

In Ezekiel 14:9 Ezekiel speaks of those who abuse their prophetic office. There he states that the false prophets speak deceptive words because God has deceived them. This of course generates a lot of questions: If God deceives people, how can He be Holy? How do we know that the gospel isn't a deception of God as well? How can people be responsible for believing a deception if God is the one deceiving them? Answers to these questions would take volumes to explore, but hopefully, the following work by DA Carson and the comments that follow will shed a little light on the subject.

Excurses - Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

The sovereignty of God and human responsibility is not an easy concept with a simple solution. D.A. Carson does a good job at explaining the relationship between the two. The following comments are taken from *A Call To Spiritual Reformation* under the chapter entitled "A Sovereign and Personal God."

He says:

I shall begin by articulating two truths, both of which are demonstrably taught or exemplified again and again in the Bible:

- 1. God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty never functions in Scripture to reduce human responsibility.*
- 2. Human beings are responsible creatures – that is, they choose, they believe, they disobey, they respond, and there is moral significance in their choices; but human responsibility never functions in Scripture to diminish God's sovereignty or to make God absolutely contingent.*

My argument is that both propositions are taught and exemplified in the Bible. Part of our problem is believing that both are true. We tend to use one to diminish the other; we tend to emphasize one at the expense of the other. But responsible reading of the Scripture prohibits such reductionism.

We might begin by glancing at the large picture. Proverbs 16 pictures God as so utterly sovereign that when you or I throw a die, which side comes up is determined by God (16:33). "The LORD works out everything for his own ends – even the wicked for a day of disaster" (16:4). "In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps" (16:9). "Why do the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him" (Ps. 115:2-3).

According to Jesus, if the birds are fed, it is because the Father feeds them (Matt. 6:26); if wild flowers grow, it is because God clothes the grass (6:30). Thus God stands behind the so-called natural processes. That is why biblical writers prefer to speak of the Lord sending the rain, rather than to say, simply, "It's raining" – and this despite the fact that they were perfectly aware of the water cycle. The prophets understood the sweep of God's sway: "I know, O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). "The LORD does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths" (Ps. 135:6). The passage (Eph. 1:3-14) is as strong as any: God "works

out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11). In some mysterious way, and without being tainted with evil himself, God stands behind unintentional manslaughter (Exod. 21:13), family misfortune (Ruth 1:13), national disaster (Isa. 45:6-7), personal grief (Lam. 3:32-33, 37-38), even sin (2 Sam. 24:1; 1 Kings 22:21ff.). In none of these cases, however, is human responsibility ever diminished. Thus, although it is God in his wrath who incites David to take the prohibited census (2 Sam. 24:1), David is, nevertheless, held accountable for his actions.

The second of my two statements is no less strongly supported in Scripture. There are countless passages where human beings are commanded to obey, choose, believe, and are held accountable if they fail to do so. God himself offers moving pleas to incite us to repentance because he finds no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Isa. 30:18; 65:2; Lam. 3:31-36; Ezek. 18:30-32; 33:11). In his day, Joshua can challenge Israel in these words: "Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. . . . But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve. . . . But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD" (Josh. 24:14-15). The commanding invitation of the gospel itself assumes profound responsibility: "That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved . . . as the Scripture says, 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame'" (Rom. 10:9, 11). Of course, none of this jeopardizes God's sovereignty: only a few verses earlier we find the apostle quoting Scripture (Exod. 33:19) to prove that "God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" (Rom. 9:18).

Hundreds of passages could be explored to demonstrate that the Bible assumes both that God is sovereign and that people are responsible for their actions. As hard as it is for many people in the Western world to come to terms with both truths at the same time, it takes a great deal of interpretative ingenuity to argue that the Bible does not support them. In fact, not only does the Bible support both these truths in a large number of disparate passages, both truths come together in many passages . . . *[I have taken out some Carson's other examples due to space limitations]*

Genesis 50:19-20

After the death of their father, Jacob's sons approach Joseph and beg him not to take revenge on them for having sold him into slavery. Joseph's response is instructive: "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives."

We shall best understand what Joseph says if we carefully observe what he does not say. Joseph does not say, "Look, miserable sinners, you hatched and executed this wicked plot, and if it hadn't been for God coming in at the last moment, it would have gone far worse for me than it did." Nor does he say, "God's intention was to send me down to Egypt with first-class treatment, but you wretched reprobates threw a wrench into his plans and caused me a lot of suffering."

What Joseph says is that *in one and the same event the brothers intended evil and God intended good*. God's sovereignty in the event, issuing in the plan to save millions of people from starvation during the famine years, does not reduce the brothers' evil; their evil plot does not make God contingent. Both God's sovereignty and human responsibility are assumed to be true.

