

# HUE AND CRY: Patterns of Power and Pride

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Observing current events in Israel and the Middle East, as stimulated by me examining recent Torah and Haftarah readings, has initiated a review of the Biblical records concerning influential world leaders whose decisions have impacted Israel down through the ages. Two significant examples include: the Egyptian Pharaoh of the Exodus, and the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar. From positions of seemingly unlimited “world power” in their respective eras, both the Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar were used as instruments of God’s deliverance and restorative actions toward Israel. Both of these unchallenged dictatorial leaders succumbed to the human tendency to stiffen their necks, or exude self-confident pride, as their perceived power overruled humble sensibility. Since history has a tendency to be repetitive, the noticeable pattern of power resulting in pride begged to be further explored.

Upon thought provoking reflection, a few adages and Scriptures came to my mind when recalling how historically, unimpeded political and military power will frequently manifest itself in prideful ways by the rulers of nations. First, the often-quoted axiom accredited to late Nineteenth and early Twentieth century British historian Lord Acton, describing the corrupting tendencies of power, surfaced:

*“Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”*

Clearly Lord Acton, a student of history and a staunch Roman Catholic, understood how different types of power—whether political, economic, military, or religious in the context of this statement—has a unique tendency to corrupt those who wield it. When the power holder has absolute power, the corruptive nature of supremacy, not fearing retribution, is unavoidable. Without necessarily stating it, Acton recognized that inherent in fallen human nature is the propensity for abuse when one has some aspect of power over others.

In the few centuries preceding and including his lifetime (1834-1902), monarchial rule was being confronted, and European governments were being altered by giving the population more representation in parliamentary and congressional legislatures. Additionally, the conscience of society, represented by different ecclesiastical authorities, was being challenged specifically when it came to the Papal dictum regarding his infallibility (1870). Reviewing the context of Acton’s statement is often overlooked, but it is quite revealing when one considers the essential truths that are conveyed. In a letter dated to April 1887, Lord Acton wrote to Church of England ecclesiastic Mandell Creighton regarding the issue of Papal infallibility, and we witness that the fuller context of his statement is as follows:

“I cannot accept your canon that we are to judge Pope and King unlike other men with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption, it is the other way, against the holders of power, increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. **Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.** Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd the tendency or certainty of corruption by authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.”

Note that Acton states that both the Pope with religious authority, and the King with political authority, are fallible human beings. Given power, the assumption is that both will do wrong and more wrong as the power increases. Notably after the phrase that has the most notoriety, he asserts that “great men are almost always bad men” because of the tendency for prideful power to corrupt. His conclusion is that the office of Pope or King does not sanctify the holder of those positions. Acton obviously understood much about fallen human nature, and he was willing to famously confront the two most influential authorities in his era.

Lamentably, human nature has not changed. Even though the antiquated “divine rights” of kings have been relegated to the ash heap of history, and ecclesiastical authority has been mitigated if not eliminated by secular governments—the problems associated with power comingled with pride still prevail in political, financial, military, educational, and even religious leaders of the world. In light of current events, as new leaders assume positions of authority in the

modern era, **even elected or appointed leaders are not made holy and righteous by their positions or titles.** The fact that human nature generally reacts to power with pride bordering on superiority, is something to contemplate—and be warned of its consequences!

When it comes to political leaders, Biblical and world history are replete with examples of how power corrupts as pride wells up in the hearts of those endowed with authority. From the Biblical record, I believe the Pharaoh of the Exodus and King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon stand as examples. *Both had unlimited dictatorial powers.* In fact, both thought of themselves as deities worthy of worship by their subjects. The Pharaoh who did not know Joseph or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 1:8), was considered a god by the Egyptian people (something only to be intensified if the Pharaoh of the Exodus was Ramses II, as many believe).

This stiff-necked leader ultimately brought horrific judgment upon his own people, having denied the requests of Moses to let Israel leave Goshen in order to worship their God. The Biblical principle of **“Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling”** (Proverbs 16:18), is dramatically exemplified as the tenth and final judgment is exacted against the Egyptians because of the prideful Pharaoh. When reading God’s judgments upon the Egyptians as they lose their firstborn children and livestock, one finds not only a broken Pharaoh that has lost his firstborn son, but a man who actually asks Moses and Aaron for their blessings when they reach the destination to worship the Lord:

“Now it came about 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 cattle. Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians, and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no home where there was not someone dead. Then he called for Moses and Aaron at night and said, ‘Rise up, get out from among my people, both you and the sons of Israel; and go, worship the LORD, as you have said. Take both your flocks and your herds, as you have said, **and go, and bless me also**’” (Exodus 12:29-32).

