up:”

*And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy. Therefore he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age: **he gave them all into his hand.** (2 Chron. 36:15-17)*

God sent numerous prophets to warn Israel of the consequences of their rebellion. His compassion was rewarded with mocking and mistreatment of His prophets.

They slapped God in His face and ran Him away. Therefore, He gave them over to their enemies, in this case, the Chaldeans (Babylonians). A number of passages affirm this:

*But after that our fathers had provoked the God of heaven unto wrath, he **gave them into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, the Chaldean**, who destroyed this house, and carried the people away into Babylon (Ezra 5:12)*

*And **I will give thee into the hand** of them that seek thy life, and into the hand of them whose face thou fearest, even into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, and into the hand of the Chaldeans (Jer. 22:25)*

*Behold the mounts, they are come unto the city to take it; and the **city is given into the hand of the Chaldeans**, that fight against it, because of the sword, and of the famine, and of the pestilence: and what thou hast spoken is come to pass; and, behold, thou seest it.... Therefore thus saith the LORD; Behold, **I will give this city into the hand of the Chaldeans, and into the hand of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon**, and he shall take it.... And now therefore thus saith the LORD, the God of Israel, concerning this city, whereof ye say, **It shall be delivered into the hand of the king of Babylon** by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence (Jeremiah 32:24, 28, 36)*

*But if thou wilt not go forth to the king of Babylon's princes, then shall this city **be given into the hand of the Chaldeans**, and they shall burn it with fire, and thou shalt not escape out of their hand (Jer. 38:18)*

It is also worth noting that in God's allowing the Chaldeans to defeat Israel, it is not God, but Satan who stirs them up (see Job 1:9-12, 17). Yet Job and his friends say that God did it (Job 1:21; 2:10; 42:11). While God is often said to be responsible for what happens, His only part is to grant permission (Job 2:5-6). He does not use His divine power to bring about the event.

Hence when God says that He will *send* enemies, famine, sickness, evil beasts, etc. (Jer. 24:10; 29:17; Ezra 5:16-17; 14:13, 21; Amos 8:11) the words "send" and "sent" should follow its permissive definition. This is based, not only on the definition of the word itself, but also on the support of other passages in relation to the same event. God is not actively energizing Israel's enemies to attack them, but rather removing the restraints that held them back and allows them to attack and defeat them. This is *permissive* and not *causative*.

Lions, Tigers, and Bears (Oh My)

Another example of the use of permissive verbs can be seen in a passage that appears to make God responsible for animal violence. In the following passage God is said to have "sent" lions to kill some of the disobedient Israelites. The Hebrew word *shalah* (*shalach*) has been translated as "sent":

And so it was at the beginning of their dwelling there, that they feared not the LORD: therefore the LORD sent lions

among them, which slew some of them (2 Kings 17:25)

This word can and should be translated “permissively” rather than “causatively”. How many of us would send our pit bulls to destroy our disobedient children? The majority of us would not think to do such a thing to our children and we would be ready to hang anyone who would do such a thing to their own. Yet, many of us seem to have no problem believing that God would do the very thing we find repulsive to do ourselves (Matt. 7:7-11).

Nonetheless, the word *shalah* (*shalach*) being translated as “sent” in the above passage gives the impression that God becomes so upset with disobedient people that He sends lions and poisonous snakes to kill them. Yet, if the word had been rendered permissively then God is vindicated. Let’s compare this to another passage in which a disobedient prophet is killed by a lion:

*And when the prophet that brought him back from the way heard thereof, he said, It is the man of God, who was disobedient unto the word of the Lord: **therefore the Lord hath delivered him unto the lion, which hath torn him, and slain him, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake unto him** (1 Kings 13:26)*

Notice that, “*the Lord hath delivered him unto the lion.*” The Hebrew word for “delivered” is “*nathan*” which, as we already know, means “allow” or “permit”. When God “delivers” someone to another hostile person, animal or force, it means that He has removed His protection and allowed that person, animal or force to have access to the person that it otherwise would not have had (Gen. 14:20; Num. 21:34; Deut. 2:33; 3:3; Judges 3:10, 28; 4:14; 6:13;

7:9; 8:3; 16:24; 1 Chron. 5:20; 2 Chron. 18:14; 28:5; Jer. 32:4; 37:17; Eze. 31:11; Matt. 18:34; Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:32).

This shows how *shalach* used in 2 Kings 17:25 and *nathan* in 1 Kings 13:26 are actually synonyms and can be used interchangeably. Therefore the Lord does not “send” lions in the causative sense. This is done by *permission* and not *causation*. God told the prophet, “*Eat no bread, nor drink water, nor turn again by the same way that thou camest*” (1 Kings 13:9b). The Lord knew the danger the prophet would be in if he did not do exactly as he was told. Sadly, he believed the lie of another prophet (1 King 13:15-22). The prophet had forfeited God’s protection through disobedience and God *allowed* him to be killed by a lion.

By way of comparison, “*shalah (shalach)*” in 2 Kings 17:25 should be understood in the *permissive sense*. When we turn to other passages of Scripture, we see that God is actually the *protector* from lions and other dangerous beasts:

*And I will make with them a covenant of peace, and will **cause the evil beasts to cease out of the land: and they shall dwell safely** in the wilderness, and sleep in the woods.... And they shall no more be a prey to the heathen, **neither shall the beast of the land devour them; but they shall dwell safely**, and none shall make them afraid (Eze. 34:25, 28)*

***Because thou hast said, The Lord is my protection**, the Most High hast thou made thy refuge.... Upon **the fierce lion and asp** shalt thou tread: thou shalt trample under*

foot the young lion and serpent (Psalm
91:9, 13; Leeser Old Testament)

Lions do not have to be *sent* in the literal sense of the word since the nature of a lions, as Peter revealed, is to “...walketh about, **seeking** whom he may devour” (1 Pet. 5:8b). The lion seeks who he is able to devour and will look for the one that is unprotected.

The folks in 2 Kings 17:25 did not fear the Lord so they no longer dwelled in safety (Prov. 1:24-33; 10:27; 14:26-27; 19:23; 29:25). When people reject the fear (worship) of the Lord He has no choice but to remove His protective presence. Once that had been removed then the lions were allowed to have their way, unrestrained. Therefore, 2 Kings 17:25 should be understood as God *permitting* the lions to do the damage that was done. Otherwise, interpreting *shalah* (*shalach*) as “sent” gives us the picture of an angry father purposefully sending a pit-bull to deal with his rebellious children.

Conclusion

When Hebrew verbs are interpreted according to their correct meaning then Scripture can be read in a way that vindicates the righteous, loving, and holy character of God. This understanding is far from promoting any false idea that sin goes unpunished. On the contrary, we live in a world full of evil hostile forces that God continues to protect us from. When God is left with no other choice but to permit these hostile forces to have their way, one could not suffer a worse punishment. Therefore, it is unfair to God to say that He is the *cause* of those things that come upon us. They are the results of our own sins and our rejection of a loving God and His protective presence.

Chapter Five

Early Jewish Sources

We must not complain, as some of them did—and they were destroyed by the Angel of Death (1 Cor. 10:10; Good News Translation)

Paul summarized much of Israel’s difficult wilderness experiences by stating that they were destroyed by the destroyer, or as some translations render it, the “angel of death.” Paul would later identify this angel as Satan (Heb. 2:14). That means many passages in the Old Testament in which God is said to do certain things can only be read in the permissive sense.

It was early Jewish scholars that first began to attribute punitive acts to the angel of death. As theologian John Lightfoot notes concerning the Jews, “...whereby the whole multitude of those that murmured, perished, within forty years. He saith, they perished by that great ‘destroyer,’ the ‘angel of death.’”¹

In this chapter, we will examine several passages in which the early Jewish theologians taught the principle that we are promoting in this book which is that God is said to do that which He merely permitted. Jewish theologians, like us, attempted to defend the character of God against devilish maleficence while still recognizing the divine inspiration of the Scriptures.

Beginning with Scripture

Perhaps the book of Job might be the earliest divinely inspired Jewish literature to serve as a clear teaching of the principle that God is only said to do that which He allows or permits. Many scholars believe that

Job is the earliest written book of the Bible and they attribute its authorship to Moses.

However, neither the date nor the human authorship is as important as recognizing that the book is inspired by God (2 Timothy 3:16) and provides the foundation for the “permissive sense” principle in which God is said to do that which He allows or permits. In Job 1, after Satan has made false accusations against God and Job, Satan makes a request that God complies with:

But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face. And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power (Job 1:11-12a)

Notice the language used in the passage. Satan tells God to put forth His hand to touch all that Job has. God complies by putting all that Job has in Satan’s power (within limits). What we see here is that God has removed His protection from Job and allowed Satan access. In this sense God has put forth His hand on Job.

Later, God takes full credit for destroying Job as if He personally did it (Job 2:3), Job attributes His misfortune to God as well (Job 1:20-21). Job’s family and friends that came to comfort him also attribute Job’s suffering to God (Job 42:10-11). If it is true that Job is one of the first books in the Bible then it is possible that many Jews understood this “permissive sense” truth during the time that Scripture was being recorded.

Ezra the scribe is probably the earliest Jewish theologian to clearly teach the permissive idiom principle in which God is said to do that which He merely allowed or permitted. Where 2 Samuel 24:1 which is written in 1120 BC says that God, “....moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah,” several centuries

later (between 450 to 400 BC), Ezra, by divine inspiration (2 Timothy 3:16), tells us that Satan was the one to actually bring the temptation when he writes, “*And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel*” (1 Chron. 21:1).

Some scholars erroneously teach that Ezra may have been influenced by the Eastern religion of Zoastrianism during his exile in Babylon. This religion teaches that there are two deities: one good and one evil. Since we believe that 1 Chronicles was given to Ezra by the Holy Spirit then we reject this theory. More than likely, Ezra was influenced by the Holy Spirit as he read the book of Job. Thus revelation of God’s part in the evils on the earth and Satan’s part began to increase. While Satan was not mentioned much within the pages of Scripture due to the nature of progressive revelation, neither was he totally absent. The book of Job affirms this.

Both accounts are Holy Spirit inspired and they both serve as a foundation for the principle that we are expounding upon in this book that helps us to understand that when God is said to do certain things (bring sickness, disaster, deception, temptation, etc.) He is only doing this in the *permissive sense* by removing His protection and allowing Satan and evil men to have their way.

Non-canonical Jewish Literature

Many of the early Jewish theologians and students of Scripture also taught the “permission versus causation” principle. They believed that God could not have *personally* done what He is said to do and therefore the Scripture only says that He did it because He permitted it.

Take what I believe is one of the harshest examples in Scripture where the Lord appears to be arbitrary and capricious. God has just commanded Moses to go to Egypt and rescue His people. Moses does not

want to go and gives every excuse possible to get out of this mission. God refutes each excuse and provides every supernatural provision necessary for Moses' success. Moses finally obeys God, heads for Egypt, only to be met by the Lord on the way. Even worse, the Lord sought to kill him.

And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the LORD met him, and sought to kill him. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision (Exodus 4:24-26)

As I have scoured through a number of commentaries, both old and new, very few people seemed to be troubled by this passage. Most expositors simply believe that Moses was deservingly afflicted with sickness for failure to obey the Abrahamic covenant of circumcision. For many, the response to this troubling passage is "God is God and has the right to do as He pleases."

Personally, I find it troubling that God would spend as much time as He did to convince a reluctant Moses to go to Egypt and rescue His people, and when he finally complies, the Lord rewards him by trying to kill him. However, there is an alternative understanding. Many times we are obedient to God in one area but unknowingly open the door for satanic attack through neglect. Satan looks for any open door that he can find (1 Pet. 5:8; Eph. 4:26). He would have certainly done that in Moses' case. Due to the nature of progressive revelation God is said to do what He actually permitted Satan, the accuser, to do.

Early Jewish literature supports this premise as well. James L. Kugel in his book, “Traditions of the Bible,” writes:

In grappling with it, ancient interpreters first came to the understandable conclusion that it could not actually have been God who sought to kill Moses. For, not only did that seem quite unlikely in the larger context, but it would have hardly been appropriate for God to “seek to kill” anyone—if He *sought* to kill someone, then that someone would be killed! Moreover, the text does not say “God sought to kill him” (though this is clearly what is implied): it only says “[he] sought to kill him.” But if not God, then who?²

Kugel quotes from a number of Jewish sources to see how they resolved this issue. Of particular interest to our study is his quote of the “Fragment Targum (P) Exod. 4:26 which says, “How strong is this blood of circumcision, that it rescued this bridegroom from the **Angel of Death.**”³

Who is the angel of death? It could not be God or any of His faithful angels. The New Testament Scriptures which we Christians consider to be canon tell us that Death is an enemy of God (1 Cor. 15:26) and that Satan was the one who held the power of death (Heb. 2:14-15). However, would the early Jews have seen the angel of death as a satanic being? In the Jewish apocryphal book, *Wisdom of Solomon*, a book written about two centuries before Christ, we read:

For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity. Nevertheless through envy of the devil came death into the world: and they that do hold of his side do find it. (Wisdom 2:23-24)

Furthermore, the early Jews taught that Satan's name was "Samael" and, like the author of the Wisdom of Solomon, they believed him to be the author of death. Puritan theologian, John Owen, quoting from the works of early Jewish scholars, writes:

And he adds, that by Samael, the angel of death, they understand Satan: which he proves from the words of their wise men, who say in some places that Satan would have hindered Abraham from sacrificing of Isaac, and in others that Samael would have done it; which proves that it is one and the same who by both names is intended. And hence they usually call him Bin,—“the wicked Samael, the prince of all the devils;” and say of him, “....Samael brought death upon all the world.”⁴

And finally, a sermon preached and transcribed by the late Rev. James Saurin also states that the Jewish community attributed the works of death to Satan, by which Saurin connects this to the Biblical teaching of Paul in Hebrews 2:14:

But if the devil be represented as exercising an influence over the ills of human life, he is still more especially represented as exerting his power over our death, the last and most formidable of all our woes. The Jews were impressed with ideas of this kind. Nay, they did not satisfy themselves with general notions on this subject. They entered into the detailthey said that the devil, to whom they gave the name of Samael, had the empire of death, that his power extended so far as to prevent the resurrection of the wicked. St. Paul, in the words of our text, adopts their mode of expression, as his custom is, without propagating their error; he describes the evil Spirit as the person who possesses the empire of death, and who, through the fear of death, subjects men all their life time to bondage.⁵

Most of the early Jewish community did not see God as the cause of death or any of the troubles in this life. They believed that this was the devil's work. Again, Jewish writers attempted to vindicate God on this particular point:

Seek not death in the error of your life: and pull not upon yourselves destruction with the works of your hands. **For God made not death: neither hath he pleasure in the destruction of the living.** For he created all things, that they might have their being: and the generations of the world were healthful; and there is no poison of destruction in them, nor the kingdom of death upon the earth: (Wisdom 1:12-14)

According to the Jews, God did not create death so certainly He could not have created an angel of death. Therefore, the angel of death that is identified in the Targum would have to have been Satan, a good angel created by God but of his own free-will became an agent of death.