2 Samuel 24

We have already mentioned that God in his anger incites David to number the people, and then when David performs this prohibited action, he is conscience-stricken and must ultimately choose one of three severe judgments that God metes out. The result is that seventy thousand people die.

It is important to remember that the Bible insists that God is good, perfectly good. "He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he" (Deut. 32:4). "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Heaven echoes with the praise, "Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy" (Rev. 15:3-4).

Yet on the other hand, there are numerous passages, like this one in 2 Samuel 24, where God is presented as in some way behind the evil. The evil does not just happen, leaving God to splutter, "Whoops! I missed that one; it sort of slipped by. Sorry about that." Thus, God sends certain people a "strong delusion" so that they will believe the great lie (2 Thess. 2:11); he seduces Ahab's prophets, so that their prophecies are rubbish (1 Kings 22:21ff.); ultimately he stands behind Job's sufferings. The story of Job is important when we reflect on 2 Samuel 24 and God's incitement of David to sin by taking a census. The reason is that in 1 Chronicles 21, where the story is retold in a slightly different way, it is Satan and not God who incites David to number the people. Some readers think this is an intolerable contradiction. Certainly the emphasis is different, but it is not a contradiction. Similarly in Job, one could either say that Satan afflicts Job, or that God afflicts Job: the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Of course, this introduces all sorts of difficult questions about secondary causality and the like. My sole point at the moment, however, is that God is presented as sovereign over David's life, including this particular sin in his life, while David himself is not thereby excused: David is still responsible for his actions. Both propositions are assumed to be true.

Isaiah 10:5-19

This passage is typical of many in the Prophets. God addresses the crudest superpower of Isaiah's day: "Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets" (10:5-6). The context makes clear that the people against whom God is sending the Assyrians is none other than his own covenant community. God is angry with his people for their sin, and so he is sending the Assyrians against them. Even so, God here pronounces a woe on the Assyrians in connection with this mission. Why? Because they think they are doing this all by

themselves. They think Samaria and Jerusalem are just like the capital cities of the pagan nations they have already overthrown. Therefore, when the Lord has finished his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem (that is, when he has finished punishing them by using the Assyrians), he will say, "I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes" (10:12). "Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it?... Therefore, the Lord, the LORD Almighty, will send a wasting disease upon his sturdy warriors; under his pomp a fire will be kindled like a blazing flame" (10:15-16).

Here we find God using a military superpower as if it were nothing more than a tool –an ax or a saw – to accomplish his purposes of bitter judgment. But that does not mean the Assyrians are not responsible for their actions. Their "willful pride" and their "haughty look" and above all their arrogance in thinking they have made themselves strong are all deeply offensive to the Almighty, and he holds them to account. They may be tools in his hands, but that does not absolve them of responsibility.

John 6:37-40

In the context of the "Bread of Life" discourse, Jesus declares, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (6:37). This means, on the one hand, that all of the elect, all of God's chosen people, are viewed as a gift the Father presents to the Son, and, on the other, that once they have been given to Jesus, Jesus for his part will certainly keep them in: he will never drive them away. That this is the meaning of the last part of verse 37 becomes especially clear when we follow the argument into the next few verses. "I will never drive [them] away," Jesus says, "for I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day" (6:37-39).

Thus, God is seen as so sovereign in the process of salvation that the people of God are said to be given as a gift by the Father to the Son, while the Son preserves them to the last day when (he promises) he will raise them up. Nevertheless, this does not make these privileged people automata. The next verse can describe these same people in terms of what they do: "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (6:40).

Both of our propositions are assumed to be true, and neither is allowed to diminish the other.

Philippians 2:12-13

After powerfully presenting the unique example of Jesus Christ (2:6-11), Paul writes, "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (2:12-13). The meaning of these verses has been disputed, and this is not the place to engage the disputants. On the face of it, however, Paul's meaning may become a little clearer if we recognize what he does not say. Paul does not tell his readers to work out their own

salvation, since God has done his bit and now it is all up to them. Still less does he tell them that God does everything, so that all they need is to become supremely passive: "Let go and let God" or some equivalent slogan. Rather, he tells them to work out their own salvation precisely because it is God working in them, both at the level of their will and at the level of their actions ("to will and to act according to his good purpose").

Not only is the truth of our two propositions assumed, but God's sovereignty, extending so far that it includes our will and our action, functions as an incentive to our own industry in the spiritual arena.

