"Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is Jonathan Edwards’ most famous sermon. Indeed, it is the most famous sermon of the eighteenth century and among the most famous sermons ever preached. It begins by citing two stitches from Deuteronomy.

DEUT. XXXII: 35.

*Their foot shall slide in due Time.*

In this verse is threatened the vengeance of God on the wicked unbelieving Israelites, that were God's visible people, and lived under means of grace; and that, notwithstanding all God's wonderful works that he had wrought towards that people, yet remained, as is expressed, ver. 28, *void of Counsel,* having no understanding in them; and that, under all the cultivations of heaven, brought forth bitter and poisonous fruit…

A powerful opening that describes the threatened vengeance of God on the wicked unbelieving Israelites, a people “void of Counsel,” having no understanding in them, a wicked people who, despite all the cultivations of heaven, brought forth bitter and poisonous fruit. A deeply troubling image, but the nation that is “void of Counsel” whose “foot shall fall” is not Israel. The stitches in question refer to the enemies of Israel, those wicked nations that attacked Israel, it is their foot that will fall in due time when the “Lord champions His people.” (35:36).

In fact, the 16th century Italian rabbi, the Sforno read these same stitches as a warning to Christians who persecuted Israel. This interpretation swiftly drew the heavy hand of Christian censors. The antisemitic nature of the sermon should not be overlooked. Frederick Jaher, comments in his masterful, *A Scapegoat in the New Wilderness: The Origins and Rise of Anti-Semitism in America* (1994) that

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1 Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno was an Italian rabbi, Biblical commentator, philosopher and physician. He was born at Cesena about 1475 and died at Bologna in 1550. His commentary on the Torah is part of the traditional compilation called the Mikraot Gedolot - which simply means, *The Major Writings* or the major commentaries. The material cited here is from *Sforno: Commentary on the Torah,* translation and explanatory notes by Rabbi Raphael Pelcovit (Brooklyn: Mesorah 1987) p. 1005. Pelcovit points out that the original commentary was heavily censored “in most cases by a convert to Christianity.” Careful examination of the censored verses “readily reveal what aroused the censors.” p. 1005.
“Any comprehensive analysis of anti-Semitism in America… must consider the interplay of religious, social, and psychological factors. Of these factors, I believe that religious prejudice—specifically, Christian hostility toward Jews—is paramount. Other minorities have been heretical, commercially successful, intellectually accomplished, and prevalently liberal in politics, yet have not repeatedly been the focus of xenophobic and religious paranoia. None of the others, however, gave birth to Christianity, killed its God, and was assigned by Christian doctrine a pivotal role in the cosmic struggle between the saved and the damned. Uniquely cursed as unrepentant deicides, Jews became the most consistently demonized outcasts in Christendom. … the essential anti-Semitic claim [is] that all Jews are treacherous and murderous conspirators.”

Jaher’s insight is especially important here because the antisemitism was completely missed by almost all readers. Nevertheless, the starkly antisemitic tone should not be overlooked. Pronouncements such as these imprinted antisemitism at the very core of Christianity, regardless of how Jews were treated in various times and places. The American colonies were a vast improvement over conditions just about anywhere else at the time, but the antisemitic notions were just as deeply rooted and in the 1920s they became a significant factor in the explosion of American antisemitism leading to the 1924 Immigration Restriction Act, aimed, at least in good measure, at keeping European Jews out of the United States.

Here are the two stitches in context:
32:28 ff
For a nation lost in counsel are they, there is no understanding among them.