Therefore if the Jewish theologians are correct in saying that it was the angel of death that tried to kill Moses on his way to Egypt then this being would have to have been Satan. This is confirmed by another early Jewish work, the book of Jubilees, which some scholars also believed to be written 100 to 200 years before Christ:

And you yourself know what He spoke to you on [2410 A.M.] Mount Sinai, and what prince Mastema desired to do with you when you were returning into Egypt. Did he not with all his power seek to slay you and deliver the Egyptians out of your hand when he saw that you were sent to execute judgment and vengeance on the Egyptians? (Jubilees 48:2-3)

The book of Jubilees recognizes in the case of God killing Moses that God is only said to do what He allowed Satan (prince Mastema) to do. So the principle that we are proposing in this book is not a new one at all. It is a very much *neglected* principle but certainly not new.

The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

Furthermore, the early Jews believed that it was Satan (Mastema) who hardened Pharaoh's heart even though God was said to have done it:

And on the fourteenth day and on the fifteenth and on the sixteenth and on the seventeenth and on the eighteenth the prince Mastema was bound and imprisoned behind the children of Yisrael that he might not accuse them. And on the nineteenth we let them loose that they might help the Egyptians and pursue the children of Yisrael. And he hardened their hearts and made them stubborn, and the device was devised by YAHWEH our Sovereign Ruler that He might smite the Egyptians and cast them into the sea (Jubilees 48:15-17)

Now this was not a view shared by all early Jewish leaders and philosophers just as there is no unified agreement on this subject in our day. In our day, Calvinists believe that God personally hardened pharaoh's heart by using His divine power to override his will. While none of the early Jews denied the freedom of the will as Calvinists do today, they did have a variety of conflicting views about how God went about the hardening process.

Nonetheless, we do have some Jews, as evidenced by the book of Jubilees, that did not see this as God doing it directly. Like us, they believed that the divinely inspired record used the idioms of the people of that time in which God is said to do that which He merely allowed or permitted to be done by men and devils. This is the

only understanding that does not mischaracterize God as being the author of the sin that He punishes as so many “Christian” fatalists are prone to do.

The Passover

In Exodus 12:12 God says that He will go through the land and personally slay the firstborn. However, when we go down to verse 23 He then says that another being will do the killing. The New King James Version translates the latter part of Ex. 12:23, “....*the Lord will pass over the door and not **allow** the destroyer to come into your houses to strike you.* “

Many present day theologians haggle over who this destroyer is. Some believe that it is one of God’s faithful angels sent by Him to kill. Others, like myself, believe that it was Satan taking another opportunity to “steal, kill, and destroy” (John 10:10). In the book of Jubilees we see that many of the early Jews saw Satan, or Prince Mastema, as the killer:

For on this night -the beginning of the festival and the beginning of the joy- ye were eating the passover in Egypt, **when all the powers of Mastêmâ had been let loose to slay all the first-born in the land of Egypt**, from the first-born of Pharaoh to the first-born of the captive maid-servant in the mill, and to the cattle. And this is the sign which the Lord gave them: Into every house on the lintels of which they saw the blood of a lamb of the first year, into (that) house they should not enter to slay, but should pass by (it), that all those should be saved that were in the house because the sign of the blood was on its lintels (Jubilees 49:2-3)

John Owen says that the other Jewish scholars believed that it was Samael who killed the firstborn of Egypt. Owen quotes one of them as saying, “....He is the head of

those ‘evil angels,’ who slew the Egyptians.”⁶ Thomas M’Crie also affirms this:

The Jews call the angel who went through the land on that fearful occasion, Samael, or the Destroyer. That angel had the power of death for a night, and he was prevented, by the appointed means, from touching the first-born of Israel. But the devil has been a murderer from the beginning; and Christ, our passover, not only foiled him by plucking the prey from his teeth, but he destroyed the destroyer—stripped him of his deadly weapons—and caused his power to cease by removing the foundation of it in the expiation of sin : It may be in reference to this event, therefore, that our apostle says, “That through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil.”⁷

Here again the principle is confirmed by early Jewish scholars that when the Bible makes God the cause of sin, sickness, disaster, or any other tragic event, it is using a permissive idiom in which God is taking responsibility for the things He allowed Satan to do.

Plagues Hit Israelites in the Desert

During Israel’s wilderness wanderings, they sinned much against God. As a result of constant, unrepentant sin God is said to have sent plagues (sicknesses) among them in a number of cases. In one case the people complained about the manna they were getting and the lack of meat in the desert. God gave them meat in response to their complaining but we also read, “...*the wrath of the LORD was kindled against the people, and the LORD smote the people with a very great plague*” (Num. 11:33).

Another of several cases recorded in Scriptures concerns the plague that came upon the people who rose

up against Moses and Aaron after the deaths of Korah and his rebellious followers:

And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Get you up from among this congregation, that I may consume them as in a moment. And they fell upon their faces. And Moses said unto Aaron, Take a censer, and put fire therein from off the altar, and put on incense, and go quickly unto the congregation, and make an atonement for them: for there is wrath gone out from the LORD; the plague is begun (Num. 16:44-46)

In Numbers 16 the plague is attributed to the wrath having gone out from the Lord. However, Jewish interpreters saw the “wrath of God” that released the plagues as being synonymous with the “angel of death” with whom Aaron had to engage in spiritual warfare with using the promises of God and prayer:

Death also came to the righteous nation, for an epidemic struck many of them while they were in the desert, but your anger did not last long. There was a certain blameless man who quickly took action to defend them. Acting as their priest, Aaron offered prayers and burned the incense used in asking forgiveness of sins. With prayers and incense as his weapons, he withstood your anger and ended the disaster. By doing this he proved that he was your servant. He overcame the bitter difficulty,^[b] but not by his own strength or by military force. Instead, he used prayer to stop the punishment, appealing to the promises you solemnly gave to our ancestors. Dead bodies were already lying in piles, but he stepped in to hold your anger back and to keep it from harming those who were left alive. He wore a long robe decorated with

symbols of the universe. In honor of our ancestors he wore four rows of engraved stones on his chest, and your own majesty was represented by the ornament on his turban. The Angel of Death was afraid of these things, and gave up. It was only a slight experience of your wrath, but it was enough. (Wisdom 18, Good News Translation)

Concerning Aaron, Scripture says, “*And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed.*” (Num. 16:48). This is interesting when compared to the commentary by the “Wisdom of Solomon.” Aaron actually seems to be standing against an enemy and bringing a stop to its work. The early Jews saw this as warfare against the angel of death.

Indeed many of the early Jews did not see God as the actual inflictor of sickness and disease. The writers of the book of Enoch, a book that has become widely popular due to the current interest in the Nephilim (the “half angel-half human” breeds in Genesis 6), names Satan as the leader of the “angels of plague:”

Sinners shall be destroyed from before the face of the Lord of the Spirits – they shall perish eternally, standing before the face of his earth. So I saw all **the angels of plague co-operating and preparing all the chains of Satan** (1 Enoch 53:3)

Once again, the Jews applied the “permissive sense” to passages where God is said to send sickness and see it as Him only taking credit for what He allowed the devil to do. Those plagues that we read about that were sent by the Lord are understood by many of the early Jews as actually being brought about by the angel of death. Here again we see that many early Jewish expositors believed that God is said to do that which He merely allowed or permitted.

Chapter Six

Early Church Fathers

If any one, however, who has leisure for the examination of the sacred writings, should collect together from all sources and form into one body of doctrine what is recorded concerning the origin of evil, and the manner of its dissolution, he would see that the views of Moses and the prophets regarding Satan had not been even dreamed of either by Celsus or any one of those whose soul had been dragged down, and torn away from God, and **from right views of Him, and from His word**, by this wicked demon.¹ – Church Father Origen

According to church father Origen it is Satan who gives people warped ideas about both God and His Word. A distortion of one always leads to the distortion of the other. Tertullian, in defending Christ's claim that He is the Creator, writes, "Otherwise He would actually be the author of error, and the prevaricator of truth, contrary to the character of the good God."²

Among many things, the church fathers were concerned about how some pagans and heretics presented distorted views of God's character. Quite often these pagans and heretics misinterpreted and misused the Scriptures to do so. In some of their apologetic works, the church fathers set out to prove that God is not the author of evil. They also had to show how some Biblical statements that make God appear to be the author of evils were being abused. Many of the fathers proved that when Scripture is interpreted properly using the principle in which *God is said to do that which He allows or permits*,

it gives readers the correct view of God from His Word and proves Him to be a God of good character.

Satan: a Fallen Angel Hostile to God

Athenagoras (133-190) taught that there is a wicked spirit, who has control over the elements of the earth, who is hostile to the good that is in God:

....so also do we apprehend the existence of other powers, which exercise dominion about matter, and by means of it, and one in particular, which is hostile to Godto the good that is in God, which belongs of necessity to Him, and co-exists with Himto the good that is in God, I say, the spirit which is about matter, who was created by God, just as the other angels were created by Him, and entrusted with the control of matter and the forms of matter, is opposed.³

This is in reference to Satan, who we know became this world's present ruler when he usurped man's dominion (Daniel 10; Luke 4:6; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Eph. 2:2; 2 Cor. 4:4; 1 John 5:18-19). It is this evil spirit who slandered God before the angels (Ezek. 28; Job 1) and later before Eve (Gen. 3:1-7).

Yet many theologians today do not believe that there is a real warfare between God and the devil. They believe that God ordained the fall of Satan and mankind. They believe that Satan is an unwitting servant of God who does God's secret bidding. This would make Satan a puppet and make God directly responsible for his actions. However, Tertullian (160-225) says that Satan's fall and his current activities is not God's doing:

Now, whence originated this malice of lying and deceit towards man, and slandering of God? **Most certainly not from God**, who made the angel good after the fashion of His good works. Indeed, before

he became the devil, he stands forth the wisest of creatures; and wisdom is no evil.⁴

God is not in any way responsible for Satan's fall or the evils that he brings into this world. Many of the church fathers taught that Satan fell of his own accord and that he is a being opposed to God's goodness. His work is to slander God's character and make Him appear to be something that He is not. None of this originates with God.

Sickness and other Evils are NOT from God

Church Father Tatian (120-180), whose strong faith in God's power to protect and heal enabled him to confess, "I despise death; I am superior to every kind of disease,"⁵ taught that God is not the author of evil of any kind, but that we are responsible for it:

We were not created to die, but we die by our own fault. Our free-will has destroyed us; we who were free have become slaves; we have been sold through sin. **Nothing evil has been created by God**; we ourselves have manifested wickedness; but we, who have manifested it, are able again to reject it.⁶

Tatian says that God is not the cause of death or any other evil. This is the result of our own personal choices. Tatian also says that sickness has its origins with the demonic:

Being armed with the breastplate of the celestial Spirit, he will be able to preserve all that is encompassed by it. There are, indeed, diseases and disturbances of the matter that is in us; but, when such things happen, the demons ascribe the causes of them to themselves, and approach a man whenever disease lays hold of him. Sometimes they themselves disturb the habit of the body by a tempest of folly; but, **being smitten by the word of**

God, they depart in terror, and the sick man is healed.⁷

Obviously, Tatian did not believe that the Scriptures taught that God is the author of the horrors and evils that we suffer. He saw this as the work of demons. Therefore, he must have understood any Bible passage that *appeared* to teach that God is the author of these things as being only from the *permissive sense*. Tertullian also taught sickness and other evils are inflicted by fallen angels who fell by their own free will:

We are instructed, moreover, by our sacred books how from certain angels, who fell of their own free-will, there sprang a more wicked demon-brood, condemned of God along with the authors of their race, and that chief we have referred to. It will for the present be enough, however, that some account is given of their work. Their great business is the ruin of mankind. So, from the very first, spiritual wickedness sought our destruction. They inflict, accordingly, upon our bodies diseases and other grievous calamities, while by violent assaults they hurry the soul into sudden and extraordinary excesses.⁸

Tertullian believed that the business of these evil spirits is *to ruin mankind*. They are not here to work on God's behalf. God is not controlling them since God's intention for mankind is *salvation* rather than *ruin*. **Origen (185-254)** taught that Jesus died to free men from Satan and his faithful satanic forces that bring about sickness, calamities and other evils:

....such a virtue that one just man, dying a voluntary death for the common good, might be the means of removing **wicked spirits, which are the cause of plagues, or barrenness, or tempests, or similar calamities**. Let those, therefore, who would

disbelieve the statement that Jesus died on the cross on behalf of men, say whether they also refuse to accept the many accounts current both among Greeks and Barbarians, of persons who have laid down their lives for the public advantage, in order to remove those evils which had fallen upon cities and countries? Or will they say that such events actually happened, but that no credit is to be attached to that account which makes this so-called man to have died to ensure the destruction of a mighty evil spirit, the ruler of evil spirits, who had held in subjection the souls of all men upon earth?⁹

Origen taught that Jesus died to remove these calamities. Obviously Origen did not believe that these evils are the work of God since Jesus died to remove them. Therefore, any Biblical statements that would appear to teach this idea must be interpreted in light of the principle in which *God is said to do that which He allows or permits*.

Interpreting Scripture in the “Permissive” Sense

So how did the church fathers reconcile the numerous Old Testament (and some New Testament) passages used to insinuate that God is responsible for the horrors and evils that men suffer? Many of them applied the very principle of Bible interpretation that we are advocating in this book in which *God is said to do that which He allows or permits*. In our present generation some ministers teach that God personally tortured and killed Jesus. Others, by misinterpreting Acts 2:23 claim that God, by manipulating the future, eternally decreed that man would fall and then some centuries later men would torture and crucify the Lord for the salvation of an elect few. However, they are able to produce Biblical texts to promote this assertion.

The Scripture does say about Christ, “...yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to

grief” (Isa. 53:4, 10). Isaiah implies that God personally did it. One of the earliest church fathers, Justin Martyr (100-165), understood this in the *permissive sense* and taught the Biblical truth that it was the devil and demons, rather than God the Father, who moved men to crucify our Lord Jesus Christ:

But so much is written for the sake of proving that Jesus the Christ is the Son of God and His Apostle, being of old the Word, and appearing sometimes in the form of fire, and sometimes in the likeness of angels; but now, by the will of God, having become man for the human race, **He endured all the sufferings which the devils instigated the senseless Jews to inflict upon Him.**¹⁰

There is Biblical support for Justin Martyr’s position (Luke 22:3-4, 53; 1 Cor. 2:6-8). Christ’s primary purpose for going to the cross was to defeat Satan and remove his hold over mankind (Col. 1:12-14; 2:14-15; Heb. 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8). Therefore, it is only reasonable to see in Isa. 53 the truth that God was only said to do what He actually permitted Satan to do when He “delivered up” His Son (Matt. 27:46; Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:31).

