

The Assyrian: Rod of God's Anger

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O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. (Isa. 10:5-6)

In the passage above God tells Isaiah that He will use Assyria as an instrument to punish His wayward people. Later in this same chapter God says that He will punish Assyria for their cruelty to Israel. The passage has perplexed some. They ask, "Why would God *use* cruel pagan murderous heathen as His instrument of anger and then punish them for their cruelty?"

Of course, there are those of a particular theological persuasion who thrive on the idea that God's sovereignty entails ultimate control and mysterious unexplainable actions. Isaiah's statement is one of a number of passages cited to support this ideology. The passage is equally used by God's haters to justify maligning Him as violent, cruel, and vindictive.

Those who have learned that Jesus is the exact image of God and everything Jesus is, God is (John 14:8-11; 2 Cor. 4:4), find it difficult to reconcile Isaiah 10 with this revelation. How can the God who is just like Jesus work through a cruel pagan murderous nation as the rod of His anger? Thankfully, the Scriptures themselves provide an answer.

God's Protection

When God's people are obedient to Him then He protects them from heathen that want to destroy them. The psalmist wrote, "*He suffered no man to do them wrong: yea, he reproveth kings for their sakes, Saying, Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm*" (1 Chron. 16:21). An example of this truth is seen during the time of the godly king Jehoshaphat's reign:

And the LORD was with Jehoshaphat, because he walked in the first ways of his father David, and sought not unto Baalim; But sought to the LORD God of his father, and walked in his commandments, and not after the doings of Israel. Therefore the LORD stablished the kingdom in his hand; and all Judah brought to Jehoshaphat presents; and he had riches and honour in abundance. And his heart was lifted up in the ways of the LORD: moreover he took away the high places and groves out of Judah.... And the fear of the LORD fell upon all the kingdoms of the lands that were round about Judah, so that they made no war against Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 17:3-6, 10; Emphasis added)

Why was God with Jehoshaphat? It is because this king walked in the ways of God, sought God and walked in His commandments. The result was that God's fear was over the

nations and they would not dare to attack him. The Bible says, “*When a man's ways please the Lord, he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him*” (Prov. 16:7). The nation had no trouble with their enemies when they walked in the ways of the Lord because His powerful protective presence kept their enemies at bay.

When God is defending or protecting His people He will not permit any enemies to harm them. When the godly king Hezekiah was being threatened by Assyria God told him, “*And I will deliver thee and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria: and I will defend this city*” (Isaiah 38:6). Alternatively, as another translation renders it:

*Not only that, but I will also rescue you and this city and **not allow** you to fall under the control of the Assyrian king. **I Myself will protect this city, Jerusalem.*** (Isaiah 38:6; The VOICE; Emphasis added)

Therefore, no enemy can hurt God’s people when He is protecting them, which He surely did when they obeyed Him. On the other side of this coin, when Israel chose to disobey God, forsake Him for other gods, and live in rebellion against Him, God removed that protection and allowed them to receive the consequences of their sin. God said that Israel’s failure to walk in His ways is the thing that kept Him from subduing their enemies:

*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 81:11-14; Emphasis added)

Such is the case with Assyria becoming God’s “rod of anger”. God *delivered*, or rather, *permitted*, Israel to fall into the hands of the Assyrians when they chose to rebel against Him:

*Wherefore I have **delivered** her into the hand of her lovers, **into the hand of the Assyrians**, upon whom she doted.* (Eze. 23:9; Emphasis added)

Ezekiel 23:9 in the Easy-to-Read Version says, “*So I **let** her lovers have her. She wanted Assyria, so I gave her to them!*” (Emphasis added). When we interpret Scripture with Scripture we see that God is said to do that which He merely permitted. God punished Israel by allowing them to have what they wanted. Israel loved Assyrian idolatry so God let them have it along with its consequences.

Permission Rather Than Causation

There is no mystery or arbitrary decree concerning the Assyrians being the rod of God’s anger. God did not use a supernatural influence over them to attack Israel. The enemies of Israel

could do no harm to them when they walked in God's ways because He was with them. This protective presence was removed when rebellion persisted.

Israel became steeped in idolatry and God had to chastise them (2 Chron. 33:1-9). God did not want this for Israel and warned them repeatedly to repent of their sin. Since Israel refused to repent we are told of their king, "...*he wrought much evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke him to anger*" (2 Chron. 33:6b). God expressed this anger when He brought the King of Assyria upon them:

*And the Lord spake to Manasseh, and to his people: but they would not hearken. Wherefore the Lord **brought** upon them the captains of the host of the king of Assyria, which took Manasseh among the thorns, and bound him with fetters, and carried him to Babylon.* (2 Chron. 33:10-11)

The word "brought" in our language appears to be causative. However, the word "brought" is used in Scripture in a permissive sense (Compare Job chapters 1 and 2 with Job 42:11). For example, God "brought" Jerusalem's enemies on them by *forsaking* them and *delivering* them into their hands:

*Therefore thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Behold, **I am bringing such evil upon Jerusalem and Judah**, that whosoever heareth of it, both his ears shall tingle. And I will stretch over Jerusalem the line of Samaria, and the plummet of the house of Ahab: and I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it, and turning it upside down. **And I will forsake the remnant of mine inheritance, and deliver them into the hand of their enemies; and they shall become a prey and a spoil to all their enemies.*** (2 Kings 21:12-14; Emphasis added)

God's "bringing" horrendous evil upon Jerusalem and Judah is defined as "forsaking" the people and *delivering* them to the enemy. Interpreting Scripture with Scripture, the word "brought" in 2 Chron. 33:11 should be defined in the same manner. Some more modern translations of 2 Chron. 33:11 help us to grasp this truth better:

*So he **let** Assyrian army commanders invade Judah and capture Manasseh. They put a hook in his nose and tied him up in chains, and they took him to Babylon.* (2 Chron. 33:11; Contemporary English Version)

*So the Lord **let** the commanders of the Assyrian army invade Judah. They captured Manasseh, stuck hooks in him, put him in chains, and took him to Babylon.* (2 Chron. 33:11; Good News Translation)

God *let* the Assyrian army attack His people. Therefore, when we read expressions in Scripture such as, “*O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation,*” we are to not to read into this the idea that God used a supernatural influence to move the Assyrians against His people. It only means that God’s anger is expressed by removing His protection and allowing the Assyrian to have his way with Israel.

The Turning of God’s Face

2 Chron. 33:6, as examined above, demonstrates that the Lord expresses His anger by the removal of His protection. God’s anger against Israel was always expressed, not by using His power to directly harm them, but by *not* using His power to protect them from their enemies. The expression used in Scripture to convey God’s means of exercising His anger is to “forsake” the recipients of His anger, “cast them out of His sight,” “remove from His face,” “hide His face from them,” “sell them,” “give them up,” and to “deliver” them to their enemies (Deut. 31:17-18; Judges 2:12-14; 3:8; 10:7; 1 Kings 14:15-16; 2 Kings 13:3; 21:1-14; 2 Kings 24:20; Psalm 78:50, 58-62; Jer. 25:38; 32:31; 52:3; Hosea 11:8-9).

Understanding the hiding of God’s face is indispensable to understanding how God expresses or acts on His anger:

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? (Deut. 31:17; Emphasis added)

In his commentary on the passage above, Adam Clarke wrote, “I will surely hide my approbation and my protection. This is the general meaning of the word in Scripture.”¹ The “face” of God is indeed symbolic of God’s favor and protection (Numbers 6:23-27).

On the other hand, the *removal* of God’s face or the hiding of it is symbolic of having removed His protection from an individual or nation (Deut. 32:17-20; Jer. 33:5; Eze. 39:23-24). God told Moses that it is by this method that His anger is exercised. This truth is confirmed in the book of Judges:

*And they caused their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire, and used divination and enchantments, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, to **provoke him to anger**. Therefore **the LORD was very angry** with Israel, and **removed them out of his sight**: there was none left but the tribe of Judah only. (2 King 17:17-18; Emphasis added)*

¹ Clarke, Adam **The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments** (New York: G. Lane and F. F. Sandford, 1843), p. 820

The expression, “removed them out of his sight” is simply another way of saying that God “hid” or “turned” His face from them. The Bible in Basic English renders verse 18a, “*So the Lord was very angry with Israel, and his face was turned away from them*” and the Hebraic Roots Bible says, “*so that YAHWEH was very angry against Israel, and turned them away from His face.*” Another translation gives us a clear understanding of the permissive sense expression of God’s anger:

The Lord became so furious with the people of Israel that he allowed them to be carried away as prisoners. Only the people living in Judah were left (2 Kings 17:18; Contemporary English Version; Emphasis added)

Here we see that God does not express His anger by controlling cruel warlords and making them chastise His people. God, after a period of pleading with His people to stop their idolatry and return to Him, finally turns away from them and allows the enemies that His presence protected them from to have their way.

This is how we are to understand the truth about God “hiding His face”. The enemies that God protects His people from already hate them and already desire to do them harm:

And I will set my face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you. (Leviticus 26:17; King James Version)

Note that the enemies already hated God’s people and were ready to destroy them. It was only the turning of God’s face against Israel that opened the way for their enemies to slaughter them. The Contemporary English Version gives us the correct understanding of Leviticus 26:17 in light of this evidence: “*.... and I will turn from you and let you be destroyed by your attackers. You will even run at the very rumor of attack.*”

How the Assyrian Became God’s Rod of Anger

The hiding of God’s face merely gives the enemies of God’s people a chance to do what they already desired to do. God does not need to use His power to “create” enemies for His sinning children. He only needs to step out of the way and permit this to happen. That is how the Assyrian becomes the “rod” of God’s anger:

For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they departed not from them; Until the Lord removed Israel out of his sight, as he had said by all his servants the prophets. So was Israel carried away out of their own land to Assyria unto this day. (2 Kings 17:22-23)

Note that God had warned through His prophets what He was going to do. He had given the people ample opportunity to repent. Therefore, the Assyrian acting as God's rod is not the basis of some "eternal decree" or "secret will" of God. It was merely the result of people refusing to listen to God and repent, thus forfeiting His protection.