Acts 18:9-10

A similar argument is displayed in Acts 18, where God's election becomes an incentive to evangelism. Paul arrives in Corinth, doubtless a little discouraged from the rough treatment he has suffered as he has made his way south through Macedonia into Achaia. Now, in a night vision, the Lord speaks to him: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city" (18:9-10). The prospect of the conversion of many people, a prospect ensured by God's purposes in election, is what gives Paul stamina and perseverance as he settles down in Corinth for extended ministry. . .

Mystery and the Nature of God

If we agree, then, that the Bible frequently affirms or exemplifies the truth of these two statements, where do we go from there?

First, we refuse to think of these two statements as embracing a deep contradiction. Granted there is mystery in them, and we shall have to explore just where that mystery lies. But if we are careful about semantics, we can avoid setting up these two statements as if they were mutually exclusive. Christianity is not interested in tempting you to believe contradictory nonsense. It invokes mystery now and then; it does not invoke nonsense.

That means, for instance, that we must be careful with the notion of freedom. Many Christians today think that if human beings are to be thought of as morally responsible creatures, they must be free to choose, to believe, to disobey, and so forth. But what does "freedom" mean? Sometimes without thinking about it, we assume that such freedom must entail the power to work outside God's sovereignty. Freedom, we think, involves absolute power to be contrary, that is, the power to break any constraint, so that there is no necessity in the choice we make. If we are constrained to choose a certain option, if what we decide is in fact utterly inevitable, then how could it be ours? And if not truly ours, how can we be held morally accountable?

Yet the passages we have just surveyed cry out in protest. To go no further than the last example: Herod and Pontius Pilate and the rest conspired together; they did what they wanted to do, even though they did what God's power and will had determined beforehand should be done. *That is why many*

theologians have refused to tie "freedom" to absolute power to act contrary to God's will. They tie it, rather, to desire, to what human beings voluntarily choose. Joseph's brothers did what they wanted to do; Herod and Pilate and the rulers of the Jews did what they wanted to do; the Assyrians did what they wanted to do. In each case, God's sovereignty was operating behind the scenes: the human participants, to use the language of the early Christians, did what God's power and will had decided beforehand should happen. But that did not excuse them. They did what they wanted to do.

The only reason for bringing this up is to insist that our two propositions, as difficult and mysterious as they are, can be made to look silly, even flatly contradictory, if we begin with questionable assumptions and definitions that are not borne out by the Scriptures.

Second, it is vital to see that God does not stand behind good and evil in exactly the same way. There are two positions to avoid: (1) Some suppose that God does not stand in any sense behind evil and (2) others think that God stands behind good and evil in exactly the same way.

In the first case, the thinking is that certain things take place in the universe, namely, every evil event, that is entirely outside God's control. That would mean there is another power, apart from God and outside the domain of God's sovereignty that challenges him. In philosophy, such a viewpoint is called dualism. In such a universe, it is hard to be sure which side, good or evil, will ultimately win. We have already taken notice of enough texts to be certain that the Bible does not sanction this view of God.

The second view maintains that what God ordains takes place; what he does not ordain does not take place. If both good and evil take place, it can only be because God ordains them both. But if he stands behind good and evil in exactly the same way, that is, if he stands behind them symmetrically, he is entirely amoral. He may be powerful, but he is not good.

The Bible's witness will not let us accept either of these positions. The Bible insists God is sovereign, so sovereign that nothing that takes place in the universe can escape the outermost boundary of his control; yet the Bible insists God is good, unreservedly good, the very standard of goodness. We are driven to conclude that God does not stand behind good and evil in exactly the same way. In other words, he stands behind good and evil asymmetrically. He stands behind good in such a way that the good can ultimately be credited to him; he stands behind evil in such a way that what is evil is inevitably credited to secondary agents and all their malignant effects. They cannot escape his sway, in exactly the same way that Satan has no power over Job without God's sanction; yet God remains mysteriously distant from the evil itself.

I say "mysteriously" because how he does this is mysterious, for reasons still to be explored. In fact, it is the very mysteriousness of his control that prompts not a few biblical writers to wrestle in agony over the problem of evil, not only the writer of Job, but Habakkuk, some of the psalmists, and others.

Third, and most importantly, our two propositions concerning God's sovereignty and human responsibility are directly tied to the nature of God. If God were sovereign and nothing more, we might

all become Christian fatalists, but it would be hard to carve out a place for human interaction with Deity, a place for human responsibility. If God were personal and no more – talking with us, responding to us, asking and answering questions - it would be easy to understand how human beings are responsible to him, but it would be harder to grasp just how this sort of God could be transcendent, sovereign, omnipotent.