The “permissive sense” interpretation is advocated by Tertullian in a number of his writings. For example, in Genesis 3 God announced the curse that will come as a result of man’s rebellion. Many read the passage with the belief that God is the One who personally inflicts the curse and its results. However, Tertullian does not accuse God of personally inflicting the curse but reads Genesis 3 in a permissive sense and says that these things were “admitted” (permitted) by God:

Up to the fall of man, therefore, from the beginning God was simply good; after that He became a judge both severe and, as the Marcionites will have it, cruel. Woman is at once condemned to bring forth

in sorrow, and to serve her husband, Genesis 3:16 although before she had heard without pain the increase of her race proclaimed with the blessing, Increase and multiply, and although she had been destined to be a help and not a slave to her male partner. Immediately the earth is also cursed, Genesis 3:18 which before was blessed. Immediately spring up briers and thorns, where once had grown grass, and herbs, and fruitful trees. Immediately arise sweat and labour for bread, where previously on every tree was yielded spontaneous food and untilled nourishment. Thenceforth it is “man to the ground,” and not as before, “from the ground”; to death thenceforth, but before, to life; thenceforth with coats of skins, but before, nakedness without a blush. Thus God's prior goodness was from nature, His subsequent severity from a cause. The one was innate, the other accidental; the one His own, the other adapted; **the one issuing from Him, the other admitted by Him.** But then nature could not have rightly permitted His goodness to have gone on inoperative, nor the cause have allowed His severity to have escaped in disguise or concealment.¹¹

In some of the Old Testament passages where God is said to have brought about certain events, Tertullian understood those permissively. For example, when Solomon sinned against God we read in the Scripture, *“And the LORD stirred up an adversary unto Solomon, Hadad the Edomite: he was of the king's seed in Edom”* (1 King 11:14). Tertullian writes:

From Christ, too, God's mercy did not depart, whereas on Solomon even God's anger alighted, after his luxury and idolatry. **For Satan stirred up an Edomite as an enemy against him.** Since, therefore, nothing of these things is compatible with Solomon, but only with Christ, the method of our interpretations will certainly be true; and the

very issue of the facts shows that they were clearly predicted of Christ.¹²

Tertullian realized that God often took responsibility for the work of Satan. Solomon's sin opened the door for Satan to destroy the peace that God had given the nation and stirred up an adversary against him. It was God's removal of His protection and peace that allowed this. However, the Scripture interprets God's abandonment as Him being the One to bring about the event. Tertullian recognized this truth and explained that this was Satan's work. We can see from this that Tertullian followed and defended the method of Biblical interpretation that we are advocating (See Job 1:9-17, 2:3).

The Lord's Prayer and Permission

Tertullian and others also explained the Lord's teaching on prayer in light of the permissive sense. Jesus instructs us to pray, "*And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one* (Matt. 6:13a; New King James Version). The implication here is that unless we ask God not to, He will lead us into temptation. Yet, this directly contradicts God's revelation concerning His character and nature (James 1:13; 1 Cor. 10:13). Tertullian and other church fathers recognized this dilemma and translated the passage in the permissively:

Lead Us Not Into Temptation; in other words, "Do not allow us to be deceived, of course by 'him who tempts.'" But away with the idea that the Lord should be thought to tempt, as if He either did not know each man's faith or was eager to dethrone it. Weakness and evil nature belong to the devil. For even the command to Abraham about the sacrificing of his son was made not to try his faith, but to approve it, that in Abraham the Lord might furnish an example for the carrying out of the command, which He was afterwards to issue, that

none should look upon his dear ones cf. Matt, with greater love than upon his God. He Himself, when tempted by the devil, pointed out the ruler and author of temptation. This clause He enforces by later words, saying: "Pray that ye be not tempted." They were so tempted in abandoning their Lord, because they had given themselves up to sleep rather than to prayer. Therefore the clause brings the answer, explaining what is meant by: "Lead us not into temptation" For this is what it means: But Draw Us Away From The Evil One.¹³ – Tertullian

"And lead us not into temptation;" which means, "Suffer us not to fall into temptation." And to show that this did not imply they should not be tempted, but really that they should be delivered from the evil, He added, "But deliver us from evil." But perhaps you will say, What difference is there between being tempted, and falling or entering into temptation? Well, if one is overcome of evil — and he will be overcome unless he struggles against it himself, and unless God protects him with His shield — that man has entered into temptation, and is in it, and is brought under it like one that is led captive. But if one withstands and endures, that man is indeed tempted; but he has not entered into temptation, or fallen under it.¹⁴ – Dionysius, Bishop of Rome (AD 259-269)

The church fathers recognized that God is not the tempter but that Satan is. Therefore, any passage in which God is said to do something that went against His revealed nature was to be understood from the perspective of permission.

Abandonment: Interpretation of God's Punishments

The reason that Satan is able to get a foothold in the life of any person is due to God's abandoning the person, lifting His protection, and thus Satan seizing the opportunity to bring about destruction in the lives of sinners. Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) writes:

Having by trickery mingled vice with man's free will, the Enemy managed to eliminate and obscure the divine blessing. With this blessing lacking, its very opposite necessarily appeared in its place. Thus death opposes life, weakness opposes strength, etc.¹⁵

So it is by men yielding to Satan's temptations and rebelling against God that causes man to lose God's protection and receive the opposite of His blessings. However, this happens due to our having first abandoned God and in turn rejecting the good God desired for us:

The rejection of the Good, once accomplished, had as a consequence the appearance of evil: the fact that man turned away from life led to death; by depriving himself of light, he fell into darkness, lacking virtue, evil appeared in his life; and thus it is that all forms of good were one by one replaced by a series of opposite evils.¹⁶

Saint Basil (330-379) also believed this to be the true understanding of how God is said to bring about punishment in Scripture. Basil writes:

Death is a necessary consequence of sin; one draws near to death to the degree that one distances oneself from life, which is God. Death is the absence of life: by distancing himself from God, Adam exposed himself to death.¹⁷

Sickness and its subsequent death is not something personally inflicted by God as Basil states but is the consequence of our distancing ourselves from His life-protection. These fathers believed that the inspired Scriptures, when properly interpreted, make this "abandonment" truth clear. Concerning Is. 6:9-10 Chrysostom (349 – 407) writes:

That the saying of Isaiah might be fulfilled: that here is expressive not of the cause, but of the event. They did not disbelieve because Isaias said they would; but because they would disbelieve, Isaias said they would.... For He does not leave us, except we wish Him....Whereby it is plain that we begin to forsake first, and are the cause of our own perdition. For as it is not the fault of the sun, that it hurts weak eyes, so neither is God to blame for punishing those who do not attend to His words.¹⁸

Even Aurelius Augustine taught this truth. While explaining John 12:40, Augustine (354-430) disagrees with earlier Church Fathers on a number of points (such as the fact that it is not the devil who blinds but God, despite 2 Cor. 4:4). However, he does come closer to the truth than many of his followers in our day when he writes, “For God hardens and blinds a man, by forsaking and not supporting him.”¹⁹

Clement of Alexandria (153-217) taught that God is not at all to blame for the results of the choices that we make. Explaining God’s character in the light of divine retribution, Clement writes:

God, then, is good. And the Lord speaks many a time and oft before He proceeds to act. ... For the Divine Being is not angry in the way that some think; but often restrains, and always exhorts humanity, and shows what ought to be done. And this is a good device, to terrify lest we sin. “For the fear of the Lord drives away sins, and he that is without fear cannot be justified,” says the Scripture. And God does not inflict punishment from wrath, but for the ends of justice; since it is not expedient that justice should be neglected on our account. Each one of us, who sins, with his own free-will chooses punishment, and the blame lies with him who chooses. God is without blame.²⁰

Clement of Alexandria taught that God's primary method of punishment was to "turn away His face" and then evil would fall upon the impenitent one:

Very clearly, therefore, by the prophet Amos has the Lord unfolded His method of dealing, saying, "I have overthrown you, as God overthrew Sodom and Gomorrah; and ye shall be as a brand plucked from the fire: and yet ye have not returned unto me, saith the LORD." See how God, through His love of goodness, seeks repentance; and by means of the plan He pursues of threatening silently, shows His own love for man. "I will avert," He says, "My face from them, and show what shall happen to them." For where the face of the Lord looks, there is peace and rejoicing; but where it is averted, there is the introduction of evil. The Lord, accordingly, does not wish to look on evil things; for He is good. But on His looking away, evil arises spontaneously through human unbelief.²¹

The Scriptures themselves describe God's abandonment as His "turning away His face" (Isa. 59:1-2; Eze. 39:23-24; Deut. 31:17-18; 32:17-20). When God is said to inflict punishment, it is meant that He turns His face and abandons a person to their sin.

Church Father Origen wrote an apologetic against some heretics of his time who taught doctrines that are similar to what we would refer to today as "Calvinism". These heretics cited God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart and other passages in which God is said to cause people to sin as "proof" that He personally ordained men to sin and in turn punished them for it.

Origen deals with this extensively and, in my opinion, very well. His whole apologetic on this is worth reading. However, let me quote a small sample here. In dealing with a passage from the book of Jeremiah Origen writes:

The expression, then, “*Why, O Lord, have You hardened our heart, that we should not fear Your name?*” used by those who prayed for mercy, is to be taken in a figurative, moral acceptance, as if one were to say, “*Why have You spared us so long, and did not requite us when we sinned, **but abandoned us**, that so our wickedness might increase, and our liberty of sinning be extended when punishment ceased?*”²²

Origen believed that the language in which God is said to have been the cause of sin was simply His abandoning the person and permitting them to sin without restraint. Origen believed that this is the correct way to understand such passages. Origen then writes. “It is therefore by the sentence of God that he is abandoned who deserves to be so.”²³

Interpreting Scripture with Scripture

Origen believes that “abandonment” is the key to understanding passages in which God is said to do things that actually malign His character. Origen then explains that “...those heretics who are accustomed to hunt out of the Old Testament any expressions which seem, according to their view, to predicate severity and cruelty of God the Creator”²⁴ should follow this principle of interpretation:

And if they are of opinion that any expressions occurring in such a connection in the New Testament stand in need of explanation, it will necessarily follow that those also occurring in the Old Testament, which are the subject of censure, may be freed from aspersion by an explanation of a similar kind, so that by such means the passages found in both Testaments may be shown to proceed from one and the same God.²⁵

Origen believed that by following this simple principle of Bible interpretation there is no need to deny the divine inspiration of any portion of Scripture (as some are prone to do). Furthermore, there is no need to cast aspersions on God's loving and holy character when we follow this particular hermeneutic:

Continuing to pour abuse upon Jesus as one who, on account of his impiety and wicked opinions, was, so to speak, hated by God, he asserts that "these tenets of his were those of a wicked and God-hated sorcerer." And yet, if the name and the thing be properly examined, it will be found an impossibility that man should be hated by God, seeing God loves all existing things, and "hates nothing of what He has made," for He created nothing in a spirit of hatred. And if certain expressions in the prophets convey such an impression, they are to be interpreted in accordance with the general principle by which Scripture employs such language with regard to God as if He were subject to human affections.²⁶

So Origen believed that following a "general principle," that we can see from his writings, is the "permissive sense" where in many portions of Scripture God is said to do the thing which He actually allowed or permitted. Origen and other church fathers that held similar views did not come up with their ideas out of a vacuum but chose to allow Scripture to interpret itself in light of "progressive revelation".

In chapter 29 of his book, "*Against Heresies*," Church Father Irenaeus (175-185) sees the difficulty in passages in which the Lord is said to harden, blind and dull people's senses (Ex. 9:35; Matthew 13:11-16; Isaiah 6:10). However, he taught that the solution was to *interpret Scripture with Scripture*. He shows from Scripture that it is the devil and not God that does the

blinding (1 Cor. 4:4). He states that God's only part is in turning people over to a reprobate mind (Romans 1:28).²⁷ He then writes:

If, therefore, in the present time also, God, knowing the number of those who will not believe, since He foreknows all things, **has given them over** to unbelief, and **turned away His face** from men of this stamp, leaving them in the darkness which they have themselves chosen for themselves, what is there wonderful if He did also at that time **give over** to their unbelief.²⁸ (Emphasis are mine)

Irenaeus taught that God's only part in dealing with an unrepentant rebel is to give him over to his own choices. This is how he understood the teaching of Scripture that appeared to make God the direct cause of a person's unbelief. He came to his conclusions by interpreting Scripture with Scripture and saw that God is only said to do that which He no longer restrained. Irenaeus applied this hermeneutic even to the consequences that come from sin:

And to as many as continue in their love towards God, does He grant communion with Him. But communion with God is life and light, and the enjoyment of all the benefits which He has in store. But on as many as, according to their own choice, depart from God, He inflicts that separation from Himself which they have chosen of their own accord. But separation from God is death, and separation from light is darkness; and separation from God consists in the loss of all the benefits which He has in store. Those, therefore, who cast away by apostasy these aforementioned things, being in fact destitute of all good, do experience every kind of punishment. God, however, does not punish them immediately of Himself, but that punishment falls upon them because they are destitute of all that is good.²⁹

Irenaeus says that God does not punish people by directly inflicting them but by allowing the results of being removed from His protective presence to take place. Irenaeus continues to point out that we are the author of our own afflictions by separating ourselves from God:

It is in this matter just as occurs in the case of a flood of light: those who have blinded themselves, or have been blinded by others, are for ever deprived of the enjoyment of light. It is not, [however], that the light has inflicted upon them the penalty of blindness, but it is that the blindness itself has brought calamity upon them: and therefore the Lord declared, "He that believeth in Me is not condemned," that is, is not separated from God, for he is united to God through faith. On the other hand, He says, "He that believeth not is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God;" that is, he separated himself from God of his own accord.³⁰

Therefore, Irenaeus, as many of the church fathers, confirms that such passages are to be understood permissively.

Chapter Seven

Protestant Reformation to the Enlightenment

Because Christ himself says, John viii., *when he speaketh a lie, he speaketh it of himself*, I will not make God~ the author of sin, but the preserver of nature, the restorer of life and motion, which life and motion the devil and the wicked do not rightly use.¹ – Phillip Melanchthon (*Commentary on Colossians* - 1527)

Quoting John 8:44, Melanchthon challenges the theological positions of his time in which God is said to have predestined all that comes to pass, including the fall of Satan and the sins of men and devils. This could not have been an easy position for him to take because it was a departure from the popular reformation theology of his time which taught the idea of an all-controlling sovereign God whose inscrutable will always came to pass.

Even Melanchthon's close friend, Martin Luther, often held to many of these ideas, though as we will see, he was inconsistent. Sometimes Luther held to the truth of *the permissive sense* and at other times he held to predestination error. Therefore, this chapter is not an endorsement of the reformers and their theology since I reject much of what they taught. However, we do want to show those rare occasions in which they did get things right in relation to the character of God, thus proving that the principle we are teaching in this book is nothing novel or new—only too often neglected.

Pre-Reformation

During the fourth century a controversy began with a man named Pelagius who taught the freedom of the

will and went against the idea that God predestines men to their lot in life. His teachings began to spread widely and Augustine, a leader in the church at the time, who held to some very unbiblical ideas, began to challenge Pelagius as a heretic. Augustine began refuting Pelagius by going to the exact opposite extreme in which he denied that the will is free. Augustine taught a version of God's sovereignty in which nothing happens outside of his will.