The pattern of power generating a pride that breeds disaster, resulting in humility, is seen during the Jewish exile to Babylon, when Nebuchadnezzar requires adulation by his subjects. Those who do not worship his idol are to be cast into a fiery furnace and burned alive:

“Then the herald loudly proclaimed: ‘To you the command is given, O peoples, nations and *men of every* language, that at the moment you hear the sound of the horn, flute, lyre, trigon, psaltery, bagpipe and all kinds of music, you are to fall down and worship the golden image that Nebuchadnezzar the king has set up. **But whoever does not fall down and worship shall immediately be cast into the midst of a furnace of blazing fire**” (Daniel 3:4-6).

It is only a matter of time that Babylon’s king is humbled, as he is driven mad. Nebuchadnezzar will spend seven years eating grass like a beast, before finally declaring that Daniel’s God is the Almighty:

“All *this* happened to Nebuchadnezzar the king. Twelve months later he was walking on the *roof* of the royal palace of Babylon. The king reflected and said, ‘Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?’ While the word *was* in the king’s mouth, a voice came from heaven, *saying*, ‘**King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is declared: sovereignty has been removed from you, and you will be driven away from mankind, and your dwelling place *will be* with the beasts of the field. You will be given grass to eat like cattle, and seven periods of time will pass over you until you recognize that the Most High is ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it on whomever He wishes.**’ Immediately the word concerning Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled; and he was driven away from mankind and began eating grass like cattle, and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair had grown like eagles’ *feathers* and his nails like birds’ *claws*. But at the end of that period, I, Nebuchadnezzar, raised my eyes toward heaven and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever; for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom *endures* from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, but He does according to His will in the host of heaven and

*among* the inhabitants of earth; and no one can ward off His hand or say to Him, ‘What have You done?’ At that time my reason returned to me. And my majesty and splendor were restored to me for the glory of my kingdom, and my counselors and my nobles began seeking me out; so I was reestablished in my sovereignty, and surpassing greatness was added to me. **Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride**” (Daniel 4:28-37).

Obviously in both instances, Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar not only reveled in their absolute power, but their pride clearly came before they were humbled (or humiliated) by actions of the Almighty. Nevertheless, both men were used by God in critical times during Biblical history. Pharaoh’s opposition to the Israelites and their God and has been since the Exodus, the classic example of how God overrules human dictates in order to accomplish His will. The Exodus account was so dramatic and miraculous that its message (even for those who do not believe it took place) has been influential in a manifold number of societies down through the millennia. Likewise, the actions of Nebuchadnezzar have been chronicled to illustrate how the Lord works through prideful leaders, despite the corrupting nature of power. A proverb describes God’s sovereign actions succinctly, as the stiffening of Pharaoh’s heart or softening of Nebuchadnezzar’s heart, reveals that **“the king’s heart is channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes”** (Proverbs 21:1).

What is intriguing from the perspective of a Believer in the God of Israel, and His Messiah Yeshua, is that this pattern of power leading to pride with an inevitable fall, is so ingrained in not only Biblical history—but the pattern appears to repeat itself down to the modern era. Generally speaking over the millennia, various regional and global powers have tried to influence, if not dominate or control, the Middle East region and Land of Israel. After the Babylonian exile and the return that was funded by the Persian King Cyrus, the Persians eventually lost authority. Then through the centuries, the Greeks, then the Romans, then the Muslim hordes interrupted by Vatican-inspired Crusaders, until the four hundred year rule of the Ottoman Turks terminated at the end of World War I is seen. Finally, the British Mandate administered a period of transition as the seeds of Zionism were germinating and growing, until the State of Israel was founded in 1948.

Curiously, as one recalls the history of the entities that have controlled or subjugated the Land of Israel, each nation or empire that gained influence to the point of absolute power eventually witnessed a discernible destruction or debilitation of their holdings. Societal leadership on multiple levels, including politics and finance, succumbed to the corrupting tendencies of power and commensurate pride. The corruption generally migrated back to the seat of power whether it was Athens, Rome, Istanbul, or London, and the power leading to pride eventually led to a humbling that affected the rest of these empires. These once great powers are today relative shadows of what they once were in the global arena.