The wonderful truth is that God is both transcendent and personal. He is transcendent: he exists above or beyond time and space, since he existed before the universe was created. From this exalted and scarcely imaginable reach he sovereignly rules over the works of his hands. Yet he is personal: he presents himself to us not as raw power or irresistible force, but as Father, as Lord. When he speaks and issues a command, if I obey, I am obeying him; if I disobey, I am disobeying him. All of my most meaningful relationships with God are bound up with the fact that God has disclosed himself to be a person.

Part of our problem is that virtually all that we understand by "personal" is shaped by our experience within time and space. We find it hard to imagine how God can be both transcendent and personal, even though we clearly see that the Bible presents him in just such categories.

So whatever mystery is locked up in our initial pair of statements, it is no more and no less than the mystery of God himself. Christians are prepared to accept certain mysteries. We confess that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God yet there is but one God. Christian thinkers across the ages have taken pains to show how there is no necessary contradiction in such an understanding of the trinitarian character of God, even if there are huge swaths of mystery involved. So also here: God is sovereign and transcendent, and he is personal.

Perhaps it is the way God apparently stands outside time and space that enables him to handle secondary causes the way he does. I do not know. What does time look like to a transcendent God? I do not know. I only know that the Bible speaks of his predestinating power and his foreordination of events, even though these are categories of time. I suppose that if he is to communicate effectively with us, he must graciously stoop to use categories that we can understand. But despite all the mysteries bound up with the nature of God, I perceive, on the basis of Scripture, that he is simultaneously personal and transcendent. He is utterly sovereign over his created order, yet he is nothing less than personal as he deals with me. Sometimes it is more important to worship such a God than to understand him.

Conclusion

. . . it is essential to draw one crucial lesson out of the previous discussion. Let us grant that the Bible insists that God is utterly sovereign, and human beings are morally responsible creatures; let us grant that God himself is both transcendent and personal. Let us frankly admit that this involves a significant degree of mystery. The question we must then ask ourselves is this: How can we ensure that these complementary pairs of truths operate the right way in our lives? If there is so much mystery about

them, will we not always be in danger of using these truths in a way that denies the mystery or contradicts something else we should know?

The answer is simple, but has profound effects. We must do our best to ensure that these complementary truths function in our lives in the same ways they function in the lives of believers described in Scripture.

For example, how does election function in Scripture? How should election function in our lives? It never functions in Scripture to foster fatalism; it never functions to douse evangelistic zeal. Repeatedly it functions to emphasize the wonder of grace (John 6:68-70; Rom. 9). It also functions, among other things, to ensure the certainty of spiritual fruitfulness among God's people (John 15:16) and to encourage perseverance in evangelism (Acts 18:9-10).

How do the constant exhortations to believe and obey function in Scripture? They never function to picture God as fundamentally at the end of his own resources and utterly dependent on us; they never reduce God to the absolutely contingent. Rather, they function to increase our responsibility, to emphasize the urgency of the steps we must take, to show us what the only proper response is to this kind of God.

How does the repeated truth of God's sovereign providence function in Scripture? It never serves to authorize uncaring fatalism; it never allows me to be morally indifferent on the ground that I can't really help it anyway. Rather, the biblical emphasis on God's sovereignty functions in quite different ways. For example, it gives me ground for believing that everything is in God's gracious control, so that all things will work out for good in the lives of God's people (Rom. 8:28).

We must deploy exactly the same approach when we come to prayer.

How does God's sovereignty function in passages of Scripture where prayer is introduced? Certainly it never functions as a disincentive to pray! It can forbid certain kinds of preposterous praying: for instance, Jesus forbids his followers from babbling on like pagans who think they will be heard because of their many words. "Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Matt. 6:8). On the other hand, this prohibition cannot be taken as a blanket condemnation of all perseverance in prayer since the same Jesus elsewhere urges that such perseverance is important (Luke 11, 18).

God's sovereignty can also function as an incentive to pray in line with God's will. Thus Jesus prays, "Father, the time [lit., hour] has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you" (John 17:1). This is important. The hour in John's Gospel is the time appointed by the Father at which Jesus will in fact be glorified by means of the cross, and thus returned to the glory that he enjoyed with the Father before the world began (John 12:23-24; 17:5). By saying that the hour has come, Jesus is acknowledging that his Father's appointed time has arrived. This does not prompt Jesus to say only "Your will be done." Still less does it breed silence: the hour has arrived and there is not much anyone can do about it, since

everything has been ordained by my heavenly Father. Rather, Jesus' logic runs like this: My Father's appointed hour for the "glorification" of his Son has arrived; so then, Father, glorify your Son.