Some centuries later Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-1274), an Italian Dominican friar and Catholic priest who was influenced by Augustine as well as a number of pagan philosophers, wrote Bible commentaries and numerous books on theology. Though he may have been steeped in philosophy Thomas Aquinas did leave us this gem in his comments on the often misunderstood portion of our Lord's prayer in which He says, "*And do not lead us into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one*" (Matt. 6:13; NKJV):

For it is impossible not to be tempted by the devil, but we make this prayer that we may not be abandoned to our temptations. **Now that which happens by Divine permission, God is sometimes in Scripture said to do.** And in this way by hindering not the increase of temptation which is above our strength, he leads us into temptation. Max. Or, the Lord commands us to pray, in Orat. Lead us not into temptation, that is, let us not have experience of lustful and self-induced temptations.² (Emphasis are mine)

Hence Thomas Aquinas recognized the truth concerning the permissive sense of the Scripture.

Reformation Theology

Centuries later Martin Luther would be the catalyst for a protestant reformation that stood against the Roman Catholic Church. Luther repeated history by

debating a Catholic priest named Desiderius Erasmus on the subject of free-will. Heavily influenced by the teachings of Augustine (though a critic of Thomas Aquinas), Luther wrote a book titled “The Bondage of the Will” in response to Erasmus’ free-will teachings. In this book, God is basically the all controlling deity by which nothing happens apart from Him.

Later men such as Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin would enter the reformation and they began teaching these same ideas about God and man. Calvin would systematize the teaching of Augustine and Luther in his *Divine Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

While these “reformers” denied the charge (and sometimes admitted to it), their doctrine made God the author of evil. It left no room for warfare between Satan, prayer was a sham, there was no victory over sin, sickness was a blessing, and tragedy was all God’s doing. The Biblical principles of Scripture interpretation taught by the early Jews and many of the church fathers that vindicated God from the charge of evil would be lost since many of the Old and New Testament passages that made God appear to be the inflictor of sickness, demonism, death, and sin were interpreted in light of the “Calvinistic” model rather from the Biblical “permission” principle.

Martin Luther’s Surprising “Permission” Principle

However, all was not completely hopeless during the reformation era. Though Martin Luther was very much an “Augustinian” theologian in that he taught against the freedom of the will and advocated the idea that God controls everything, he was actually quite inconsistent in these ideas. Surprisingly, Luther sometimes taught the position that we are advocating in this book in which God is said in the Bible to do many things that He merely permitted the devil and evil men to

do. One of Luther's biographers noted from some of his quotes how he would actually credit the devil with much of the evil in this world:

In his opinion the devil is at the bottom of all evil. ... I think that the devil sends every plague and sickness, for he is the prince of death . . . but he uses natural instruments and means." ("") ...No illness comes from God, for he is good and sends good to everybody, but it is sent by the devil, who causes all misfortunes." ("")³

Luther said that God is not the author of evil, to include sickness. He noted that this is the work of Satan. God only sends good. Luther made statements of this nature often. In one of his discourses Luther writes. "God sendeth no sicknesses into the world but by the devil; for all melancholy or sicknesses do come of the devil, not of God. The devil is our Lord God's executioner."⁴

While we disagree with the idea that Satan is God's executioner (as if he worked *for* God) we know that this is a by-product of Luther's predestinarian views. Nonetheless, Luther, like us, simply did not see God as the direct source of sickness and disease. Luther firmly believed that all sickness and death has its source in Satan:

"I HOLD," he said, "that Satan sends epidemics and sicknesses amongst men, for he is a prince of death. Therefore St. Peter saith, 'Christ healed all who were held captive by the devil.' To this end the devil uses natural means, poisonous air, &c., as a murderer uses a sword."⁵

Luther understood that those passages in the Bible that tell us that God sent sickness or pestilence should be understood as saying that the devil did it and God merely took responsibility for it. This is consistent with the

statements in Job in which God takes credit for the work of Satan because He did not prevent it (see Job chapters 1 and 2 and 42:10-11).

Luther also believed in divine healing by faith in God's Word. Luther taught that going to God's Word to build one's faith in order to pray against what Satan is doing to one's body was the way to victory:

The physicians in sicknesses consider but only out of what natural causes and from whence a sickness cometh, the same they will cure with their physic, and they do right therein; but they see not that oftentimes the devil casteth a sickness upon one's neck, when it hath no natural cause; therefore a higher physic must be required to resist the devil's diseases; namely, faith and prayer, which physic may be fetched out of God's Word.⁶

This was not something that Luther believed intellectually but he put it into practice. When his very close friend, Phillip Melanchthon, had fallen ill and close to death, Luther began to petition God boldly, reminding Him of His promises to answer prayer and heal. Melanchthon not only was supernaturally healed by the power of God, thanks to Luther's bold faith, but he outlived Luther.

Therefore, while Luther may have held on to some ideas about the will of man and God's sovereignty that we vehemently reject, he did give some insight during this reformation period that helps us to see that God is not the direct cause of any evil, that all passages that imply such must be seen from the perspective of the "permissive sense" in which God is said to do that which He merely permitted, and that we can boldly claim God's promises for healing, deliverance, and victory over sin. However, more consistent in his *later* theology was Luther's successor, Phillip Melanchthon.

Melanchthon Introduces the Permission Principle

As noted earlier, Melanchthon (1497 –1560) worked very closely with Martin Luther and was also a contemporary of John Calvin. Melanchthon held to and promoted the theology of his peers. However he later rejected the harsh hyper-sovereignty doctrines espoused by these men that made God the cause of sin and misery in the world. His vigorous study of Scripture and research led him to discover the “permission idiom” of the Hebrew language. In his comments on Romans 1:24 Melanchthon writes:

“He gave them upthat is, he permitted them to rush by their own will, or as impelled by the devil: for this signification of permission is extremely frequent in the Hebrew verbsThis simple and true grammatical interpretation removes the labyrinths of multitudinous questions. And the apophthegm in Hosea, *From thyself is thy perdition, only in me is thy help*, is to be held as most true. Sin is neither desired, nor approved of, nor effected, by God. This true idea is to be held most tenaciously.”⁷

By far this is one of the clearest explanations concerning some of the difficult passages in Scripture that, apart from understanding them in the light of a permissive sense rather than a causative one, God can be made to look like anything but good and loving. Check any book or web page by a raving atheist quoting the Bible apart from this truth and one will affirm what I am saying.

When attempting to prove that a good God does not override the freedom of the will, Melanchthon again appeals to this principle of permission to address such passages as the hardening of pharaoh’s heart. In his teaching “the Cause and Consequence of Sin” Melanchthon writes:

Such expressions as “I will harden Pharaoh’s heart” do not contradict this representation, because they are mere Hebrew idioms, signifying the permission and not the effectual operation and impulse of the divine mind. The nature of original sin is hence apparent. It is not the original nature which the Deity implanted in man, but the corruption arising from disobedience. God then is not the author of sin, but properly speaking, it arose from the temptation of Satan and the will of man which was created free.⁸

Many who followed John Calvin’s teaching during the time in which Melanchthon lived and many still today always refer to God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart as proof that there is no such thing as free-will. They ignore the fact that this “reformation doctrine” maligns God’s loving character and makes Him the author of evil and sin. Melanchthon was zealous to vindicate God from the false accusation that He is the author and cause of sin. He wrote:

“God is not the cause of sin. Contingence must evidently be conceded, because sin, properly speaking, arises from the will of the devil and of man, and is committed without the approbation of God and without his forcing our wills. Hence it is not by any means committed necessarily by absolute necessity.”

The doctrine of necessity he calls “a dream of the Stoics,” to which the pious must give neither their minds nor ears. “The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is a Hebrew figure of speech which signifies permission, not an efficient will; as, Lead us not into temptation, means, permit us not to be led into temptation.”⁹

Melanchthon saw that the only way to keep God from becoming the author of sin and to vindicate His character of love and righteousness is to recognize the permissive

sense in which God is said to do that which He merely permitted. Melancthon would go on to influence others to use this same method to properly interpret the Scriptures in a way that did not cast aspersions on God.

Hugo Grotius

Another leader in the later years of the reformation who taught this truth was a defender of Arminian theology named Hugo Grotius (1583-1645). While it is difficult to find books by Grotius where he elucidates upon this truth, we find sparse quotes in some of his writings and primarily in the writings of others. Concerning evil Grotius said that God permitted man to abuse his freedom:

(a) The Cause of something that is Evil, &c.] God indeed foresaw, that free Agents would abuse their Liberty, and that many natural and moral Evils would arise from hence; yet did not this hinder him from permitting such Abuse, and the Consequences thereof; any more than it hindered his creating Beings endued with such Liberty. The Reason is plain. Because a free Agent being the most excellent Creature, which discovers the highest Power of the Creator, God was unwilling to prevent those Inconveniences which proceed from the Mutability of their Nature, because he can amend them as he pleases to all Eternity; in such a manner as is agreeable to his own Goodness, though he has not yet revealed it to us.¹⁰

Grotius taught that God permitted evil by allowing men the freedom of their will to bring it about. Love cannot be genuine unless it is offered freely. However, this vindicates God from being the cause of the evil. He did not decree it but allowed men to act freely. In dealing with Bible passages that appear to make God the author of

evil, Grotius applied the permissive sense to such. Thomas Pearce quotes Grotius' comments on Ezekiel:

'If the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that prophet.' (Ezek. xiv.9.)—That is, 'I have permitted him to be deceived:' or, as Grotius, 'I will deceive him by giving him such an end as he expects not.'¹¹

In his book, *Fate and Destiny Inconsistent with Christianity*, another minister from the Enlightenment period, Edward Bird, also taught that passages such as Ezekiel 14:9 should be interpreted using the permissive principle. Like Pearce, Bird also quotes Hugo Grotius for support:

Eutybus Sir, There is one Text, *Ezek. 14. 9.* which I think can't well be evaded, as to the Point in hand; the Words are these, *If the Prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, I the Lord have deceived that Prophet.*

Epenetus. These words must needs be figuratively spoken; because it is downright Blasphemy, to say, that God is a "*Deceiver.* For as he who *Loves, Teaches, Reads, or Hears* in a Literal Sense, without a Figure, must needs be a *Lover, Teacher, Reader or Hearer* ; so he who doth *Deceive* with a Figure, must without a Figure be a *Deceiver.* And in the Judgment of the most learned Expositors, and by the allowed Interpretation of other Places of Scripture, the Meaning of this Place must undeniably be one of these two: Either *Deceiving* is nothing else, but God's *permitting* the False Prophet, for his Wickedness, to be Deceived by the *Deceiver,* that is, the *Devil:* Or else it must mean, the delivering him up to his own corrupt Heart, which is willing of itself to be deceived and accordingly it follows in the very next words, *I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him.* Or it may be more fitly rendered, according to the Interpretation of *Grotius,* (who is styled *the*

Prodigy of Learning,) not, *I have deceived*, but, *I will deceive him, viz. By giving him such an End as he expects not.*¹²

Bird firmly believed that the God of truth who says that it is impossible for Him to lie could not be a deceiver even though a literal reading of Ezekiel 14:9 could make Him appear to be. However, knowing the permissive idiom in the Hebrew removes the apparent contradiction. Hence God and His promises can be trusted and the integrity of His Word stands.

Enlightenment Period or Age of Reason (1650-1800)

Thomas Pearce (1622-1691), a minister during the enlightenment taught the truth concerning the permissive sense of the Bible and credits Melancthon and Grotius as having influenced his thinking:

When God is said in Scripture to command Shimei to curse David, to profane His sanctuary, to give the wives of David unto Absalom, to pollute men in their gifts, and the like, such words must be expounded by an Hebraism, whereby many verbs which are active in sound are only permissive in signification. And **herein I agree as well with Melancthon as with Grotius, and all other the most learned interpreters of Scripture**, and with the judgment of common sense. So as my apprehension of such texts is plainly this: that God did permit, or that He did patiently suffer, or that He did not hinder, those wicked acts; namely, the cursing of David, the profanation of His temple, the pollution of His people, and Absalom's violation of his father's wives. Nor do I say that thus it *may he*, but thus it *must*. "For nothing can actively pollute, but what is unclean in itself; as nothing properly can moisten but what is wet. Now God, we know, is the Spirit of holiness and purity, who hateth sin with a real, not with a counterfeit, hatred, as Melancthon speaks; and cannot decree what He

hateth, because He cannot be willing of that of which He is unwilling. It would imply a contradiction.¹³

Thomas Pearce himself, though he learned it from Grotius, Melancthon, and others, embraced this principle as his own. In his book, “Divine Philanthropy Defended”, Pearce writes:

“When God is said to harden men's hearts,—to deliver them up to a reprobate mind,—to send them strong delusions, that they should believe a lie, and the like;— it is infinitely far from being meant of an efficacious impulse in God Almighty.” “That all those verbs,— to harden, to blind, to deliver up, to send delusions, to deceive, and the like,—are by an ordinary Hebraism only permissive in signification, though active in sound, is placed without all controversy.”¹⁴

Pearce tells us that when we read many the Scriptures he cited that we should remember that these verbs are permissive. This helps when we read the Bible, especially the Old Testament, to see that God is not the hyper-controlling deity often taught to us in some circles. From this truth we find the freedom that God gives man to receive His blessings or to bring about his own destruction.

Another minister from the Enlightenment period named Charles Leslie also expounded on this principle in order to explain the split in the kingdom when Solomon’s son Rehoboam acted on unwise advice and offended a significant part of Israel. Jeroboam took over the portion of the kingdom that Rehoboam lost, but Jeroboam began to act wickedly. However, we read in 1 Kings 12:24 where God says, “...*for this thing is from me.*” Leslie explains that this should be understood from the perspective of “permissive providence”:

Lastly, as to that expression, "This thing is from God," it may very well be understood of God's permissive providence only. There are much stronger expressions which cannot be understood otherwise, as where God says to David, 2 Sam. xii. 11. I will take thy wives before thine eyes, and give them unto thy neighbour, and he shall lie with thy wives in the sight of this sun. And I suppose nobody will say, that God did approve of Absalom his lying with his father's wives; far less command it.

So that, as I said to you before, fact is the surest way whereby to understand words. I suppose David did not know what neighbour of his it was to whom God said he would give his wives, nor how it was to be fulfilled; but when we see how it was fulfilled, then it is impossible for us think, that God did give, these wives to his son. Otherwise than by permitting it as a just punishment for David's sin against Uriah.

No man will say that God deceives, or pollutes, or that his laws are not good. Yet he says, Ezek. xiv. 9, "If a prophet be deceived — I the Lord have deceived that prophet." And chap xx. 25. I gave them statutes that wert not good. And ver. 26. "I polluted them in their own gifts," That is, he suffered them to pollute themselves, and to deceive themselves, for their many provocations, which are there repeated: and to follow the wicked laws and statutes which themselves had made. **Thus he is said to do what he only permits to be done;** and in this sense we must understand 2 Thess. ii. 11, "And sent them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie." And he gives the reason, for this cause, says he, because they loved not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness; therefore he left them to the deceivableness of unrighteousness. And thus we must understand God's being said to harden the heart of Pharaoh; that is, God suffered him to harden his own heart, as you will find it in the history of the fact, related in Exodus; the fact does explain it. He is there said to harden his own heart.