Were they wise they would give mind to this, understanding their latter days:
O how could one chase a thousand,
or two put ten thousand to flight,
had not their Rock handed them over,
had the Lord not given them up?
For not like our Rock is their rock,
our enemies’ would be gods.
Yes, Sodom’s vine is their vine,

3 The translation presented here is from Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary (New York: W.W. Norton 2004) pp. 1044-46. Alter notes on this stitch: “As the following lines make clear, the reference is not to Israel but to its triumphant enemy. Had they real understanding, they would realize that such a spectacular defeat as they inflicted on Israel could only have been God’s doing.”
from the vineyards of Gomorrah
Their grapes are grapes of poison,
death-bitter clusters they have.
Venom of vipers their wine,
and pitiless poison of asps.
Look, it is concealed with Me,
sealed up in My stores.
Mine is vengeance, requital,
\textit{at the moment their foot will slip.}
For their day of disaster is close,
what is readied then swiftly comes.
\textit{Yes, the Lord champions His people,}
\textit{for His servants He shows a change of heart}
when he sees that power is gone,
no ruler or helper remains.
...

The song ends triumphally:
32:43 - Nations, O gladden His people,
for His servants’ blood will He avenge,
and vengeance turn back on His foes,
and purge His soil, His people.

What we are reading, of course is the Song of Moses, one of the great poetic songs of the Torah. It is a song of warning to Israel to be faithful to God, but it is ultimately a song of triumph and a warning to Israel’s enemies for God will avenge the blood of His servants. In the portion that Edwards used for his sermon, God is describing the seed of Sodom, the enemies of Israel who are void of counsel. It is their foot that will slip when God takes vengeance on them, for if God allowed the enemies of Israel to be triumphant over Israel, they would believe that they had triumphed over Israel’s God because they are “devoid of counsel.” If they were wise they would realize that their triumph over Israel was God’s doing. After all, “how can one chase a thousand, or two put ten thousand to flight, had not their Rock handed them over, had the Lord not given them up?”

How is it that Edwards came to so misread the text and why is it that no one in 270 years seems to have noticed this glaring misreading? Edwards has taken God’s words of rebuke of the enemies of Israel for God’s rebuke of Israel. Edwards has taken God’s merciless condemnation of the nations for the vindication of Israel and turned it into a merciless condemnation of Israel? Even if Edwards has a reason for reading the text in this peculiar manner, shouldn’t some learned man of the cloth or some sectarian critic of the Great Awakening, have noticed that the text had been forced into an unnatural position and made to stand in that position as the pillars of this great pronouncement of God’s wrath against sinners, restrained by nothing more than God’s will. But that is not what is happening in the poem where the stitches in question refer to God’s wrath upon the nations who dare to believe that their victory over Israel was of their own making, or worse still, a sign of the victory of their gods over the God of Israel. Israel is saved, not
because they repent, but by the grace of God who fears “a nation void of counsel” will misconstrue their victory as a victory over God. The Israelites are not even part of the calculation in these verses, had the nations been wise enough to recognize God’s omnipresence, the Israelites would have been erased from the memory of man. After all, God cries out, “Let Me wipe them out, let Me make their name cease among men.”

I am not an Edwards scholar. I’m a historian of science whose work focuses on twentieth century eugenics. In 2011, I was hired to participate in a teacher education program in rural Michigan and I was asked to do a lesson based on a primary source from the middle of the eighteenth century. “Sinners” came to mind, not because I knew much about it, I certainly had never read it, but I was sure it would be easy to find a facsimile online along with lots of secondary materials. When I sat down to read it through for the first time and followed the stitches back to their source, it was obvious at once that Edwards was misreading the text. I didn’t know what to make of it. I still don’t.

When I first discovered the misreading, I wrote to Robert E. Brown, author of Jonathan Edwards and the Bible (2002) and I put to him the question that was on my mind.

It just seems strange to me that Edwards would so misunderstand the text and I was wondering if anyone in all the centuries since its publication has pointed out that the sermon rests on a misreading of the biblical text.

Brown responded: “Thanks for your interesting observation. I doubt that any one has called attention to that.”

Brown speculated:
I suspect that Edwards would not have been too concerned about this, perhaps for these reasons. He would have been inclined to read the Bible in a somewhat "flat" manner, rather than in a contextualized way. I suspect his interest in that passage would have simply been this: that God deals with sin by punishing it, whether those are the sins of his people or the sins of the nations -- and so it would have application for him and his congregation. A second, less likely, reason might have been this -- in v. 21 God promises to provoke the Israelites through a people who are "not a people," a "foolish nation." Perhaps Edwards saw in this a reference to Gentiles/Christians, and so the verse would have had application for him in that way also (I doubt this is what he had in mind, but it is possible).

