

### The 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.**

The 19<sup>th</sup>, century theologian George Bush said, ***"God is often said to do that which he merely commands, causes, or permits to be done"***.

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 everywhere 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"***.

{Foyster, John Goodge Sermons, p. 90}

Hence, passages that appear to make God the cause of some negative event should be understood in the light of the permission idiom of prevalent in that culture.

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"***. {Russell, David Letters, Practical and Consolatory: Designed to Illustrate the Nature and Tendency of the Gospel, Volume 1, pp. 199, 200}

### Neglecting this Idiom Leads to Error

***"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 he 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”.*

{Kendall, James A Sermon, Delivered at the Ordination of Rev. Oliver Hayward (Samuel T. Armstrong, 1816), pp. 7, 8}.

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”.* {Murray, John Hale A Help for English Readers to Understand Mis-translated Passages in Our Bible, p. 2}

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.”* {Murray, John Hale A Help for English Readers to Understand Mis-translated Passages in Our Bible, p. 133}

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”.* {McClelland, Alexander Manual of Sacred Interpretation: For the Special Benefit of Junior Theological Students, pp. 112, 113}

**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.”* {Jackson, Thomas, The Providence of God, Viewed in the Light of Holy Scripture, p. 304}

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.

**God has been mischaracterized and maligned, often by sincere men and women, due to the neglect of this idiom.**

**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. 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”.* {Murray, John Hale, A Help for English Readers to Understand Mis-translated Passages in Our Bible, pp. 144, 145}

**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. Treasury of Scriptural Knowledge by Canne, Browne, Blayney, Scott, and others about 1880, with introduction by R. A. Torrey}.

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,”*** {Holden, George The Christian expositor; or, Practical Guide to the Study of the Old Testament, p. 277}

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.***

{M'Leod, Alexander The American Christian Expositor: Designed to Promote the Influence of Sound Principles and Social Order, Volume 1, p. 458}

**Because God did not intervene in a supernatural way to override Pharaoh's free-will choice, He is said to have done the hardening.** In other words, Pharaoh hardened his own heart by his own choice. 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 our sins, he will not punish us for his doings".* {M'Leod, Alexander The American Christian Expositor: Designed to Promote the Influence of Sound Principles and Social Order, Volume 1, p. 458}

**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.**

**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 control, 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".* {Twopeny, Richard Dissertations on Some Parts of the Old and New Testaments which have been Supposed Unsuitable to the Divine Attributes, pp. 17-19}

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."* {Ibid}

**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."*

{Pierce's "Divine Philanthropy Defended," pp. 23, 24. (Edition of 1658), as quoted in Jackson, The Providence of God, p. 401}

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

*"He gave them up ....that 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 verbs ....This simple and true grammatical interpretation removes the labyrinths of multitudinous questions."*

{Philip Melanchthon, as quoted in “The Dark Side of Things: An Exposition” in The Evangelical Repository: A Quarterly Magazine of Theological Literature (Vol. I) p. 100}

**Thomas Scott in a well-known commentary also notes:**

***“Verbs active in the Heb[rew] often signify only permission.”*** {Scott, Thomas; Henry, Matthew The Comprehensive Commentary on the Holy Bible; p. 545}

**Hebrew scholar Robert Young wrote,**

***“Active verbs frequently express a permission of it.”*** { Young, Robert “Hints and helps to Bible Interpretation” in Analytical Concordance to the Holy Bible; p. viii}

Despite the people and their original language with all of its idioms, the Bible is still the inspired Word of God.

God used the language, expressions and idioms of His people to speak His Word. Many have 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.

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 by any means a recent discovery. For centuries men have attempted to vindicate God’s character by reinterpreting the Scriptures in light of the permissive sense.