This sort of logic is not in any way unusual. Those who pray in the Scriptures regularly pray in line with what God has already disclosed he is going to do. A wonderful example is found in Daniel 9. Here we are told that Daniel understands from the Scriptures, "according to the word of the LORD given to Jeremiah the prophet" (Dan. 9:2), that the period of seventy years of exile was drawing to an end. A fatalist would simply have wiped his or her brow and looked forward to the promised release as soon as the seventy years were up. Not Daniel! Daniel is perfectly aware that God is not an automaton, still less a magic genie that pops out of a bottle at our command. God is not only sovereign, he is personal, and because he is personal he is free. So Daniel addresses this personal God, confessing his own sins and the sins of his people: "So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes" (9:3). In other words, precisely because Daniel is aware of the promise of this personal, sovereign God, he feels it his obligation to pray in accord with what he has learned in the Scriptures regarding the will of that God. Most of the rest of the chapter records Daniel's prayer. Daniel reminds God that while Daniel and the children of Israel have sinned, God is the one "who keeps his covenant of love" (9:4), that God is "merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against him" (9:9). "For your sake, O Lord," he prays, "look with favor on your desolate sanctuary. . . . O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because your city and your people bear your Name" (9:17, 19). In other words, he appeals to God to preserve the integrity of his own name, the sanctity of his own covenant, his reputation for mercy and forgiveness. And the exile ends. . .

This is part of an excerpt from *A Call To Spiritual Reformation* by D.A. Carson. Baker Academic. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1992. Chapter 9. Pages 145-166 (a book worth reading in its entirety).

With all this in mind, we return to Ezekiel 14:9.

14:9 And if the prophet is deceived and speaks a word, I, the LORD, have deceived that prophet, and I will stretch out my hand against him and will destroy him from the midst of my people Israel.

14:10 And they shall bear their punishment- the punishment of the prophet and the punishment of the inquirer shall be alike-

14:11 that the house of Israel may no more go astray from me, nor defile themselves anymore with all their transgressions, but that they may be my people and I may be their God, declares the Lord GOD."(ESV)

In verse 9 Ezekiel states that the deceptions of the false prophets have come about because God has deceived them.

In reading this verse, it is important to see what is and what is not being said.

1) First, this is not a case of God telling the truth to some and deceiving others who want to know God's will. Rather, God is speaking to the people who want false gods, love lies, and refuse the truth. This is a case where God gives them what they want. If they love deception, God gives it to them. In other words, God's "deception" of the prophets is part of His judicial sentence.

There are some key passages that help us understand the "deception" of God.

1 Kings 22 is a classic case study of divine deception. Jehoshaphat, the king of Judah, went to Ahab, the king of Israel (1 Ki. 22:2), and formed an alliance to fight at Ramoth-gilead. But before they went to battle they decided that they should inquire from God to see if they would win. So the king of Israel gathered about 400 prophets and asked if they should go to battle against Ramoth-gilead, or refrain from battle. The prophets said, "Go up, for the Lord will give it into the hand of the king." But Jehoshaphat asked if there was not another prophet of the LORD of whom they could ask. The king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the LORD, Micaiah the son of Imlah, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil" (1 Kings 22:6-8). Nevertheless, they sent for Micaiah and inquired of him. As predicted, Micaiah's prophecy was not in favor of the king's desire to go to battle. 1 Kings 22:19-23 records Micaiah's response.

19 Micaiah said, "Therefore, hear the word of the LORD. I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by Him on His right and on His left. 20 and the LORD said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another.

21 Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, 'I will entice him.'

22 And the LORD said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.'

23 Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you."

Then Zedekiah, the son of Chenaanah (a false prophet – not the Zedekiah in Ezekiel), struck Micaiah on the cheek and said, "How did the Spirit of the LORD go from me to speak to you?" Then the king of Israel commanded that they seize Micaiah, put him in prison and feed him meager rations of bread and water until he returned from battle. Micaiah said, "If you return in peace, the LORD has not spoken by me" (1 Ki. 22:24-28). So they went to battle, the armies of Israel were defeated, the king was killed, and the Word of God spoken through Micaiah came to pass.

God's sending of a member from the host of heaven to be a deceiving spirit may surprise some, but other factors are relevant. First, it is difficult to call God a liar or deceiver when He announced before Ahab went to battle that a deceiving spirit had been placed in the mouths of all his prophets and that certain defeat awaited Ahab. Second, God sent a spirit to counsel Ahab to take the wrong course of action Ahab had already decided to take. God did not lure Ahab into sin, nor did He entice him to change his intentions. Simply put, God did not lead Ahab into sin.

