

## Because the Lord Would Slay Them (Part 1)

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*If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the LORD, who shall intreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, **because the LORD would slay them.** (1 Samuel 2:25)*

Hophni and Phinehas, Eli's sons who were supposed to help him with the Levitical ministry, were sleeping with the ladies and stealing God's sacrifices. They refused to listen to their father, despite Eli's half-hearted attempts to reprimand them. The King James Version and a number of other versions suggest that this was because of God's purpose to destroy them.

As usual, God's enemies have latched on to these words as evidence that the God of the Bible is an arrogant, vindictive tyrant bent on the destruction of others. Then there are God's "defenders" who use the words to make a case for the false idea that God predestines all events and controls all things, including our sin. No further evidence of the latter needs to be sought than the writings of John Calvin:

So, when it is related of the sons of Eli, that they listened not to his salutary admonitions, "because the Lord would slay them," (i) it is not denied that their obstinacy proceeded from their own wickedness, but it is plainly implied that though the Lord was able to soften their hearts, yet they were left in their obstinacy, because his immutable decree had predestinated them to destruction.<sup>1</sup>

We agree with Calvin's statement that God *left* Hophni and Phinehas, but not for the reasons that Calvin claims. Calvin believed that these men "were left in their obstinacy" because God "had predestinated them to destruction." Yet, this goes directly against 2 Peter 3:9, "*He doesn't want anyone to be destroyed. Instead, he wants all people to turn away from their sins*" (New International Reader's Version). God also told the prophet Ezekiel:

*Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD: and not that he should return from his ways, and live? (Ezekiel 18:23)*

*Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11)*

Despite these facts, theologians throughout the centuries have accepted Calvin's interpretation of 1 Samuel 2:25. It also appears that the belief is supported by the rendering of the passage found in most English translations of Scripture. The question is, however, is it an *accurate* translation?

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<sup>1</sup> Calvin, John *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Volume 2* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1843), p. 193

Some theologians believe that 1 Samuel 2:25 is an example of some of the “imperfections” in our translations:

Imperfections in our translations have given rise to many things hard to be explained. The English translation now in use, is probably the best ever made; yet there are imperfections in it, where the true sense of the original has not been conveyed, or conveyed only in part .... 1 Sam. ii. 25, “Because the Lord would slay them.” The Hebrew is: “Therefore the Lord would slay them.”<sup>2</sup>

Hence, we are shown that one word, translated properly, is quite significant to a correct understanding of a Biblical text. In his advice to preachers on studying the meaning of words in Scripture, another author explained:

The accepted signification of a word must be retained, unless sufficient reasons can be assigned for its rejection. Thus, we shall be justified in rejecting the received meaning of a word in the following two instances, viz.<sup>3</sup>

The author demonstrates why a term in Scripture has to be modified using 1 Samuel 2:25 as an example. This is especially true when the present word conflicts with God’s whole revelation as given in Scripture:

If a meaning is inimical to any doctrine revealed in Scripture: For instance, according to our English version, Eli’s rebukes of his wicked sons served only to lull them into security, because the Lord would slay them (1 Sam. ii. 25), which rendering goes to show that their wicked conduct was the result of Jehovah’s determination to destroy them; and so apparently teach the horrid idea, that God wills His creatures to commit crimes, because He will display His justice in their destruction. It is true that the ordinarily received meaning of the Hebrew word here used is, because; but in this place it ought to be rendered therefore, or though, which makes the obstinate disobedience of Eli’s sons the cause of their destruction, and this is in harmony with the whole tenor of the Scriptures. The proper rendering, then, of this passage is, Notwithstanding, they hearkened not unto the voice of their Father. Therefore, the Lord would slay them.<sup>4</sup>

According to one author, altering the word “because” to “therefore” (or “though”) eliminates the awful idea that God ensures that people will remain in sin because He has already irresistibly decreed their destruction for no other reason than He is sovereign. Another academic has expressed a similar opinion:

In 1 Sam. ii, 25, we read: “Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the Lord would slay them.” This rendering makes God the author of the wickedness done, and Eli’s sons the passive medium through which God violates his own law, while they are at the same time the recipients of the divine wrath on account of the breaking of the law. It is true that *kîy* does frequently mean because,” yet when we consider the wide range of signification which

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<sup>2</sup> Dobie, David **A Key to the Bible: Being an Exposition of the History, Axioms, and General Laws of Sacred Interpretation** (New York: C. Scribner, 1856), pp. 252, 253

<sup>3</sup> Bate, John “The Meaning of Words and Phrases” in **The Local Preacher’s Treasury** (London: T. Woolmer, 1885), p. 185