Now let us look into the fact by which Jeroboam came to the crown, and how that prophecy of Abijah was fulfilled; and then we may perceive whether it was of God, otherwise than by permitting it.¹⁵ (Emphasis are mine)

Statements where God is personally said to do things such as divide kingdoms, send delusions, and deceive prophets can be understood from a permissive sense. One more theologian from the Enlightenment age, German theologian Johann Dathe (1731-1791) is credited by Richard Twopeny as teaching this principle during his short life in the 1700s:

....and the whole proceeding would, in the language of the Hebrews, be ascribed to him; for their custom was (as is observed by a judicious translator and critic) to speak of God as the immediate efficient cause in all the events of the world, and not accurately to distinguish his direction of the most free human actions for the attainment of good ends, from the actual performance of the actions themselves.¹⁶

Dathe tells us that what God is said to have caused was never clearly distinguished from His permission of the event. The modern day reader now has the tools to make this distinction as we read and study God's Word.

Conclusion

The permissive sense of Biblical interpretation in which God is said to do that which He merely allows or permits began to slowly slip its way back into the teaching of Scripture during the Reformation and enlightenment periods. It would become even more prevalent during the 19th century, helping people to understand difficult passages of Scripture and to begin seeing a more loving picture of God. Sadly, this truth was

no longer emphasized by many Christians in later years and the idea that God was the inflictor of disease, disaster, and deception began to be taught in many churches. We believe that a rediscovery and recovery of this truth should help Christians enjoy their Bibles again and see nothing but a God of love in its pages—a God who hesitates to judge or display wrath. Yet, when He is left with no choice He does not personally inflict the sinner with evil but merely permits the sinner to suffer the results of the seeds of sin and death that they planted on their own.

Chapter Eight

The Bible is Its Own Interpreter

For with thee is the fountain of life: in thy light shall we see light (Psalm 36:9)

Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual (1 Cor. 2:13)

Over the years I have appreciated and utilized commentaries and Bible dictionaries written by scholars and teachers who have studied the original languages and historical background of the Scriptures. These resources help to shed more light on the meaning of difficult Bible passages. I have even appreciated the devotional commentaries I have read by men who have meditated on the Word of God and have helped me to learn how to apply it in certain areas of my life.

However, we as humans have our biases. Many of them are traditional, denominational, and theological. Quite often, when we are not carefully listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit, our bias will color how we interpret the Word of God. Many of the best Bible commentaries are theologically biased. Some make sincere efforts to stay true to the Bible without being influenced by certain biases, but it is not easy.

However, one commentary and dictionary that is sure to accurately define the meaning of Bible words and explain passages of Scripture is the Bible itself. The Bible is the best commentary on the Bible. God, in certain sections of His Word, explains His Word better than anyone else.

“Explanation” versus “Contradiction”

As we have already learned, many of the troubling passages in the Old Testament (and some in the new) can be resolved by the context of the passage itself or by comparing Scripture with Scripture.

In many instances God says that He will be the doer of some horrible thing to punish rebellious people. The Bible speaks of God smiting, striking, killing, cursing, destroying, deceiving, tempting, hardening hearts, sending sickness and catastrophe, sending wild beasts, stirring up the enemies of His people to hurt them, and a host of other horrendous things that one has difficulty reconciling in their mind would come from the hand of a loving God. Yet they are there.

We have already seen that Bible translators have often neglected the Hebrew idiom in which God is said to do that which He merely allowed or permitted. We have also seen that some *permissive* verbs in the Bible have been translated in a *causative* sense. These things have contributed to the western distortion of God’s loving character. Furthermore, those few works that explain the permissive idiom and the dictionaries that explain the permissive verbs have been rare, unknown and unaffordable to the average Bible student.

Despite the lack of these helpful resources, the Bible has always explained itself. The problem has been that too many misunderstood God’s *explanation* and called it a *contradiction*. This has led to atheists working hard to show all of the contradictions in the Scripture that can justify their denial of the one true God. This has led theologians to spend hours attempting to reconcile seeming contradictions. However, if these “contradictions” could have been better understood as “explanations” then we may have saved ourselves a lot of aggravation.

The Bible Explains the “Permissive Sense”

The Bible explains those passages in which God is said to do a horrible act when it says in another place that He did no such act. Let’s take a look at a couple of contradictory Scriptures concerning prophets that deceive:

*And if the prophet be deceived when he hath spoken a thing, **I the LORD have deceived that prophet**, and I will stretch out my hand upon him, and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel. And they shall bear the punishment of their iniquity: the punishment of the prophet shall be even as the punishment of him that seeketh unto him (Ezek. 14:9-10)*

*For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Let not your prophets and your diviners, that be in the midst of you, **deceive you**, neither hearken to your dreams which ye cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely unto you in my name: **I have not sent them, saith the Lord** (Jer. 29:8-9)*

Now the question to be asked here is which one of these seemingly contradicting passages is true. Does God deceive the prophet or does He have nothing whatsoever to do with the deceiver? Too many theologians who accept a Calvinist view of God’s sovereignty will reconcile this by saying that God *ordained* that the prophet was deceived. Yet Jeremiah refutes this idea by saying that this is not God’s permissive will. Therefore the Calvinist’s explanation is a faulty one and demonstrates how Bible interpretation in this case is colored by theological bias.

A better explanation is to remember God's character as it has been revealed in other parts of the Bible. God tells us that He is not a man that He should lie (Num. 23:19). God's holiness prohibits Him from lying (Psalm 89:33-35). Other passages tell us that God cannot lie and that it is impossible for Him to do so (Titus 1:1-2; Heb. 6:17-18). He is a God of truth and there is no iniquity in Him (Deut. 32:4).

On the other hand, Satan is a liar and the father of this wicked art (John 8:44). He is also known throughout Scripture as the deceiver (Gen. 3:1-7, 13; 2 Cor. 4:4; 11:3, 12-15; Rev. 12:9; 20:10). We learn in Scripture that it is Satan who works through false prophets (Acts 13:6-10). The deception of a false prophet is completely the work of Satan rather than God.

Therefore, the only way to understand Ezekiel 14:9 is *permissively*. Adam Clarke, in his Bible commentary, wrote concerning Eze. 14:9, "...it is common in the Hebrew language to state a thing as done by the Lord which he only suffers or permits to be done."¹ In Ezekiel 14:9, God is only said to do that which He permitted Satan to do. There is no need for numerous Bible commentaries, dictionaries, and other scholarly material to understand this. We are to simply take statements like Ezekiel 14:9, see that it is in contradiction to God's known character, that it contradicts other passages that tell us that He would never do such, and passages that tell us that Satan is the one who does such things, and from that we are able to understand that Ezekiel is only speaking in the *permissive sense*.

Does God Author Sin?

Not only do we have to vindicate God against the misunderstanding that He is a party to deception, but some passages appear to make God the author of sin if they are not understood in the permissive sense:

O LORD, why hast thou made us to err from thy ways, and hardened our heart from thy fear? Return for thy servants' sake, the tribes of thine inheritance (Isa 63:17)

Is God causing people to err from His ways? Certainly this passage cannot be accepted as it is literally stated here. Sadly, some extreme Calvinists have used passages such as these to teach people that God ordains sin. Yet, why must we take responsibility for our sin if God uses divine omnipotent power to cause us to sin in the first place? Furthermore, this contradicts numerous passages of Scripture that removes God from having any culpability for our free-will choice to sin.

For the children of Judah have done evil in my sight, saith the LORD: they have set their abominations in the house which is called by my name, to pollute it. And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart (Jer. 7:30-31; see also 19:5; 32:35).

The Lord says in this passage that He did not command His people to sin. He said that what they did never even came into His heart. Therefore, how could He be the cause of free-will beings doing the very thing that He begs and pleads with them not to do (Jer. 44:4)? What Isaiah is actually saying here is that because His people have persisted in sin and ignored His pleadings for them

to repent, He finally gave them up and allowed them to walk in their own counsels:

*But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. So **I gave them up** unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels. Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways! (Psalm 81:11-13)*

Romans 1:28 says, “*And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, **God gave them over** to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient.*” God is said to have done the thing which He merely permitted when He would no longer restrain His people from their sin. In other words, when they became joined to their idols He let them alone (Hosea 4:17).

Here we can see why comparing Scripture with Scripture is vitally important if we do not want to make God the author of sin. The Bible is the most accurate commentary on itself and is its best explainer. One does not need knowledge of original languages if they would learn to use this method in order to vindicate God’s righteous and holy character when interpreting Scripture. When we compare Scripture with Scripture we find that much of the negative that God is alleged to have done can be understood from a permissive sense.

Job: The Key to Interpreting Many Passages

Some may not want to look up numerous passages in order to understand the permissive sense of another passage. Thankfully, God has provided us with a master key through one of the oldest book in the Bible, which is the book of Job. In this book, Satan has evil designs for Job. In front of numerous angels Satan accuses God of

buying Job's loyalty and worship through His blessings. He then challenges God to destroy all that Job has with the belief that Job will curse God to His face. God removes His protection from Job and allows Satan to do a number of horrible things to him. Yet God takes responsibility for them all:

*And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil? and still he holdeth fast his integrity, although **thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause***
(Job 2:3)

God says that Satan moved *Him* to destroy Job. Here God takes full responsibility for the work of Satan. God speaks using the Ancient Near Eastern idiom of permission in which He is said to do that which He merely permitted. However, when we read the first chapter of Job we find that it is Satan who sent natural disasters to destroy Job's family and property. It is Satan who stirred up enemies to kill, steal and destroy. In the second chapter it is Satan who inflicts Job with sickness and then warps the minds of his wife and friends to torment him more. This is all Satan's doing but God, due to the way people communicated in the ANE, adapted His language to accommodate how things were understood during that period of time.

One of the things God is frequently said to do in the Old Testament is to bring up Israel's enemies as instruments of His punishment. After desecrating the Lord's house with idolatry, the Lord lovingly and patiently sent His prophets to warn Israel of the consequences of their sin. We read:

*But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord arose against his people, till there was no remedy. Therefore **he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees**, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age: he gave them all into his hand (2 Chron. 36:16-17)*

God is said to have brought up the Chaldeans through His wrath. Before this happened God warned Jeremiah about the Chaldeans that He, “...*will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and **will utterly destroy them***” (Jer. 25:9b). God says that He will bring the Chaldeans against the land and God takes personal credit for the destruction that will occur. Yet, we read later in Jeremiah that God considers the acts of the Chaldeans against Israel as iniquity that He will punish:

And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the Lord, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations (Jer. 25:11-12)

If God Himself brought the Chaldeans against Israel and if He takes credit for the destruction that happens then why is He so willing to punish the instruments that He used? Furthermore, why does He call their acts “iniquity?” Is God a party to iniquity? This is impossible since there is no iniquity in Him (Deut. 32:4).

Returning to Job 2:3 we see that God took credit for everything that Satan himself did to Job in chapter one. One of the things that Satan did to Job was stir up the Chaldeans to take Job’s property and murder his servants:

And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord.... While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, The Chaldeans made out three bands, and fell upon the camels, and have carried them away, yea, and slain the servants with the edge of the sword; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee (Job 1:12, 17)

Here we learn by allowing the Bible to be its own commentary, that when God said that He would bring up the Chaldeans against Israel and that He would destroy His people, He was only speaking in the *permissive sense*. As a matter of fact in other parts of Jeremiah’s prophecy, God actually speaks in a clear permissive sense when He says that He will “deliver” or “give” (“*nathan*”) the city into the hands of the Chaldeans (Jer. 22:25; 32:4, 24, 25, 28, 43, 38:18). God will do this by no longer protecting it. God allows Satan to have His way because the people chose to worship demons but He takes responsibility for Satan’s work.

Natural Disasters

Quite often we hear insurance companies, preachers and others refer to natural disasters as “acts of God.” The reference is due to finding similar language used in the Scriptures. For example, note the punishment that came upon the Israelites in the wilderness when they complained against God:

*And when the people complained, it displeased the Lord: and the Lord heard it; and his anger was kindled; and **the fire of the Lord** burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp. And the people cried unto Moses; and when Moses prayed unto the Lord, the fire was quenched. And he called the name of the place Taberah: because **the fire of the Lord** burnt among them (Num. 11:1-3)*

While we can understand God getting irritated with people’s complaining, it does seem a little extreme to our Western minds that God would kill them with fire (or lightning) in the process. It also makes Him appear to be petty and vindictive rather than the loving God we find exhibited in Jesus Christ. When Jesus was asked to take vengeance upon his rejecters by having fire from heaven called down upon them, he rebuked his disciples for such a suggestion and told them that it was His purpose to save men, not to destroy them (Luke 9:51-56).

Did God change to a different being in the New Testament? Absolutely not! We have merely failed to understand the permissive sense of such passages. Once again the book of Job is extremely helpful in this regard. When Satan brought down fire (lightning) to destroy Job’s livestock and servants, the one surviving servant called it “the fire of God”:

*And the Lord said unto Satan, Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord.... While he was yet speaking, there came also another, and said, **The fire of God** is fallen from heaven, and hath burned up the sheep, and the servants, and consumed them; and I only am escaped alone to tell thee (Job 1:12, 16)*

It was Satan who brought the fire that destroyed but it is God who is given the responsibility. This is the nature of the Eastern-Hebrew idiom of permission. The fact that Satan is fully capable of this is seen in the book of Revelation where the Satan-controlled anti-Christ brings down “fire from heaven.” “*And he doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in the sight of men*” (Rev. 13:13).

The passage from Job (and Revelation) should help us to interpret the wilderness incident in Numbers 11. We fail to understand that there is life and death in the power of the tongue (Prov. 18:21). Our words of faith opens the doors for God to work in our lives and our words of doubt and unbelief can hinder God from working in our lives and give Satan access to us. Paul tells us that it was the *destroyer*, otherwise known as “*the angel of death*” who brought the destruction upon the Israelites when they complained: “*Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer*” (1 Cor. 10:10).

The Good News Translation renders this, “*We must not complain, as some of them did—and they were destroyed by the Angel of Death*” and the VOICE translation says, “*Some of them complained, and the*

messenger of death came for them and destroyed them.”
The New Testament reader is well aware of the fact that Satan is the “angel” or “messenger” of death:

Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil (Heb. 2:14)

Therefore, the fire of God that burned the rebellious complainers in Numbers 11 is to be understood in the permissive sense. By complaining against God they forfeited His protection, pushed Him out of their lives and opened the door for Satan to destroy them. In this sense, the best explanation for what God is alleged to have done in Numbers 11 is explained by the Bible itself. The Word of God is its own expositor – and the best one at that.

God “brings” Sickness

The Old Testament, when we fail to apply certain passages in the permissive sense, also makes God the author of sickness and disease:

*And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have **brought** upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee (Ex. 15:26)*

God says that He will not *put* sickness on Israel like He *brought* on the Egyptians if the Israelites behave

themselves. There seems to be a contrast in the revelation of God's character here. He presents Himself to Israel as their covenant healer but implies that He is also the One who inflicts with sickness in the first place. Is God the source of AIDS, cancer, and numerous other things that people suffer from? Does God heal people of the sickness that He personally inflicts? How can He be trusted for healing if He is the One who brings sickness? Is God at war with Himself?