While reviewing these ancient and more recent predictable patterns, a nagging question came to mind over and over again. **At this point in history, is the world witnessing a repetition of this pattern to another global power (and leader) that is trying to influence the affairs of the Middle East, and dictate actions to Israel?** As an American Messianic Believer, connected at the heart to Israel and adopted into the family of God by belief in Messiah Yeshua—I am mindful of not only our common history, but also am privy to Biblical prophecies about the restoration of all Israel. These include statements about Seventieth Week of Israel or the Time of Jacob’s Trouble (Daniel 9; Jeremiah 30:7). I think there are some red warning lights visible on the horizon.

In recent years the United States of America, a relatively young but militarily powerful country in the Western Hemisphere, has had a profound protective influence on Israel since its rebirth in 1948. The United States, Israel’s most faithful ally, has stood beside and sent substantial financial and military aid for over sixty years. However, reviewing the emphasis of American foreign policy over those years will discover that it was not until the demise of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that American leaders began focusing intently on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even though the Camp David meetings of 1978 convened by President Carter brought a documented peace between Israel and Egypt in 1979, it was not until the Madrid

Middle East Peace conference of 1991, initiated by the President George H.W. Bush, that American engagement became intensified. Since then we have witnessed the 1993 Oslo Accords coordinated by President Clinton, followed by another Camp David Peace Summit of 2000.

Since the administration of President George W. Bush, the most significant action after the 9/11 attacks was the June 2002 endorsement of a two-state solution. What is interesting to note is that although the Afghanistan war to topple the Taliban and Al Qaida began in October 2001, the Iraq War only began in March 2003 after the intention to divide the Promised Land into two distinct and separate political entities was declared. Since that time, the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq continue to require human and financial sacrifice, with a final resolution of both somewhat elusive.

The anti-war sentiment, combined with the economic recession, led to a defeat of the Republicans and a nominally conservative government. The new administration under President Obama, coupled with resounding majorities in the Senate and the House of Representatives, has given the new regime significant power to assert their agenda. With the Supreme Court being largely neutral, we are witnessing the executive branch in collusion with the legislative branch—cheered on by a “media branch”—initiating policies that many think have the possibility to incur damage on the well being of the United States of America.

The locus of the problems we may see is what I alluded to above. The power inherent in the American government, while not necessarily absolute, is certainly skewed heavily in one direction. This power has the ability to corrupt our leaders, who Acton assertively declared are “bad men.” Whether the people in leadership are necessarily bad men and women is subject to debate, but is certainly something to assiduously consider in your thoughts and prayers.

History is a great teacher. One either learns from history or one is destined to repeat it. Over the millennia, one can make a good case that those nations and leaders that have been involved in the affairs of Israel, had various consequences for their behavior—whether good or bad. Many try to make a connection between the fate of nations and Israel by quoting Genesis 12:2-3, where the blessing or cursing of Abraham is extended to his offspring. It is asserted that those who bless Israel will thus be blessed, and those who curse Israel will thus be cursed.

In light of the obvious tendency for power to generate pride, I would submit that there is another Scripture which is perhaps a better warning for those in positions of power, trending toward greater and greater doses leading toward corruption. People need to guard themselves against being proud, and humble themselves before the mighty hand of the Creator who is ultimately in sovereign control of the affairs of man:

“You younger men, likewise, be subject to *your* elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:5-7; cf. Proverbs 3:34).

Peter’s statement is especially addressed to younger people. This is one of the primary reasons that someone young in the faith is often not given a significant position of power or authority. **How much more so does this apply when a young and inexperienced person is given significant power in the political arena?** The possibility for corruption is disconcerting.

Will the pattern of power leading to pride resulting to destruction repeat itself with the current administration in Washington, D.C.? *This may be a possibility.* But rather than getting concerned, worried, anxious, upset, angry, or simply livid—our prayers should be directed toward God’s mercy upon our nation and wisdom for our leaders! The admonition to cast any anxiety upon Him applies also, because rest assured, He does care for His own! We have the power to offer up our prayers. We simply need to humble ourselves and turn to the One that has the heart of rulers like channels of water in His hand.

May He turn the hearts of our leaders to decisions that bring blessings rather than curses!

Mark Huey (B.A., Vanderbilt University in History and Graduate Studies at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University) is the Director of Outreach Israel Ministries ([www.outreachisrael.net](http://www.outreachisrael.net)). He is the author of several books, including: *TorahScope, Volumes I & II*, and *Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot*. He is also co-author of *Hebraic Roots: An Introductory Study*.

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