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 186

the Hebrew particles have, we can readily see that the passage will bear a much more consistent and God-honoring interpretation. Had it been rendered “by,” “though,” “so,” or “therefore,” no violence would have been done to the language, and the verse would have been consistent with the rest of the history, thus: “Notwithstanding they hearkened not to the voice of their father, therefore the Lord would slay them.”<sup>5</sup>

Again, a simple substitution of “because” to “therefore” or “so” eliminates God as the source of Hophni and Phinehas’ wrongdoing. God is no longer viewed as the author of evil for “divine” reasons. A number of other scholars affirm the validity of this word change:

“Because the Lord would slay them;” rather, as the Hebrew may be rendered, “therefore the Lord would slay them;” God determined to destroy them because of their wickedness.<sup>6</sup>

Because the Lord would slay them] The Hebrew particle, *kîy*, rendered *because* in this text, should be rendered *therefore*, in the sense of for that reason, for this is. its meaning here, and so it is used in other places. I be believed, and [9] therefore have I spoken. See also Isa. liv, 14; Jer. xviii, 12.<sup>7</sup>

“Because the Lord would slay them.” The Hebrew particle כִּי (ki) is ordinarily rendered “because;” but in this instance it ought to be rendered “therefore.” The proper reading of the passage is—*“Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father. Therefore the Lord would slay them”* (Horne).<sup>8</sup>

The particle כִּי ki, which we translate because, and thus make their continuance in sin the effect of God’s determination to destroy them, should be translated therefore, as it means in many parts of the sacred writings.<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, we have discovered at least two of the many English translations out there that have sought to render the passage by using another English translation of the Hebrew word *kîy*:

*If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him; but if a man sin against the LORD, who shall intreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, **therefore** the LORD purposed to destroy them.* (The Holy Bible with Emendations by J.T. Conquest)

*If one man sin against another, intercession can be made for him to the Lord; but if he sin against the Lord, who can intercede for him? But they hearkened not to*

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<sup>5</sup> Turton, J. J. “The Unauthorized Calvinism of the English Bible” in **The Methodist Quarterly Review, Volume 46** (New York: Carlton and Porter, 1864), p. 392

<sup>6</sup> Holden, George **The Christian Expositor; or, Practical Guide to the Study of the Old Testament** (London: J. G. and F. Rivington, 1834), p. 249

<sup>7</sup> Sunderland, La Roy **Biblical Institutes; or, A Scriptural Illustration of the Doctrines, Morals, and Precepts of the Bible** (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason), p. 162

<sup>8</sup> Thomas, Robert Owen **A key to the Books of Samuel, and the Corresponding Parts of Chronicles** (London: Thomas Murby, 1881), p. 52

<sup>9</sup> Clarke, Adam **The Holy Bible: Containing the Old and New Testaments** (New York: T. Mason & G. Lane, 1837), p. 213

*the voice of their father, wherefore the Lord determined to destroy them.* (Charles Thomson Bible)

This translation of the Hebrew verb is considerably more in line with James 1:13, “*for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man.*” God could not be a Holy God and declare that those men stay in their sin in order for God, who ensured that they would sin in this way, to have enough justification to slay them. Such a notion transforms God into the world’s worst tyrant.

On the other hand, when people choose to persist in sin and ignore all of God’s warnings, then God will decide, as John Calvin wrote, that such people are to be “left in their obstinacy.” Nevertheless, contrary to Calvin’s idea that God intended this to happen, Scripture teaches that God only “gives them up” to such hard-heartedness after numerous attempts to sway them into the right path (Romans 1:24-28; Psalm 81:11-13).

God sent a prophet to warn them of the danger that they were in (1 Sam. 2:27-36). Sadly, men can choose to harden their hearts when they hear God’s voice (Hebrews 3:15; 4:7). As Aaron Williams rightly noted:

*The Lord would slay them*, or ‘it pleased the Lord to slay them, and, therefore, he gave them up to their own heart’s lusts, to work all iniquity with greediness.’ Even their own father could not ‘entreat for them” in his priestly character; and for such wickedness there was no atonement. Their cup was full.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that destroying Hophni and Phinehas was not God’s initial intention or desire. God had no choice because of their relentless actions. The next thing we need to figure out is *how* God destroyed them. Is it possible that God directly orchestrated their demise? Is it possible that God used His divine power to create circumstances that would ensure their demise? Is God, in other words, a vengeful slayer of men? Part 2 will provide answers to these questions.

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<sup>10</sup> Williams, Aaron **Women in the Bible: Being a Collection of all the Passages in the Scriptures which Relate to Women** (Philadelphia: Alfred Martien, 1872), pp. 146, 147