The words "put" and "brought" (Both are translated from the same Hebrew word "suwm") as defined by the majority of Bible dictionaries do not help us to understand this passage in the permissive sense. These words in the original Hebrew are defined as God's personal action. This is when it becomes necessary to use the Bible as its own dictionary to define these words. In 2 Chron. 36:17 the word "brought" is used interchangeably with what God actually permitted:

*Therefore he **brought upon them the king of the Chaldees**, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age: he **gave them all into his hand**.*

First we are told that God *brought upon them* the Chaldeans but within the same verse we are told that He merely *gave them into the hands* of the Chaldeans. The Bible is explaining itself and defining its own language. "Brought" should not be understood as *causation* since God very quickly explains that His "bringing" is the removal of His protection and the giving over into the hands of one's enemies. The best Bible dictionary is the Bible itself.

The same understanding can be applied to Exodus 15:26 in relation to sickness. Again Job is of immense help. In Job we read, “*So went Satan forth from the presence of the Lord, and smote Job with sore boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown*” (Job 2:7). It is clear as to who brought sickness on Job. Yet, in the last chapter of Job we read this statement:

*Then came there unto him all his brethren, and all his sisters, and all they that had been of his acquaintance before, and did eat bread with him in his house: and they bemoaned him, and comforted him over all the evil that the Lord had **brought** upon him: every man also gave him a piece of money, and every one an earring of gold* (Job 42:11)

Even Job claims to have received his sickness from “the hand of the Lord” (Job 2:10). Job was not wrong in what he said since he was speaking using the idiomatic language of his culture. However, we are often wrong in the application of Job’s words since “the hand of the Lord” is not that God personally inflicts with sickness but it is when He reluctantly grants Satan permission to have his way (Job 1:9-11).

In the New Testament we are given clear evidence that Satan is the author of sickness and disease (Matt. 12:22-29; Luke 13:16; Acts 10:38). Therefore, when we read Exodus 15:26 and we are told that “God did it” then we must interpret such language in our minds that, based on other portions of Scripture, God was speaking “permissively” and not “causatively.”

Chapter Nine

Interpret the Old Testament in Light of the New

*And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. **God is love**; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. Herein is our love made perfect, that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but **perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment**. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us (1 John 4:16-19)*

John tells us that God is love and that fear (as in “being afraid”) is not inherent in love. John is telling us that God is not a tormentor. Did God all of a sudden become *love* in the New Testament or has this always been true about Him even during Old Testament times?

God Never Changes

In Malachi God tells Israel, “*For I am the Lord, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed*” (Mal. 3:6). The fact that God does not change is given as the reason that Israel had not been destroyed. God’s love was not something that is only present in the New Testament. The Old Testament speaks often of God’s tender mercies, lovingkindness, and parental love towards His people.

Therefore, since the God described in the New Testament is the exact same person under the Old then we need to understand that all of God’s laws and actions under the Old Covenant have their foundation in agape

love. Jesus tells us that “loving God” and “loving neighbor” that, “*On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets*” (Matt. 22:40). Paul expresses this truth as well when he writes, “*Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law*” (Rom. 13:10). God sets the best example of this truth concerning love:

Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him? Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets (Matt. 7:9-12)

Working no ill towards his neighbor is the law of love. Jesus tells us that if sinful humans will not give things that are harmful to their children then God, who is love, would certainly not give His children things that harm them. The Lord also tells His listeners that they are to emulate God in this manner and that this truth about love is the foundation principle within the Old Testament teachings. Love works no ill to its neighbor. God is the perfect example of this and expects us to emulate Him (Matt. 5:43-48; Luke 6:30-36).

From the light given to us in the New Testament concerning God’s loving nature, it is important that we read the Old Testament from that very light. The New Testament tells us what God’s heart and intentions were during that period. Therefore, it behooves us to read and

interpret the Old Testament from the revelation of God's love that we find in the New.

Does a Loving God Tempt with Sin?

Apart from using this method of interpreting the Old Testament, we will be confused by many passages of Scripture that make God appear to be very unloving. In this chapter we will look at three examples of Old Testament passages that clearly need to be understood from a New Testament perspective in order to see God's love shining in them. The first clear example is found in 1 Samuel 24:1 in which God moves David to sin:

And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah (2 Sam. 24:1)

Not only are we told here that God "moved" David to sin against Him, but He later punishes David and Israel harshly for the very sin that He moved David to commit. Not exactly the picture of love that we are told, "works no ill to his neighbor." The word "moved" in the Hebrew means "by implication to seduce" (Strong's Concordance). However, the New Testament is clear that God is love and does not seduce men to sin:

Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man (James 1:13)

Many have blamed their trials and tests on God based on faulty teaching, much of it deriving from failing to read Old Testament Scripture in the light of the New. This has led some to accuse God of doing some very terrible

things. Yet, James tells us that God is not the tempter or seducer of men. Hence, the language in 2 Sam. 24:1 is idiomatic and must be interpreted through the lens of progressive revelation.

By interpreting Old Testament statements about God's actions in the light of the New Testament, not only do we get a more accurate picture about God's loving character, we can also trust Him to deliver us from the very things that the Old Testament, apart from proper interpretation, makes Him appear to be the source of:

*There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; **but will with the temptation also make a way to escape**, that ye may be able to bear it (1 Cor. 10:13)*

God is not the seducer but the loving One who helps us to escape trials, tests, and temptations. He took responsibility for many of these things in the Old Testament until He could give further light. It is now our obligation as New Testament believers to study from this light.

Satan is the Tempter

So how do we explain what appears to be an apparent contradiction between the Old Testament understanding of God's dealings and the New? The first thing is to remember that *there are no contradictions in Scripture*. The Scriptures will always explain themselves.

For example, Jesus Himself used some of the idiomatic expressions similar to what we find in 2 Sam. 24:1. He told us to pray, "*And do not lead us into temptation, But **deliver us from the evil one***" (Luke 11:4;

NKJV). Many people have had trouble with Jesus teaching us to ask God not to lead us into temptation because the implication is that God does lead into temptation. However, Jesus qualifies this idiomatic language when He refers to our asking to be delivered from the *evil one*. Jesus quickly explains that Satan is the culprit behind temptation. The Bible reveals Satan as *the Tempter*:

*Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be **tempted of the devil**. And when he had fasted forty days and forty nights, he was afterward an hungred. And when **the tempter** came to him, he said, If thou be the Son of God, command that these stones be made bread. (Matt. 4:1-3)*

“Tempter” is just as accurate a title for this fallen angel as “Satan” and “devil” is. Satan is the one who brings temptation. In 1 Thess. 3:4, 5, we read, “*I sent to know your faith, lest by some means the tempter have tempted you, and **our labour be in vain**.*” Satan is not working in partnership with God. On the contrary he is looking to undermine God’s work. Since God works through men then Satan destroys God’s work by tempting men to destroy themselves through sin.

Nonetheless, this revelation concerning Satan was not prominent in the earlier parts of the Old Testament and that is why the Lord took responsibility for what Satan did to David. However, the Bible always explains the idiomatic language it uses. In a later Old Testament book that gives further insight into the historical event recorded in 1 Sam. 24:1 we are given a clear understanding that Satan was the seducer in David’s sin and not God: “*And **Satan** stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel*” (1Chron. 21:1).

Scholars say that 2 Samuel was written in 1120 BC and 1 Chronicles was written several centuries later (between 450 to 400 BC). Ezra the Scribe is credited with having written 1 Chronicles and we believe He wrote it by the inspiration of God (2 Tim. 3:16). Henry Cowles tells us that this is “progress of doctrine.”

As to the agent in this temptation, it was God only in the permissive sense; Satan in the personal and positive sense, permitted of God, and by his very nature, wanting nothing more than the barest permission to give scope to the Satanic malice of his heart, and involve both David and the Lord's people in terrible calamities. It may, perhaps, be put to the account of “progress of doctrine” that in the later book (Chronicles) this agency is ascribed to Satan, while in the book of Samuel, neither his name nor his agency appears.¹

The Bible is a progressive revelation and this explains much of the permissive idioms in which God is said to do that which He merely allowed or permitted. While God took responsibility for David's enticement to sin, the New Testament reveals that God does no such thing. Thankfully 1 Chron. 21:1 explains the idiomatic expression used in 2 Sam. 24:1. Here we see that Old Testament idiomatic expressions can be interpreted properly by appealing to insight from the New Testament. Therefore always go with the love picture of God as revealed in the New Testament when reading the Old.

Did the Father Kill Jesus?

Another example that demonstrates the necessity of interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New is the most well-known prophecy concerning the sacrificial redemptive work of Christ on our behalf:

*Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him **stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted**. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.... Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in his hand (Isa. 53:4-5, 10)*

Apart from interpreting this passage in the light of the New Testament we will be led to believe that God acted sadistically towards His Son and even derived pleasure from it. This is not the picture of a loving God that we are given in the New Testament. Thankfully, the idiomatic language in Isaiah is explained in the New Testament and it helps us to understand how our God of love is actually said to have smitten, stricken, afflicted, bruised, and grieved His Son:

*Ye men of Israel, hear these words; Jesus of Nazareth, **a man approved of God among you by miracles and wonders and signs, which God did by him in the midst of you, as ye yourselves also know: Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain** (Acts 2:22-23)*

Jesus was a man approved by God and God worked signs, wonders and miracles through Him. The only thing God

ever did to the Son was to bring healing and deliverance through Him to others. God did not violate the law of love and work any ill towards His eternal Son. Instead, He “delivered up” or “gave up” Jesus to those who needed His substitutionary death. The Bible in Basic English says, “*Him, when he was given up, by the decision and knowledge of God, you put to death on the cross, by the hands of evil men.*” “Deliver up” and “give someone up” are synonymous phrases.

People easily forget the good that God does for them and are quick to want to kill the God who did nothing but free them from the things that harmed them. Rather than exercise divine omnipotent power to destroy these murderers, God operated in love and “delivered Jesus” into the hands of those wicked men who wanted to kill Him. Paul also tells us that this is how God “struck, smote, afflicted, bruised,” and “grieved” Jesus:

*What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but **delivered him up for us all**, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? (Rom. 8:31-32)*

Again we see the phrase “delivered up” in this passage. This means that God *gave up* His Son for the purpose of redeeming us. It is for this reason that Jesus cried, “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, **My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?***” (Matt. 27:46b). For our sakes, Jesus was abandoned by the Father to wicked men. This was for the redemption of the very men who killed Him.

Jesus summed it up well when He told Pilate, “*Thou couldst have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above*” (John 19:11). Pilate could

do nothing to Jesus apart from God *allowing* it to occur. Only in that sense is God said to have grieved and afflicted Jesus. Father-God did not directly or personally kill His Son though He had the power to stop it if He so wished. He and the Son desired our redemption more.

How Loving and Patient is God?

The Father allowed His only begotten Son to suffer at the hands of wicked men without interference on His part because He loved mankind. The most familiar passage in the Bible says:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved (John 3:16-17)

God did not send Jesus into the world out of a desire to bring condemnation to it. The world was already condemned due to its rebellion against the only source of life (see v. 18). God sent Jesus into the world for its salvation. This is the loving picture of God who sacrifices the best that Heaven has—His only begotten Son.

Sadly many people strangely believe that the Father and Jesus have two distinct personalities. It is as if the Father is judgmental and ready to condemn sinners and the Son says, “No Father! I will go and die in their stead! Do to me what you really want to do to them!” I am sure that it saddens the heart of the Triune Godhead that so many people think of the Father this way.

The Holy Spirit seemed to push John to show how the Father’s love was fully involved in the redemptive work of Jesus. Certainly Jesus was willing to die on

man's behalf as we will see momentarily, but it was not to appease a judgmental God who gets His kicks out of throwing sinners into hell. On the contrary, it was a joint decision of love between all three members of the Godhead.

Jesus explains the Father's intentions in more detail in a parable. He tells about the owner of a vineyard who sent servants to the workers in the vineyard to obtain what is rightfully His (Luke 20:9). Each servant was mistreated and beaten (Luke 20:10-12). No wrath came from God when the first and second one was beaten but one would think that after the third one God would say, "Three strikes you're out! I will now kill you all."

God is nothing like us and we should be glad about that. He is the epitome of love. Rather than getting retribution for the mistreatment of His servants and taking by force what is rightfully His, God sends His only Son in with the hope that they will appreciate Him. Instead, they kill Him:

Then said the lord of the vineyard, What shall I do? I will send my beloved son: it may be they will reverence him when they see him. But when the husbandmen saw him, they reasoned among themselves, saying, This is the heir: come, let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours. So they cast him out of the vineyard, and killed him. What therefore shall the lord of the vineyard do unto them? He shall come and destroy these husbandmen, and shall give the vineyard to others. And when they heard it, they said, God forbid (Luke 20:13-16)

Jesus tells us that God “destroys” such wicked men by removing His protection and allowing their enemies to have their way (Matt. 23:38; Luke 19:41-44; 21:24; Psalm 81:10-14). He does not inflict this destruction directly.

The primary purpose of this parable is to help us see that the Father is a God of love and hope. He sent prophets who rose up early to plead with them to return to the Lord (Jer. 7:25; 25:4; 26:5; 29:19; 35:15; 44:4). Yet, they were abused, tortured, imprisoned, and killed for their obedience. But God does not easily give up. He sends Jesus as a fulfilment of prophecy. He sends His only Begotten Son into this world of wicked men with a heart full of hope that they will at least reverence *Him* though they disrespected His servants. Sadly even this fails and they kill Him.

This is important to understand because Isaiah 53:4-5 says that God Himself had smitten, stricken, afflicted, bruised, and grieved Jesus. However, God’s intent in sending Jesus was nothing but kind and loving. The malice in the heart of men led them to kill their Creator. The idiomatic expression in Isaiah 53 makes God responsible simply because He permitted it to happen. But apart from studying the insight given to us in the New Testament, we may not know how to interpret the idiomatic language found in Isaiah 53.

Jesus Willingly Gave Up Divine Protection

Jesus revealed to His followers that He would be betrayed by wicked men and crucified (Matt. 17:22; 20:18; 26:2, 24). This was the fulfilment of prophetic utterances such as the Isaiah 53 prophecy. Jesus’ death served a purpose. Therefore God was behind it and *allowed* sinful men to crucify His Son due to the beneficial outcome. Nonetheless Jesus said that no man *took His life* but that *He gave it*:

Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father. (John 10:17-18)

The Father loved Jesus because Jesus was a self-sacrificing Son who reflected His Father's heart. The Father did not force the Son to die on our behalf. I have no doubt that the Father would have done the same thing. Why Jesus died on our behalf instead of the Father or the Holy Spirit is the subject for another book. But all three members of the Godhead would have been willing to die on our behalf and they suffered immensely themselves when Christ suffered (2 Cor. 5:19).