Remember that the phrase, "removed Israel out of his sight" is another way of saying that God "turned away" or "turned His face" against Israel. Other translations render the former part of verse 23, "*Finally, the Lord turned away from Israel*" (God's Word Version); "*till the Lord did away Israel from his face*" (Wycliffe Bible); "*Till the Lord put Israel away from before his face*" (Bible in Basic English); "*until YAHWEH turned away Israel from His face*" (Hebraic Roots Bible).

God's anger is expressed by the hiding of His face. His anger means the removal of His protection and permitting the "sowing and reaping" process to begin (Jeremiah 11:17). Basically, when we sin and provoke God to anger we are really doing harm to ourselves (Jer. 12:13; 25:7). This is how we must understand such expressions in Isaiah 10:5 where God says, "*O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger.*"

Bible Commentaries

We believe that the Biblical evidence given above is sufficient to support our thesis that the Assyrian being the "rod of God's anger" is to be understood in a permissive sense. Nonetheless, it is interesting to find some older commentaries that also understand the language here as "permissive" rather than "causative:"

We turn first to the tenth chapter in the Book of Isaiah. The great Assyrian invasion under Sennacherib is the subject of this chapter. **The Assyrian enemy was permitted to come into the land** because His people had sinned and departed from God.² (Emphasis added)

And because his people are backward to this work, **he permitteth such instruments as will not spare**, but lay on to the purpose: Isa. x. 5, 6, 'O Assyrian, the rod of mine anger, and the staff in their hand is mine indignation. I will send him against an hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath will I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets.' When God is angry with his people, he can easily find a rod for them; yea, not only a rod, but a staff, which is a more heavy instrument of correction: he can find instruments sufficiently exasperated, and full of malice, severe executioners; and **he lets them alone till they have done his work**, though they manage his controversy with cruel minds, and evil and destructive intentions.³ (Emphasis added)

But, when we consider Men in Society, the Case is alter'd ; for when the Good or Evil of their Actions extends beyond themselves, and is to terminate upon other Men; **the Providence of God becomes then concerned either to hinder it, or to permit and order it so**, as may best serve the Ends of Government; and, as those, it is to affect, have merited or demerited at his Hands. **God**

² Gaebelein, Arno Clemens **The Prophet Daniel: A Key to the Visions and Prophecies of the Book of Daniel** (New York: Publication office "Our hope", 1911), p. 104

³ Manton, Thomas **The Complete Works of Thomas Manton, D.D, Vol. VIII** (London: James Nisbet and Company, 1872), p. 299

makes no Man good or bad, virtuous or vicious by irresistible Force; but he may, by a secret influence upon Men's Minds, oblige them to do the Good, they have no Inclination to; and restrain them from the Evil, they otherwise wou'd do; and in many Cases, to act contrary to their pre-conceiv'd Designs, merely as the Instruments of his Providence.... Of this we have a famous Example, in the Case of the King of *Assyria*, who came against *Jerusalem* with a powerful Army, and a full Resolution to destroy it; but God intended no more, than to make him an Instrument of his Providence, in the Correction of his People for their Disobedience.... Thus far God gave him Commission, i.e. **thus far God intended to suffer his Rage and Pride to proceed.**⁴ (Emphasis added)

These and such like instances show that the wicked agents may, and often do, and when wicked always do, have a very different reason for their conduct from what God has in suffering it. They have a selfish end in view, or do what they do for a selfish reason. God, on the contrary, has a benevolent end in view in not interposing to prevent their sin; that is, he hates their sin as tending in itself to destroy or defeat the great end of benevolence. But foreseeing that the sin, notwithstanding its natural evil tendency, may be so overruled as upon the whole to result in a less evil than the changes requisite to prevent it would, he benevolently prefers to suffer it rather than interpose to prevent it. He would, no doubt prefer their perfect obedience under the circumstances in which they are, but would sooner suffer them to sin than so change the circumstances as to prevent it; the latter being, all things considered, the greater of two evils. God then always suffers his laws to be violated, because he can not benevolently prevent it under the circumstances. He suffers it for benevolent reasons. But the sinner always has selfish reasons.⁵

No doubt that the quotes can be multiplied. However, the above should be sufficient to prove that we are offering no new doctrine or unique understanding of Isaiah 10. God does not arbitrarily influence the minds of any man to do wickedness, to include the disciplining of His backslidden people. But He will bring correction to His wayward children by removing His protection from them and allow them to suffer the consequences of their rebellion as Scripture has shown and the commentaries above have confirmed.