Ahab had already determined what he intended to do; he was simply looking for religious permission to pursue his own course of action, and even that permission came only because of the request of Jehoshaphat. Nothing—including God’s specific revelation whereby He had proclaimed disaster against Ahab (2 Kings 22:23, 28)—would deter him.

A sequential development occurs in the broader context of 1 Kings 22, especially in reference to divine truth. In addition to the revelatory truth of the OT up to that time, God also set forth His truth by means of Elijah (1 Kings 17), and His other true prophets (19:10, 14), including Micaiah (22:13-28). Ahab rejected God’s truth and ultimately became responsible for the deaths of the majority of God’s prophets (19:10, 14). Ahab replaced God’s revealed truth with “another truth” by erecting an altar to and worshiping Baal (16:31-32), making the Asherah (18:19), as well as giving place to the hundreds of false prophets associated with these false gods. The four hundred false prophets also replaced God’s truth when they traced their message to the true God of Israel (22:11-12). Ahab did not believe God’s revealed truth but instead readily accepted multiple sources of falsehood. Ironically, God then used “other truth” Ahab had chosen as a means of judgment against him.

(Gregory H. Harris; Does God Deceive? The “Deluding Influence” Of Second Thessalonians 2:11; TMSJ 16/1 (Spring 2005) 73-93)

The common denominator between the story in 1 Kings and Ezekiel is that “Yahweh answers insincerity with insincerity. Unrepentant kings and unrepentant people who seek confirmation of their perverse ways, and who clamor for reassurances of well-being do not deserve a straight answer. A false message of peace in critical circumstances not only challenges the hearers to test the prophetic spirit, but also sets up everyone, prophet and layperson alike, who proclaim to the people exactly what they want to hear, Yahweh ensures the people’s judgment” (Block, 435).

2 Thessalonians 2:8-11 provides a NT example of this. It says:

8 Then that lawless one will be revealed whom the Lord will slay with the breath of His mouth and bring to an end by the appearance of His coming;

9 that is, the one whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power and signs and false wonders,

10 and with all the deception of wickedness for those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved.

11 For this reason God will send upon them a deluding influence so that they will believe what is false,

12 in order that they all may be judged who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness.

The people being spoken of are those who refuse to believe the truth (verse 10). Verse 11 says “for this reason,” that is, because they refused to believe the truth, God sends a deluding spirit upon them so

they will believe the lie. Why does he do this? Verse 12, "*in order that they all may be judged* who did not believe the truth, but took pleasure in wickedness." God is not dealing with neutral people who He deceives, He is dealing with people who love lies, love their own man-made religions, can't bear the gospel, can't bear the God of the Bible, and won't believe the truth. At some point, God comes down in judicial sentence and says, "You love the lie, so continue to believe the lie." This is very similar to the scenario presented in Romans 1:18 ff. (see notes on that passage).

In other words, they get what they want. The fact that God is still merciful in all of this is bound up with this simple point: God in his mercy through Ezekiel tells them what He is doing.

2) Secondly, we cannot read into this that God stands behind good and evil in exactly the same way (as Carson has said). God is sovereign; that is, God's sovereignty is so extensive, that at one level it embraces everything, both good and evil (nothing is outside of his sovereignty). However, this does not mean that His relationship to good and evil is the same; good is always accredited to God (Ja. 1:13-17) and evil is accredited to secondary causes.

A perfect example of this is found in Acts 4:27-28: "For truly in this city there were gathered together against Your holy servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur."

In these verses there was a wicked conspiracy to kill Jesus, the holy servant of God. But God is in control of the wickedness. The wicked men could only do what God had predestined to occur. In this passage, wickedness is attributed to men, not God. At the same time, even the wickedness of men does not fall out of God's sovereign control. As Piper says, "When nations came to do their absolute worst, namely the murder of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, they had not slipped out of God's control, but were doing his sweetest bidding at their worst moment."

We must believe that God is sovereign over evil for the Bible to make sense. If you believe that Jesus' death was simply the result of political conspiracy, then there is no sense in which we can say that God sent Him to die for our sins. The whole of the Bible is bound up with the fact that God has a sacrificial system and a priestly system with the lambs, and bulls, that all point to the need of a Lamb of God. But all this was not God's "Plan 'B'" when sin entered into the world. The book of Revelation pictures Jesus as the Lamb of God who was slain *before the foundation of the earth* (Rev. 13:8); in God's mind it was already done.

