

Why might God ever make anyone stray from His ways? What are we missing from this Hebrew phrase that isn't coming through in English? Here's how William Lowth explains it:

"The Words might better have been rendered, Why hast thou **suffered [permitted]** us to err from thy ways? for the form called Hiphil in Hebrew often denotes only permission, and is rendered elsewhere to that sense by our translators." (William Lowth, *A Commentary Upon the Prophet Isaiah*, p. 501, word in brackets added)

Here, Mr. Lowth introduces us to a Hebrew form of grammar called *Hiphil*. The Hebrew word translated as "why hast thou made us to err" is the verb *תָּאַחַ* (*ta'ah*), which is in the Hiphil form thus, since it "often denotes only permission", it could be understood that God is not literally *causing* the people to err. By honoring man's free will, God *permits* us to err from His ways and reap the natural consequences of such choices. In his *Companion Bible*, E.W. Bullinger translates it like this, "Why hast Thou **suffered [permitted]** us to err from Thy ways, and to **let** us harden our hearts ..."

This important principle in interpreting Scripture helps us to understand those sample texts we quoted at the beginning of this tract. Notice what Adam Clarke writes about Exodus 4:21 where God is quoted as saying, "I will harden his [Pharaoh's] heart":

**"All those who have read the Scriptures with care and attention, know well that God is frequently represented in them as doing what he only permits to be done.** So because a man has grieved his Spirit and resisted his grace he withdraws that Spirit and grace from him, and thus he becomes bold and presumptuous in sin. Pharaoh made his own heart stubborn against God, Exodus 9:34; and God gave him up to judicial blindness, so that he rushed on stubbornly to his own destruction." (Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Exodus 4:21)

We read a similar verse in Exodus 10:27: "But the LORD hardened pharaoh's heart." In her *Translation of the Old Testament Scriptures from the original Hebrew*, Helen Spurrell translates Exodus 10:27 as, "But JEHOVAH **permitted** Pharaoh's heart to be hardened" (see also on Exodus 10:1). And in *The Emphasized Bible* it says, "And Yahweh **let** the heart of Pharaoh wax bold."

Referring to 1 Kings 22:23 which we saw refers to God putting a lying spirit in the mouths of the prophets, Adam Clarke explains:

"He hath **permitted, or suffered**, a lying spirit to influence thy prophets. It is requisite again to remind the reader, that the Scriptures repeatedly represent God as doing what, in the course of his providence, he only permits or suffers to be done. Nothing can be done in heaven, in earth, or hell, but either by his immediate energy or permission." (Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 1 Kings 22:23)

Commenting on 2 Samuel 16:10-11, which seems to suggest that God commanded Shimei to curse David, Adam Clarke again explains:

"No man can suppose that ever God bade one man to curse another, much less that he commanded such a wretch as Shimei to curse such a man as David; but **this is a peculiarity of the Hebrew language, which does not always distinguish between permission and commandment. Often the Scripture attributes to God what He only permits to be done; or what in the course of His providence He does not hinder.** David, however, considers all this as being permitted of God for his chastisement and humiliation." (Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 2 Samuel 16:10-11)

What about those verbs saying God "sent fiery serpents" (Numbers 21:6) and will "send them strong delusion" (2 Thessalonians 2:11)? In 1726, Edward Bird wrote:

"For pray, take notice, God is said in scripture to send what He can but doth not hinder from being sent." (*Fate and Destiny, Inconsistent with Christianity: or, The Horrid Decree of Absolute and Unconditional Election and Reprobation Fully Detected*)

On page 401 in his book, *The Providence of God Viewed In The Light Of Holy Scripture*, Thomas Jackson quotes Thomas Pierce who summed things up nicely in 1658:

"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 that God is acting unrighteously - meaning He is acting against His character 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.**"

Here's a few alternative translations of 2 Thessalonians 2:11:

**New Life Version:** "God will **allow** them to follow false teaching."

**Worldwide English NT:** "God **lets** them be fooled."

**Daniel Mace NT:** "God will **suffer** [permit] a spirit of delusion."

In addition, John Goodge Foyster concludes:

"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." (John Goodge Foyster, *Sermons*; p. 90, 1826)

This important principle has greatly changed the way I understand Scripture. It sheds so much light upon the true character of God (1 John 4:8), brings it into harmony with how His Son Jesus taught and demonstrated it (Luke 6:35; John 14:9; 17:4), and helps to make sense of multiple events found in the Bible. Consider the following verse:

"So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had married his daughters, and said, 'Get up, get out of this place; for **the LORD will destroy** this city!' But to his sons-in-law he seemed to be joking." (Genesis 19:14)

How should we understand this? The phrase, "the LORD will destroy", is in the Hiphil form, and since it is in the future tense, it could be understood as, "The LORD will *permit* this city *to be* destroyed." Here's one from another well-known event:

"And it came to pass at midnight that the LORD **struck** all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of livestock." (Exodus 12:29)

The word "struck" is also in the Hiphil form—"The LORD *permitted* all the firstborn in the land of Egypt to be struck." This rendering fits the narrative when we consider verse 23:

"... when He [God] sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the LORD will pass over the door and **not allow the destroyer to come into your houses to strike you.**"

Clearly, God is not the one who directly struck all the firstborn thus proving the principle that God is often represented as "doing" that which He only "permits." We see the Hiphil form again in this next verse:

"The LORD shall **cause** thee to be smitten before thine enemies ..." (Deuteronomy 28:5, *King James Version*)

However, the *New English Translation* renders it, "The Lord will **allow** you to be struck down before your enemies ..." The Hebrew verb in question here is *נָתַן* (*natan*) of which Thomas Coke writes, "The original word natan, is frequently used in the permissive sense." (*A Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 282). And George Philips writes, "The verb [natan] signifies to permit" (*The Psalms in Hebrew*, p. 116).

We see the Hiphil form again in this next verse:

“But while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the LORD was aroused against the people, and the LORD **struck** the people with a very great plague.” (Numbers 11:33)

It appears again in this final example:

“And God said to Noah, ‘The end of all flesh has come before Me, for the earth is filled with violence through them; and behold, I **will destroy them** with the earth,’” (Genesis 6:13)

Since the statement, “I will destroy them” is in the Hiphil verb form it could be understood as permissive rather than causative. Confirmation of this is found in Isaiah 54:9, which presents the flood in the permissive:

“Just as in the time of Noah I swore that I would never again **PERMIT** the waters of a flood to cover the earth and destroy its life, so now I swear that I will never again pour out My anger on you.” (Isaiah 54:9, *The Living Bible*)

When commenting on the flood, Jesus never said His Father caused or sent it. Instead of saying something like, “My Father sent a flood and destroyed them all”, He simply said, “The flood came and destroyed them all” (Luke 17:27; see also Matthew 24:39).

And please don't get confused at phrases such as, “the wrath of the LORD was aroused”, or, “I will never again pour out My anger on you”, because God's wrath (anger) isn't about “lashing out” to cause harm but God reluctantly removing His protective presence at the persistent sinner's request thus permitting the calamity to strike. When Aaron and Miriam spoke against Moses, we read:

“So the **anger of the LORD** was aroused against them, and **He departed**. And when the cloud **departed** from above the tabernacle, suddenly Miriam became leprous, as white as snow ...” (Numbers 12:9-10)

The plague came *after* God “departed.” In Exodus 15:26, most translations quote God saying, “I **will put none of these diseases on you which I have brought on the Egyptians.**” On pages 5 and 6 in his book, *The Key to Scriptural Healing*, Kenneth Hagin writes: “... the literal Hebrew reads, ‘I will **permit** to be put upon thee none of the diseases which I have **permitted** to be brought upon the Egyptians.’”