I ran my question by rabbi, David Krishef who observed:
... I am wondering if Christian commentaries identify themselves as Israel, and the "enemy" as the Jews. Therefore, the Christian reading

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7 Brown to Mehler via email, 20 February 2011.
would be that verses which denote grace are talking about the Christians, and verses which denote punishment are talking about the Jews.

As I read Edwards sermon, God is angry with His people, His chosen people, “yea doubtless with many that are now in this Congregation.” In other words, there is a slide of identification between the Israelites and God’s new Israel which is what makes Rabbi Krishef’s comments interesting. Still, the stitches in question are not addressed either to the new Israel or the old Israel. They are addressed to Israel’s enemies whom God will destroy for attacking God’s chosen.

In November 2011, I wrote to Avihu Zakai at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Professor Zakai replied: “Amazing. I am sending your letter also to the Edwards' center in Yale. Great point.” And that brings me to the present. What, if anything are we to make of Edwards misreading and the subsequent 270 years during which no one seems to have noticed the glaring incongruity?

To deepen the mystery, in his biblical exegesis, the so-called, “Blank Pages” Edwards correctly interprets the stitches:

[Deuteronomy 32:35.] Here God begins on a new subject. Before he spoke of punishing his professing people by the cruelty of their enemies; now he speaks of vengeance on their enemies for that cruelty as upon their enemies, when he shall be about gloriously to deliver his people from their hands. The same thing is further insisted on, the Deuteronomy 32:40 and following verses; and then the consequent joy and prosperity of his church is spoken of Deuteronomy 32:41. This vengeance and this mercy shall be fulfilled, especially at the calling of the Jews and fall of Antichrist.

Thus, Edwards correctly interprets the stitches in his exegesis and then misinterprets them in his sermon. Indeed we find similar readings in John Gill (1697–1771) the English Baptist pastor and biblical scholar and Matthew Henry (1662–1714) the Presbyterian author of the six-volume, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* (1708–1710).

Henry notes:

In jealousy for his own honour, he will not make a full end of them, v. 26–28. 1. It cannot be denied but that they deserved to be utterly ruined, and that their remembrance should be made to cease from among men, so that the name of an Israelite should never be known but in history; for they were a nation void of counsel (v, 28), the most sottish inconsiderate people that ever were, that would not believe the glory of God, though they saw

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8 Krishef bam re Sinners 23F11
9 Edwards, Blank Pages, pp. 309-310.
it, nor understand his loving kindness, though they tasted it and lived upon it. Of those who could cast off such a God, such a law, such a covenant, for vain and dunghill-deities, it might truly be said, There is no understanding in them.

So, Edwards is not alone in both understanding the simple meaning of the text and applying the stitches to both Israel and its enemies. In fact, it is clear that he is applying the stitches to members of his own congregation as well, “Yea God is a great deal more angry with a great number that are now on Earth, yea doubtless with many that are now in this Congregation, that it may be are at Ease and Quiet, than he is with many that are now in the Flames of Hell.”

If we think of Israel and Sodom as “us” and “them”, the poem is primarily a warning to “us” not to abandon our protector. When we abandon God, death and suffering is brought upon us by “them.” When the verse says that “their foot shall fall” it may be speaking specifically about the fruit of Sodom, but it is primarily a warning to us.

So, it is not that Edwards use of the stitches cannot be justified, but why has the question never been addressed? I must say frankly that is embarrassing to have thought so long about this and have so little to show for it, but the question seems worth posing. How did Edwards come to misread the stitches and why is it that no one seems to have noticed the anomaly despite the fact that it is probably one of the most controversial and widely read sermons in American history and has surely been read by countless scores of biblical scholars, preachers and academics.

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