

THE KINDLING OF TOPHET

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In Isaiah 30:33, God said, *“For Tophet is ordained of old; yea, for the king it is prepared; he has made it deep and large: the pile thereof is fire and much wood; the breath of the Lord, like a stream of brimstone, doth kindle it.”* God was kindling Tophet, located in the valley of Hinnom (2 Kgs 23:10; Jer 7:31-32; 19:6), for a particular king. The two verses preceding this one informs us of which king God would judge on the outskirts of Jerusalem: *“For through the voice of the Lord shall the Assyrian be beaten down, which smote with a rod. And in every place where the grounded staff shall pass, which the Lord shall lay upon him, it shall be with tabrets and harps: and in battles of shaking will he fight with it”* (Isa 30:31-32). There is much written in the Book of Isaiah about God’s judgment of Sennacherib, King of Assyria. There is another important point to consider about Tophet in the valley of Hinnom, and the symbol that God has made of that place.

The immediate fulfillment upon Sennacherib

Sennacherib, King of Assyria, was the most powerful man in the world during his time. He may have also been the proudest. He came up against Judah and Jerusalem with the intent of conquering that city and land as he had so many others (Isa 10:7-14). In response to his boasting, God said, *“Shall the axe boast itself against him that heweth therewith? or shall the saw magnify itself against him that shaketh it? as if the rod should shake itself against them that lift it up, or as if the staff should lift up itself, as if it were no wood. Therefore shall the Lord, the Lord of hosts, send among his fat ones leanness; and under his glory he shall kindle a burning like the burning of a fire”* (Isa 10:15-16). The Lord once again mentions the fire that He was kindling for Sennacherib. This mighty king was only mighty insofar as God had given him his power. He was merely a tool in the Lord’s hand, and now God intended to use this man as a rod of His anger against the wickedness of His people in Judah and Jerusalem (Isa 10:5-6). But His punishment would not include an utter destruction of Jerusalem at this time (that would come more than a century later via Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians). God said He would bring Sennacherib and the Assyrians like a flooded river throughout Judah, and the waters would *“reach even to the neck”* (Isa 8:7-8). But that is as far as he would go. Indeed, Isaiah 36:1-2 records the fulfillment of this prophecy: *“Now it came to pass in the fourteenth year of king Hezekiah, that Sennacherib king of Assyria came up against all the defenced cities of Judah, and took them. And the king of Assyria sent Rabshakeh from Lachish to Jerusalem unto king Hezekiah with a great army.”* The Assyrians had already conquered the ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and now they

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(continued)

possessed all of Judah, and had Jerusalem surrounded. But then the fire that God kindled did its work. God did “dispose” of the king of Assyria when he came against Jerusalem, turning him away with a great slaughter, as God’s angel killed 185,000 of his soldiers in one night. The king himself fell by the sword to his own sons (Isa 37:28-38; see also 2 Kgs 19:27-37; 2 Chr 32:21).

The symbol of Tophet and the valley of Hinnom

The valley of Hinnom is now a symbol for hell. The Greek word for hell is “gehenna,” a transliteration of the Hebrew word for the valley of Hinnom. King Solomon first built there a high place for “Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon” (1 Kings 11:7). The wickedness committed there grew progressively worse until it eventually became a place where children were burnt to death as sacrifices to Molech and Baal. King Ahaz “burnt incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burnt his children in the fire, after the abominations of the heathen whom the Lord had cast out before the children of Israel” (2 Chr 28:3). King Manasseh “caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom,” and “wrought much evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke him to anger” (2 Chr 33:6). God says that it had not entered His mind that His people would commit such horrible deeds as they did there (Jer 7:31; 32:35; Ezek 16:20-21). God refused to pardon the shedding of this innocent blood (2 Kings 21:10-16; 23:26-27; 24:3-4; Jer 2:34; 15:4; 19:2-7). He also foretold His coming judgment upon this place: *“And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart. Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that it shall no more be called Tophet, nor the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter: for they shall bury in Tophet, till there be no place”* (Jer 7:31-32). King Manasseh’s grandson, Josiah, was righteous and abhorred the wickedness committed in Tophet and valley of Hinnom. When he became king, Josiah *“defiled Topheth, which is in the valley of the children of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech”* (2 Kings 23:10). As part of His vengeance, God caused the carcasses of the people to be thrown there to be eaten by the birds and wild animals (Jer 19:7). Thereafter, the valley of Hinnom was used as a place to dump garbage, sewage and dead bodies. Fires burned there continually. The valley of Hinnom, or “gehenna,” thus became a symbol for hell, where the wicked will suffer the second death, where they will be cast to be burned eternally. When that “Tophet” is kindled, we most certainly do not want to be anywhere near it!