At the time of the flood, God said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever” (Genesis 6:3). As God pleaded with the people, the book of Job tells us the people's response:

“Have you marked the old way which wicked men have trodden? Which were cut down out of time, whose foundation was overflowed with a flood: Which said unto God, ‘**Depart from us!**’ and ‘what can the Almighty do for us?’” (Job 22:15-17)

Honoring their free choice, God's Spirit (His protective presence) departed, and “the flood came and destroyed them all.” Echoing this concept, God warned Judah, “I **will cause** them to fall by the sword before their enemies” (Jeremiah 19:7). Again, this Hiphil verb form should be understood as, “I **will allow** your enemies who want to kill you to kill many of you with their swords” (*Unlocked Dynamic Bible*).

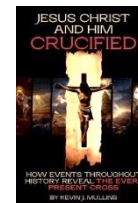
Why is it that fallen man has the propensity to view God as a revengeful dictator? God Himself explains, “You thought that I was altogether like you” (Psalm 50:21). When we fallen beings read Scripture, we often project our own evil thoughts and desires onto God. In fact, this is God's intention. God often speaks through our preconceived ideas and opinions, holding up a mirror wherein we might see ourselves in our true relationship to Him. He doesn't do this to condemn us but to bring our sin to the surface so that we might confess it and receive His grace (Romans 5:20; James 1:23-25). God does not need His word so that He can read our hearts. The Bible is written in such a way that (rightly understood) it helps us to see our own hearts. This is sometimes referred to as *the mirror principle*.

“This is how the mirror works. **Any view of God that suggests something different to what Christ revealed on earth can only be a reflection of our evil natures projected back onto Him.** It comes from our sinful mind and its faulty interpretation of the law, rather than the mind of Christ and His perfect living out of the law. Once this inconsistency is discerned, we are invited to dig deeper into Scripture to find the pieces which allow all the verses to harmonise.” (Adrian Ebens, *Mirror Principle*, p. 112)

When we realize the mirror principle at work, we are brought to our knees in confession, knowing that all sickness, destruction, and death are the natural result of man's desire to crucify Christ afresh (Hebrews 6:6) and to cut the cord of the only Source of life.

“Whenever we find portraits of God in the OT that fall below the character of God revealed in Christ — all portraits that have God commanding or engaging in violence — **we should see a reflection of the cross in them.** That is, we should view these portraits as an example of God humbly stooping to enter the limited and fallen worldview of the authors ... **Since Jesus reveals what God is always like, we should read the Bible with the understanding that God may appear to do what he merely allows.**” (Greg Boyd, *Would God Kill a Baby To Teach Parents a Lesson?* [2 Samuel 12:14-23], [reknew.org](http://reknew.org))

For more info on what you've just read, please download the free e-book *Jesus Christ and Him Crucified*



## Does God Cause Sickness, Destruction, and Death?

*How the Hebrew idiom of permission will change how you understand Scripture and God's character*

As one begins to read the Bible, especially The Old Testament, we come across some very strange statements regarding God's character. Here is a few to consider:

**Exodus 4:21:** “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘When you go back to Egypt, see that you do all those wonders before Pharaoh which I have put in your hand. But I **will harden his heart**, so that he will not let the people go.’”

**Numbers 21:6:** “So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died.”

**1 Kings 22:23:** “Therefore look! The Lord has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, and the Lord has declared disaster against you.”

**1 Chronicles 21:14:** “So the LORD sent pestilence upon Israel: and there fell of Israel seventy thousand men.”

Even the New Testament is not immune to such descriptions. Quoting Isaiah 29:10, Paul wrote:

**Romans 11:18:** “(According as it is written, **God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see, and ears that they should not hear;**) unto this day.”

In another place, he wrote:

**2 Thessalonians 2:11:** “And for this cause **God shall send them strong delusion**, that they should believe a lie.”

How are we to understand these statements? It is 100% true that we are to take the Bible just as it reads, however, even if non-inspired translators translate the words and phrases correctly, just as they appear in the inspired Hebrew or Greek, we do not always comprehend the original intent behind those words and phrases thus we will come to a wrong conclusion about God's character.

For example, in his *Commentary Upon the Prophet Isaiah* published in 1714, William Lowth quotes the following verse:

“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.” (Isaiah 63:17, *King James Version*)