If God intended for Christ to be crucified, then Herod and Pontius Pilate were just doing what God had planned. On the other hand, if you only believe God's sovereignty, but do not believe that those who crucified Jesus were wicked when they acted, then they had no personal guilt or sin that needed to be paid for. We must believe that humans are responsible under the matchless, and sometimes mysterious, sovereignty of God.

God uses even evil to bring Him glory. He used the evil of Pontius Pilate to bring about His plan of redemption. So even though these prophets are speaking lies, God is sovereign, and even their lies are part of His judicial pronouncement upon them.

God uses evil to accomplish different purposes; sometimes evil is a stimulus for spiritual growth, trust, and dependency upon God (Ro. 8:28). Sometimes evil is used as a tool of judgment (the present passage). But behind evil acts are a primary cause, secondary causes, and instrumental causes.

The Book of Job is a perfect example of this. In chapter 1, Satan appears before God after he had been roaming about the earth. God challenges Satan to consider Job whom He declares to be upright, a man who fears God and is blameless. God proudly calls him His servant.

Satan boldly challenges God and states that the only reason that Job serves God is because God has blessed his life. He mocks God's wisdom: "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face" (Job 1:9-11). Satan is confident that Job is not righteous as God believes, and if he were allowed to take away Job's blessings he would prove it. God responds by giving Satan permission to do as he pleases, apart from taking Job's life.

It is important to see that the entire conversation took place openly among the heavenly assembly. God's confidence in Job was known to all. Satan's challenge was plain. If Job responded to Satan's test successfully, it would demonstrate both to Satan and the angels that God was correct in His assessment of His servant.

Satan brings immediate disaster on all that surrounds Job.

Job 1:13-19 reads,

13 Now on the day when his sons and his daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house,

14 a messenger came to Job and said, "The oxen were plowing and the donkeys feeding beside them,

15 and the Sabeans attacked and took them. They also slew the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

16 While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "The fire of God fell from heaven and burned up the sheep and the servants and consumed them, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

17 While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "The Chaldeans formed three bands and made a raid on the camels and took them and slew the servants with the edge of the sword, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

18 While he was still speaking, another also came and said, "Your sons and your daughters were eating and drinking wine in their oldest brother's house,

19 and behold, a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people and they died, and I alone have escaped to tell you."

Prior to verse 13, Job's world was at peace and full of God's blessing. Then in an instant he lost all he had, his wealth (servants, oxen, donkeys, camels) and even his children.

Within these events we see a primary cause, secondary causes, and instrumental causes.

The question we are asking is who is responsible for the evil that befell Job? For example, when Job lost his camels, who was responsible? Satan did not go down and steal Job's livestock; the Chaldeans did. There is no question that the Chaldeans were responsible; they weren't innocent pawns in this cosmic drama. Satan didn't pick upright and blameless people to steal Job's camels. The Chaldeans already had it in their hearts. They were cattle rustlers from the beginning. They were thieves and murders already. They couldn't wait until the hedge was removed. When Satan made it known that there was no longer any hedge, they acquiesced out of the wickedness of their own hearts. Thus, even though they were instruments of Satan, God holds them completely accountable for their sins.

Of course, Satan is also responsible. He is the secondary cause, acting within the limits of his creaturehood. He is the one who desired to do harm to Job, tempted the Chaldeans to sin, and called the knowledge of God into question.

At the same time, God is responsible; He is the primary cause. "Primary cause" doesn't mean God put evil thoughts into Satan's head; it means that God is self-sufficient, without dependence upon any cause or causes, whose activity springs from its own primacy. Satan cannot act, or would not even exist, apart from God. Therefore, God is ultimately responsible for everything that happens.

So we have primary causes, secondary causes, and instrumental causes. But what is crucial to see is that the motives of each one involved were completely different.

The Chaldeans were acting out of their evil, sinful desires. Satan was blasphemous in his disrespect for God, was hostile toward Job, and tempted the Chaldeans to sin against God. On the other hand, God allowed Satan to test Job to shut the mouth of Satan, and to vindicate His own holiness and Job's righteousness under the accusations of the Accuser. God's purposes were completely holy.

At each level there was responsibility. Satan and the Chaldeans are accountable for their own sins. Job is accountable for his response to the trials. God orchestrated everything so that what happened accomplished the very thing that God wanted to accomplish. Yet God's holiness is not soiled; evil is not attributed to God. Neither is God's sovereignty compromised; nothing, not even evil, falls outside of God's absolute control.

In conclusion, Harris makes the following observations from God's deception in Ezekiel 14:9.