Jesus did this willingly because of the fruit that would come from it (John 12:24). Therefore He could say that no man takes His life but He gives it. He proves this when on the night that the wicked men came to take Him to His death and He said to Peter, "*Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?*" (Matt. 26:53)

He could have called for a legion of angels to rescue Him from it but He preferred to endure the death of the cross. Apart from a New Testament interpretation Isaiah 53 may look like the picture of a man being tortured by God. In the New Testament we see both Father and Son momentarily remitting divine protection in order to bring salvation to lost souls. You can find no greater love than this.

Satan is the true Murderer of Christ

The New Testament also reveals that Satan had a role in the death of Christ. Jesus revealed Satan as the

murderous spirit influencing the religious leaders that desired to take His life:

But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth, which I have heard of God: this did not Abraham.... Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it (John 8:40, 44)

Jesus said that these Pharisees who sought to kill Him were of their father, the devil. Their murderous intent was strongly influenced by Satan. Satan hated Christ and sought every means to kill Him. He could never succeed until Christ finally and willingly allowed His protection to be removed and gave Himself over to be killed by the powers of darkness. When these wicked men, full of the devil, came to arrest Jesus He made sure to let them know this when He said, *“When I was daily with you in the temple, ye stretched forth no hands against me: but this is your hour, and the power of darkness”* (Luke 22:53).

Jesus said that on more than one occasion they tried to kill Him but they could not. However, now this is their hour because He has willingly given up His protection. It was not only their hour but it was also Satan’s hour—the power of darkness. Luke 22:53 is a clear reference to Satan’s part in our Lord’s death (Eph. 6:10-12; Col. 1:12-14). Paul says concerning His ministry that he was, *“to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God”* (Acts 26:18a).

Therefore, Satan was very much involved in this murder of our Lord. However, Satan made a mistake. With every other man he had a legitimate right to wield the power of death over them (Heb. 2:14-15). The wages of sin is death (Gen. 2:15-17; Rom. 5:12; 6:22-3; James 1:15). But Jesus said, "...for the prince of this world cometh, and **hath nothing in me**" (John 12:30). Jesus never sinned so Satan had no legal right to put Him to death. Satan was so blinded by His hatred for God that He did not realize the ramifications for murdering an innocent sinless man:

*Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to nought: But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, **they would not have crucified the Lord of glory** (1 Cor. 2:6-8)*

This passage is a definite reference to Satan and his fallen angels (Daniel 10:12-13, 20; John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 6:12; 1 John 5:19). If Satan and his fallen angels had not been so blinded by their hatred for God and in their self-deceived state went forward with crucifying Him then they would not have suffered such a crushing defeat, thus relinquishing their hold on the power of death (Matt. 28:18; Rev. 1:18).

Satan murdered Christ and brought about his own defeat in the process. God gave Satan the chance to do what he had wanted to do to Christ for centuries and this in effect destroyed him (Heb. 2:14-15; 1 John 3:8).

However, apart from studying this New Testament revelation we would have no idea that evil men and Satan were the ones that murdered our Lord. God takes responsibility for what would happen to Christ in Isaiah 53 because all necessary revelation about Satan was not available. But the New Testament, as we have seen, helps us to understand the idiomatic language of Isaiah 53 in that God is often said to be the doer of that which He allowed or permitted. In this case, what God allowed to happen to His Son purchased our salvation.

Does God use Evil for Some “Greater Good”?

Another example we find in the Old Testament that truly needs to be seen in the light of the New Testament is the way Joseph’s brothers abused him and then sold him as a slave in Egypt. Joseph, to our Western understanding, seems to be saying that God was behind the wicked actions of his brothers:

And God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God: and he hath made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt. (Gen. 45:7-8)

And if that isn’t clear enough Joseph makes a similar statement sometime later: *“But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save much people alive”* (Gen. 50:20). Many have used these statements by Joseph, connected them to Romans 8:28, and then taught that God ordains evil (accidents, sickness, tragedy, crime,

etc.) for “some greater good.” Often the “good” is said to be mysterious and may not be discovered in this life.

First, we need to read these passages in the light of the idiomatic Hebrew expressions which signify *permission* rather than *causation*. As Richard Twopeny wrote concerning Joseph’s statement:

The great point of religion impressed upon the mind of the Israelites was the absolute supremacy of Jehovah in every thing, and his providential interference in every circumstance, which could affect the welfare of their family or people. From whence the transition to that expression was very easy, *which describes those actions of men, as his doing, of which he only overruled the event*. Thus Joseph says to his brethren, Gen. xlv. 8. “So now it was not you, but God, that sent me here:” by which he does not mean to deny that his brothers had sent him thither, for he expressly says so, ver. 5; but to ascribe the whole to his providence, who had so wonderfully made use of their sin to the preservation of their whole family.² (Emphasis are mine)

If we would learn to take the time to understand this Old Testament mode of expression then we will not misrepresent God as so many people do. Joseph’s words were inspired by God but God was using the common idiom of that culture in which He takes responsibility for all that occurred even though His only part was to overrule the evil. Nonetheless, He did not cause it, want it, or need it.

Joseph Brothers were Moved by Envy

It is also important to interpret Joseph’s statement in the light of the New Testament. When we say this we do not mean that we take a preconceived theology and then find “proof texts” in both testaments that seem to support it. This is what some have done by taking

Joseph's statements, and then twisting Romans 8:28 in order to promote their "God ordains evil for a greater good" doctrine.

In Joseph's case we need to go to Stephen who, full of the Holy Spirit, was led by Him to give the correct understanding of the acts of Joseph's brothers:

*And the patriarchs, **moved with envy**, sold Joseph into Egypt: but God was with him, And delivered him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favour and wisdom in the sight of Pharaoh king of Egypt; and he made him governor over Egypt and all his house (Acts 7:9-10)*

God is love (1 John 4:8) and love "*envieth not*" (1 Cor. 13:4). "Envyings" are the works of the flesh and not the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:19-21). Jesus said, "*A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit*" (Matt. 7:18a) and since envy is an evil fruit God cannot be its source. James reveals that the source of envy is certainly not from God but it is of satanic origins:

*Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. **This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish.** For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work (James 3:13-16)*

The envy producing "every evil work" describes the acts of Joseph's brothers very well. It is Satan who works

through envy. It does not come from God. Therefore God had nothing whatsoever to do with the way that Joseph's brothers acted. While God did plan to make Joseph a prince one day and that He would work through Joseph to save lives, God is powerful and resourceful enough to bring this about without using evil actions.

Nonetheless, when men choose to do evil God's hand can still remain on the chosen vessel as it was on Joseph. God can overrule each situation and enable us to overcome it and rise above it. This is exactly what happened with Joseph. The sin of Joseph's brothers was not God's plan but God refused to let Satan defeat His plan. He brought Joseph through triumphantly as He will do for you and I. God fulfilled His plan in spite of the opposition.

However, it is only by interpreting Joseph's statements in the light of the New Testament that we discover this truth. Otherwise, we can do as some and take Joseph's statements in a fatalistic manner, become passive, and allow ourselves to be defeated by the evil that others do to us under the false guise that it is part of some secret plan of God.

Conclusion

As long as we believe that God is the author of sickness and all of the other miseries in life then we will not trust Him for healing. If we believe that He is the source of demonism, then we cannot trust Him for deliverance. If we believe that God is the source of temptation, we will remain in bondage to sin. These false ideas only come when we fail to follow the principle of interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New. Follow this principle and you will be able to read every part of the Bible with a view that God is love.

Chapter Ten

Biblical Permissive vs “Causative Permission”

*There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee. Thou shalt be perfect with the LORD thy God. For these nations, which thou shalt possess, hearkened unto observers of times, and unto diviners: but as for thee, the LORD thy God **hath not suffered thee so to do** (Deut. 18:10-14)*

The Good News Translation renders the latter part of verse 14, “...but the Lord your God does not allow you to do this.” Yet, when we read the history of Israel they did just about every one of these things. This passage is strong proof that what God allows or forbids has nothing whatsoever to do with divine causality. God is not the cause of what He allows since He created man with the freedom to obey or disobey. If God were the cause of what He allows then the Israelites history would be completely different based on our opening text.

Yet there are some theological camps, primarily Calvinism, which equates God’s permission with divine causality. Furthermore, they equate the permission of God with the will of God. For example, in his book, “*Trusting God Even When Life Hurts*,” Jerry Bridges writes, “We

can put this down as a bedrock truth: God will never allow any action against you that is not in accord with His will for you. And His will is always directed to our good.”¹

Within his book Bridges believes that all calamities, sicknesses, and accidents are *allowed* (caused) by God for divine purposes. This is the Calvinist doctrine of divine permission, one that bears very little difference to His causation. The Calvinist doctrine is not consistent with the Biblical teaching of the permissive sense in which God is said to do that which He merely permitted.

The Vitally Important Distinction

It is important that we distinguish the teaching of the “permissive sense” that we are advocating for in this book from that which some theologians also call “God’s permissive will” or His “willing permission.”

Within the Calvinist camp especially one will find a few theologians who recognize some of the harshness of their false teaching that they still want to cling to for some unknown reason. In order to alleviate or “water down” the harshness of their doctrine and make it more palatable to a normal Christian audience they prefer to replace some of their theological terminology such as “decree” and “ordain” with the word “permission” as it relates to God’s actions concerning sin and evil. Roger E. Olson in his excellent book, *Against Calvinism*, notes, “One more area of diversity among Calvinists has to do with whether God only ‘permits’ sin and evil because everything is foreordained by God.”² After presenting some quotes by well-known Calvinist theologians Olson sums up their belief:

....God never takes the spectator posture when he allows things, including sin and evil. Without causing them he specifically wills them in such a

way as to assure they will happen without actually causing them.³

Olson provides enough quotes by Calvinists to refute any idea that he is misrepresenting their position. Like Olson, we find these Calvinist ideas about God's permission to be inconsistent with the teaching of Scripture. For example, in Deuteronomy God says:

*They provoked him to jealousy with strange gods, with abominations provoked they him to anger. They sacrificed unto devils, not to God; to gods whom they knew not, to new gods that came newly up, whom your fathers feared not. Of the Rock that begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten God that formed thee. And when the LORD saw it, he abhorred them, because of the provoking of his sons, and of his daughters. And he said, **I will hide my face from them, I will see what their end shall be:** for they are a very froward generation, children in whom is no faith (Deut. 32:16-20)*

The Good News Translation renders verse 20, "*I will no longer help them,' he said; 'then I will see what happens to them, those stubborn, unfaithful people.'*" Unlike the god of Calvinistic mythology, the Bible teaches that God's permission is indeed one in which He takes a "spectator posture". He steps back to see what will now happen once He has removed the restraint from the forces of evil.

The Biblical teaching of permission does not confuse God's permission with a hidden mysterious causation. In the Biblical teaching God does not want

certain things to happen but if people will continue to rebel, He withdraws His protective presence and allows whatever happens as a result. In other words He does not prevent it from happening but He certain does not will it or want it. In Calvinism God permits what He has actually decreed must come to pass. Roger E. Olson quotes R. C. Sproul and again summarizes his position:

“What God permits, he *decrees* to permit” In other words, God’s permission is *willing and even determining permission*; it merely reflects and enacts God’s eternal decrees. Thus, even sin lies *both* within God’s decretive will and God’s permissive will. The latter does not in any way determine the former or else God would not be sovereign. What God permits, he decreed to permit—including sin.⁴

While Olson is taking on the more modern proponents of Calvinism in his book, their ideas about what it means for God to permit something is not new. People have been unsuccessfully attempting to make Calvinism less harsh sounding for centuries by replacing the words used for divine causality with words such as “allow” and “permit.” In his criticism of Calvinist Jonathan Edwards, John Benson in his book, “The Revival and Rejection of and Old Traditional Heresy” sums up well the former’s teaching on God’s “permission” in relation to sin and evil:

The words “permit” and “suffer,” here made use of, are (according to the doctor’s creed) synonymous with decree, for, saith he, “permission is a virtual part of the decree.” So that when he talks about permitting the fall, and suffering the commission of all the sins in the world; it is the same in signification, as to say, that “the fall and all the sins of the world was decreed.” Hence, he unequivocally declares, “God did from eternity will or decree the commission of all the sins of the

world; because his permissive will is his true and real will.” And again, says the doctor, “He might have hindered the Fall but he would not; the reason was because he had decreed their fall.” So that when he makes use of the words “permit,” and “suffer,” as above, it is but, as it were, a trussing up the limbs of the beast, in order that the camel may be more conveniently swallowed.⁵

Basically, the Calvinist doctrine of divine permission is nothing more than hyper-sovereignty or divine causality dressed in seemingly acceptable language. However, when one digs beyond the surface of this teaching they find the same moral monster that the Calvinists are trying to hide.

The Biblical Language of Permission

This is not only something that is affirmed by the opponents of Calvinism who correctly interpret the permissive language of the Calvinists, but the Calvinists themselves are very clear on this point. For example, Erwin Lutzer writes:

Calvinists pointedly admit that God ordains evil—this is consistent with both the Bible and logic. In ordinary discussions about human events, we can say that God permitted evil, as long as we understand that he thereby willed that the evil happen. Calvinists agree with the Westminster Confession of Faith that says God ordains all that ever comes to pass. In a word, what God permits, he ordains.⁶

Lutzer plainly says, “In a word, what God permits, he ordains.”⁷ The Bible, on the other hand, clearly explains what it means for God to allow or permit something to happen and none of it has anything to do with His being the cause of or the one who ordains the event. Throughout all of Scripture you will find such phrases as, “giving

them into the hands,” “giving them over,” “delivering them up,” “sold them,” “hiding,” “hiding His face,” “drawing back,” “cutting off,” “rejecting,” “forsaking,” “departing,” “recompensing,” and “removing the hedge.”

None of these Biblical words or phrases used in relation to God’s permission has anything to do with the Calvinistic idea that God is the cause of that which He permits. The important truth we learned in chapter four about God “putting” lying spirits in false prophets in an earlier chapter is that **God only allows what you and I allow on the basis of the authority and freedom of choice.** In Psalm 81 we read:

*I am the Lord thy God, which brought thee out of the land of Egypt: **open thy mouth wide, and I will fill it.** But my people would not hearken to my voice; and Israel would none of me. **So I gave them up** unto their own hearts' lust: and they walked in their own counsels. Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways! I should soon have subdued their enemies, and turned my hand against their adversaries. (Psalm 81:10-14)*

God told them to “open their mouths wide and He would fill it” showing that He had provided for their needs, but they rejected this. God does not force His blessings into “closed mouths.” He is a gentleman who “stands at the door and knocks” waiting for it to be opened (Rev. 3:20). However, if He does not get the cooperation that He is seeking then He has no choice but to “give them up” and permit them to suffer the consequences of their own rebellious choices.

Israel rejected God’s love and protection. God had no choice but to *allow* them to have what they wanted.

God permits what *we* permit. Satan is “*seeking whom he may devour*” (1 Pet. 5:8). He has to “seek” because he is waiting for someone to lose God’s protection through their sin (Eph. 4:26-27). Therefore God’s permission is not to be misconstrued as “commissioning”. We cut ourselves off from God’s protection. God honors His covenant of free-will and delegated authority. Therefore He cannot and will not protect us if we willfully reject Him (2 Chron. 15:2; 24:20).