Conclusion

Can we read Isaiah 10:5, see that God uses cruel and violent pagans as His rod of anger, and see Jesus in such passages? We certainly can if we will simply recognize that God's only real act concerning the Assyrians was to let them have their way with a people who no longer wanted to worship God in the first place. We see that God gave multiple warnings before finally taking this course of action.

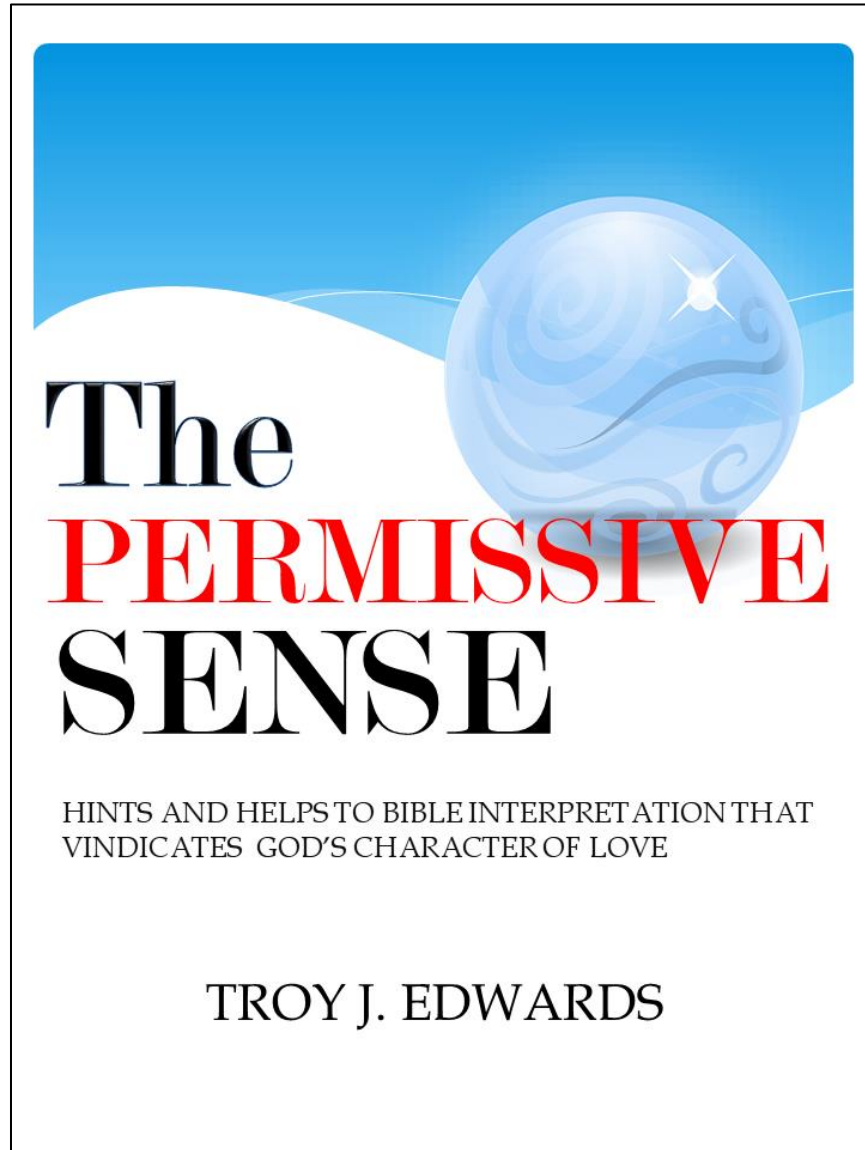
Jesus gave the same warning to the people of Jerusalem before the people murdered Him (Matt. 23:37-38). He warned them that their lack of repentance and their rejection of their Messiah would lead to being forsaken by God and being defeated by their enemy. Our Lord's word was fulfilled in 70 AD when the Romans destroyed the city. God doesn't want to chastise nor does He want destruction (Lam. 3:33; Eze. 18:23, 32; 33:11; Hosea 11:8; 2 Pet. 3:9). But

⁴ Stackhouse, Thomas A **Complete Body of Divinity: Consisting of Five Parts** (London: J. Batley, 1729), p. 242

⁵ Finney, Charles G. **Lectures on Systematic Theology** (New York: Clark and Austin, 1847), pp. 493, 494

persistent rebellion brings both. Therefore, let's learn to be obedient and serve Christ. But, if we rebel we no one to blame but ourselves for the consequences (Isa. 1:19-20).

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