He says:

God not only set forth His truth of pending judgment, He also identified and denounced the false prophets of Israel whom the people foolishly respected and revered. God revealed that such false prophets prophesied from their own inspiration, even though they presented their message as originating with Him (13:2). God renounced them, declaring, “Woe to the foolish prophets who are following their own spirit and have seen nothing” (13:3). Further, “They see falsehood and lying divination who are saying, ‘The LORD declares,’ when the LORD has not sent them; yet they hope for the fulfillment of their word” (13:6). God declared His open and active opposition against such lying prophets who misled His people (13:8-10a), as He promised certain wrath and destruction against them (13:10b -16). Included in this denunciation were the women who practiced magic and falsely prophesied, thus profaning God’s name to the people (13:17-19). Consequently, God identified and renounced two tragic effects of false prophets: they “disheartened the righteous with falsehood when I did not cause him grief, but have strengthened the hand of the wicked not to turn from his wicked way and preserve life” (13:22). Contained within this verse is an indication of God’s desire for the wicked to repent, but He realized false prophets hindered the rebellious from turning to Him. In keeping with His earlier promise of immediate action, God pronounced judgment on such false prophets (13:23a). The culminating result would be, “Thus you will know that I am the LORD” (13:23b). As in 1 King s 22, God openly presented His truth as well as exposed the source of falsehood. Anyone who then chose to ignore God’s Word and instead replaced it with “another truth,” such as the teachings of the false prophets, stood in active, deliberate opposition to God and would receive the just consequences of rebellious actions. Whereas the false prophets may have previously deceived the nation by not being detected (although this is not certain), such an argument could no longer be made after Ezekiel 13. God exposed both the lie and the liars by His truth.

God’s enticing or deceiving by means of false prophets in Ezekiel 14:9 occurs in this context. Having concluded his previous prophecy, Ezekiel was approached by some of the elders of Israel (14:1). God identified the intentions of their heart by saying, “Son of man, these men have set up their idols in their hearts, and have put right before their faces the stumbling block of their iniquity. Should I be consulted by them at all?” (14:3). Having previously denounced the false prophets and having warned the nation that He opposed them—for one who would nonetheless approach the LORD to inquire by a prophet—God promised, “I the LORD will be brought to give him an answer in the matter in view of the multitude of his idols” (14:4b). God strongly admonished the participants to repent and turn away from their idols (14:6), repeating His warning that He Himself would answer when one seeks inquiry by a false prophet (14:7). As with His pronouncement against Ahab long before, God forewarned what the outcome would be: He will set His face against that man and destroy him (14:8a). Just as with His warning in 13:23, God affirmed when such judgment transpired, “So you will know that I am the LORD” (14:8b).

In spite of such specific warnings about the consequences of seeking the counsel of false prophets, some would nonetheless totally disregard God’s word. To these God declared, “But if the prophet is prevailed upon [“enticed; deceived”] to speak a word, it is I, the LORD, who have prevailed upon that prophet, and I will stretch out My hand against him and destroy him from

among My people Israel” (14:9). Stated in clear and distinct terms, God promised wrathful judgment on both parties: “And they will bear the punishment of their iniquity; as the iniquity of the inquirer is, so the iniquity of the prophet will be” (14:10). Such a pronouncement against both inquirer and false prophet merely expands the pronouncement of God previously made in singling out Ahab for destruction; the core issues are identical. When a false prophet is enticed into compromising with idolaters, the LORD will deceive him as a means of judgment. Instead of light, those who aligned themselves with evil would receive darkness; instead of life they would choose death.

In a pattern analogous to 1 Kings 22, God addressed those who would yet choose to rebel against Him and seek the word of false prophets. As with the prophetic announcement of Ahab’s doom, God announced beforehand what would result. No deception occurred in either the identity of those who prophesied falsely or in any question of the outcome for those who, in spite of the strong warnings, would still seek such false prophets. In addition to this, God did not deceive by hiding truth. Neither could it be argued that God led anyone into sin. As was true for Ahab, those of Ezekiel’s day who refused God’s warning and chose instead to consort with false prophets continued in the inclination of their own sinful heart already established. Such individuals also would seek the false prophet even after specifically forewarned by God not to do so. Similar to Ahab, what they used to replace God’s truth would eventually become the instrument of judgment God would use against them. If a false prophet in Ezekiel’s day received a word to give an idolater, it would be a deceptive word from God that would destroy both false prophet and idolater. The people were forewarned by God. Their choice lay in whom they would believe, the true or the false, a choice that would result in good or bad consequences.

(Gregory H. Harris; Does God Deceive? The “Deluding Influence” Of Second Thessalonians 2:11; TMSJ 16/1 (Spring 2005) 73-93)