In numerous passages that use the language of permission, we find the exact opposite of the idea that God’s permission is “willing” something to happen. Let’s look at another example:

*Moreover all the chief of the priests, and the people, transgressed very much after all the abominations of the heathen; and polluted the house of the LORD which he had hallowed in Jerusalem. **And the LORD God of their fathers sent to them by his messengers, rising up betimes, and sending; because he had compassion on his people, and on his dwelling place: But they mocked the messengers of God, and despised his words, and misused his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against his people, till there was no remedy. Therefore he brought upon them the king of the Chaldees, who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion upon young man or maiden, old man, or him that stooped for age: he gave them all into his hand*** (2 Chron. 36:14-17)

God did everything that He could possibly do to prevent His people from falling into the hands of the Chaldees. He sent prophets to them. He loved them and had compassion on them despite their blatant sin and disrespect. The Israelites repaid God's kindness and patience by mocking His messengers and abusing them. It finally came to the place where God Himself said that "there was no more remedy" and so He gave them into the hands of the Chaldees.

This is in direct contradiction to the ideas presented by Calvinism. In their system of philosophy God permits what He secretly desires to come to pass in the first place. Yet the Biblical teaching of permission shows us that the true God works to do all that He can to keep man in *His will* without violating *their will*. However, when He has done all that He is able to do without violating their freedom of choice, He permits them to suffer the consequences of their rebellion by no longer protecting them from their enemies.

Yet, even in this God is very reluctant to permit them to suffer the consequences and is often quite conflicted about having to do so:

And my people are bent to backsliding from me: though they called them to the most High, none at all would exalt him. How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together. I will not execute the fierceness of mine anger, I will not return to destroy Ephraim: for I am God, and not man; the Holy One in the midst of thee: and I will not enter into the city (Hosea 11:7-9)

Jeremiah wrote, “*For he doth not afflict willingly nor grieve the children of men*” (Lam. 3:20). When God must permit negative things in our lives it is not due to a commission but merely allowing us what we allow through our rebellious actions. This is the Biblical language of permission and how it is defined in Scripture. This is far removed from the Calvinist ideological idea of permission.

God’s “Permission” is the Loss of His Protection

In the book of Job Satan is frustrated that he is unable to get to Job and complains to God, “*Hast not thou made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side?*” (Job 1:10a). It was after God removed the hedge from Job that Satan was able to do many evil things to him. Yet God took complete responsibility for Satan’s work (Job 2:3). God’s method of destruction is done by removing His protective hedge from the rebellious one:

*What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes? And now go to; I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard: **I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down: And I will lay it waste: it shall not be pruned, nor digged; but there shall come up briars and thorns: I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it** (Isa. 5:4-6)*

God appears to be frustrated here. His will is not being done. God has done for His vineyard (Israel) all that He could possibly do, yet He is not seeing the results He desired. Therefore, God has decided to “lay it waste”. However, God is not about to personally bring destruction upon Israel. Instead He is going to remove His protection from them and allow the forces of evil already poised to destroy them to have their way.

This passage is the perfect example of the Hebraic Biblical idiom in which God is only said to do that which He has allowed or permitted. By saying “I will lay it waste” God is taking responsibility for what happens to Israel when He takes away the hedge. There is no remedy left for them and God has no other choice. But this divine permission which culminates in the removal of His protection is not a “decretive will” on God’s part as advocated by Calvinistic theology on the subject of permission. God is about to permit something He really does not want to happen (Hosea 11:8).

Yet, it is the sinning people that are completely responsible for the removal of God’s hedge. In the book of Ecclesiastes we read, “*He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it; and whoso breaketh an hedge, a serpent shall bite him*” (Eccl. 10:8). A person can dig a pit through their unrepentant sinning and break a hedge apart from God’s desire and God will permit them. God will allow people to forfeit His protection over them if this is what they choose (Deut. 30:15, 19). However, this is no indication of His will in the matter. On the contrary, it is completely against His will as he desires to protect His people from the consequences of sin, but they won’t let Him (Matt. 23:33-38).

Therefore, in such cases God will take the credit for laying waste to His vineyard, but the context lets us know that this is merely done by the removal of His protection and not by His causation. He has done all He

could to prevent it but now He is left with no choice. This is far from the teaching of the Calvinists in which “permission” is on the same level as “divine causation.”

The Laws of Sowing and Reaping

Within these passages we also see the “sowing and reaping” truth that permeates the whole Bible but is missed by the careless reader. Compare Ecclesiastes 10:8 above to the following passage from the Psalms:

He made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch which he made. His mischief shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate (Psalm 7:15-16)

This passage is teaching the truth about “sowing and reaping” or “cause and effect” that God built into the order of the universe when He created it. The Apostle Paul has given us the clearest understanding of this particular truth:

*Be not deceived; God is not mocked: **for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.** For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting. And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not (Gal. 6:7-9)*

Another translation renders verse 8, “*If you follow your selfish desires, **you will harvest destruction**, but if you follow the Spirit, you will harvest eternal life*” (Contemporary English Version). Paul helps us to understand that much of that which takes place within our

lives that is punitive is “cause and effect,” though God is often given responsibility for it. But whenever God is said to destroy any of His people, we should understand the language as being *permissive* in that God has removed His protection and is about to allow the laws of sowing and reaping to have their way. The Psalmist explains:

Destroy thou them, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; cast them out in the multitude of their transgressions; for they have rebelled against thee. But let all those that put their trust in thee rejoice: let them ever shout for joy, because thou defendest them: let them also that love thy name be joyful in thee. For thou, LORD, wilt bless the righteous; with favour wilt thou compass him as with a shield (Psalm 5:10-12)

Here we find that the Bible is its own interpreter. God is said to destroy but His way of destroying is permissive in that He lets the rebellious one fall by their own counsels. In other words, He allows them to harvest destruction through their own sins when He removes His protective presence. As S. D. Gordon well said, “The worst thing God could do to any man would be to leave him utterly alone to the working out of his sin.”⁸

On the other hand God *shields* and *defends* those who trust Him. In this Psalm we can see that God allows a person to be destroyed by their own choice when He no longer shields or defends them. As God said through Hosea, “*O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine help*” (Hosea 13:9). The famous evangelist, D. L. Moody, explained how understanding this law removed any culpability from God for the negative circumstances that take place in the lives of unrepentant sinners:

It has been said that God is not a sort of a moral despot, as He is so frequently regarded. He does not sit on a throne, attaching penalties to particular actions as they come up for judgment. He has laid down certain laws, of which sowing and reaping is one, and punishment is the natural outcome of sin.⁹

Since “sowing and reaping” or “cause and effect” is the thing that is at play here then God is not the One who ordains the reaping that we suffer as the result of our disobedience to Him. He permits us to reap what we have sown if we persist in sinning.

God never intended for the laws of sowing and reaping to work evil in our lives. They were always meant to benefit His creation rather than to hurt or harm it (Gen. 1:11-12; Prov. 3:9-10; Luke 6:37-38; 2 Cor. 9:6-8). It was sin that perverted the law of sowing and reaping and made this law to work against us. Just as God permits the law to work to our benefit, He will also permit it to work to our demise if we persist in sin and push Him away. However, only Heaven will be able to tell us how often God has protected us from the results of our rebellion. David said, “*He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities*” (Psalm 103:10).

Conclusion

God’s permission as defined by Scripture is the freedom He has granted us to participate with Him in determining our circumstances and our future. It is not His manipulation of our circumstances as is often used by Calvinism’s language of permission. Therefore, when we study and attempt to understand the Biblical language of permission, let us be careful not confuse it with the unbiblical language of permission of Calvinism. The Calvinist idea of “permission” is really no permission at all. It is simply a softer form of *causation* and

manipulation. Their god permits evil because he wants the evil in the first place. The Biblical teaching in which God is said to do that which He merely permits or does not prevent is that which God has done all that He was able to do to prevent the consequences of rebellion but is left with no choice but to depart from the rebellious one, thus removing His protective presence, when no repentance is forthcoming.

Notes

Preface

1. Fraser-Tytlar, Charles Edward **New View of the Apocalypse: or, The plagues of Egypt and of Europe Identical** (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Hunter, 1852), pp. 66-68

Chapter One

1. As quoted in Rice, John R. **Is God a “Dirty Bully” and other Sensational Sermons** (Wheaton, IL: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1958), pp. 7, 8
2. Ibid, p. 8
3. Ibid, p. 17
4. Some of the people and groups that I have found that teach this truth also adhere to doctrines I vehemently reject such as universalism, soul sleep and annihilation of existence, denying the deity of Christ and other teachings I personally believe are utterly false and are unsupported by a clear unbiased reading of Scripture.

Chapter Two

1. Gordon, Samuel D. **Quiet Talks about the Tempter** (New York, Fleming H. Revell, 1910), p. 122

Chapter Three

1. Bush, George Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Genesis, Volume 1 (Chicago: B. C. Greigs & Co., 1838), p. 88
2. Foyster, John Goodge **Sermons** (London: Ibotson and Palmer, 1826), p. 90
3. Bullinger, E. W. **Figures of Speech Used in the Bible** (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1968, 2008), p. 819
4. Ibid
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6. Ibid, p. 820
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The fact that Calvinists affirm this truth but still make God the one who manipulates negative circumstances by His omnipotence makes their error more egregious. Even worse, Calvinists, especially those in our day, who do recognize this truth pervert it. (See Olsen, Roger E. **Against Calvinism** (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), pp. 57-59. Olson explains the Calvinist's use of "permission" and its inconsistency with their overall theology). R. C. Sproul says, "What God permits, he *decrees* to permit" (quoted in Olson, p. 78). So not only do Calvinists pervert the Scriptures by neglecting the permission idiom, but when they have no choice but to recognize it as truth they even pervert *that*.

Their desire is to proclaim their distorted ideas about God's sovereignty in which all that happens has been decreed by God. But at the same time they want to use their double-talk and claim that God is not the author of moral evil and sin. Therefore, this idea of permission, though perverted by them, works

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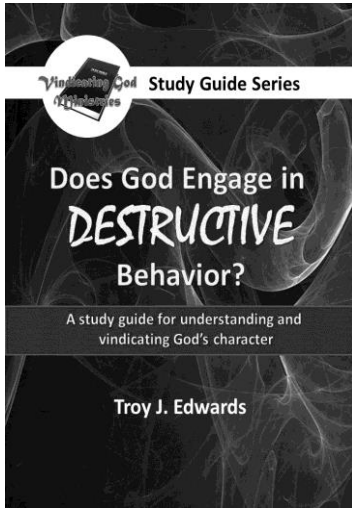
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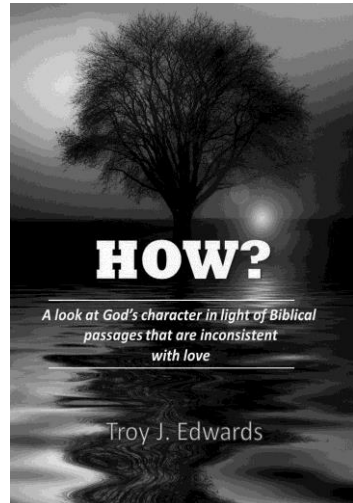
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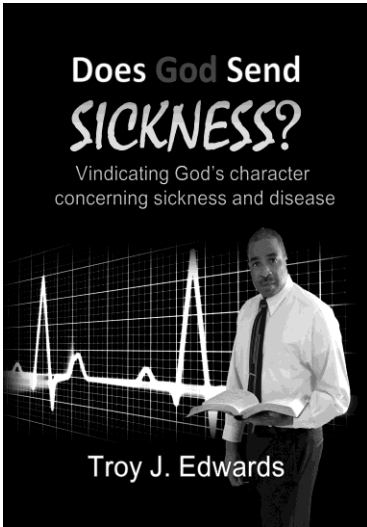
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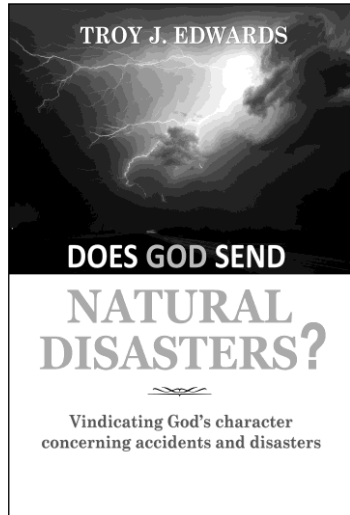
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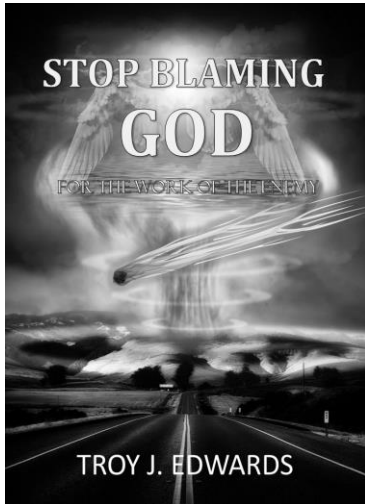
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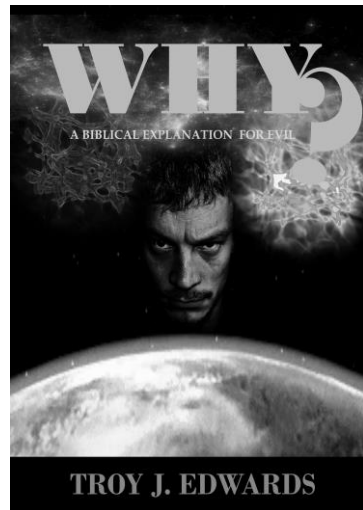
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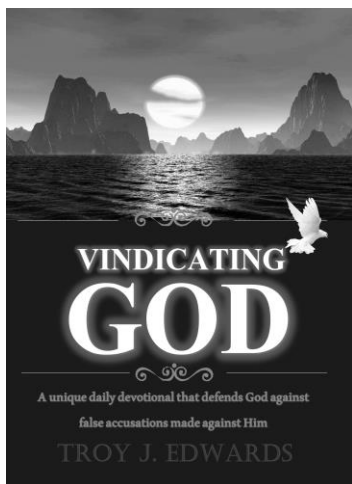
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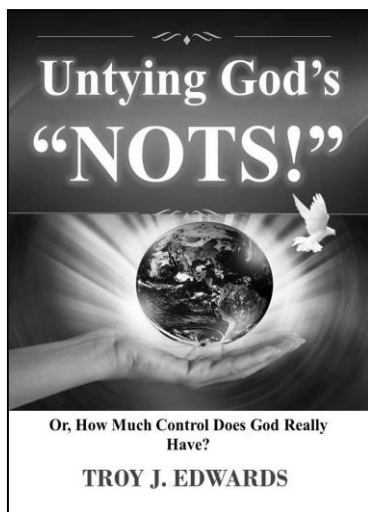
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