



## "God v. god (aka Pharaoh)"

*Exodus 7:1–13*

***Is the God of the Israelites, the true sovereign, even over Pharaoh?***

From Moses' encounter with God at the burning bush, we move on to Moses's and Aaron's confrontation of Pharaoh and the unfolding of the plagues. We must come to this portion of Exodus prepared to read and understand much differently than we might have.

This is not really a confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh. Rather, it is a contest between the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and Pharaoh, who thought of himself as a god and was worshipped as such. The God of the Israelites is determined to force Pharaoh to his figurative (or perhaps literal) knees and admit that it is Yahweh who is the Lord Almighty. In this way, God will be acknowledged before the world and the Israelites will be freed from slavery to Pharaoh.

### ***The hardening of Pharaoh's heart***

One of the most challenging parts of the plagues narrative is the account of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Why would God do that? A good question. In 2006, I wrote down a few thoughts on this:

Before Moses ever goes to Pharaoh to demand the liberation of the Israelites, God says, ". . . I will harden his [Pharaoh's] heart, so that he will not let the people go" (4:21). Time and again, as the confrontation unfolds, we are told that God hardens Pharaoh's heart and we move on to the next plague.

What sense does this make? What do we fear that it tells us about God? If the point is to get freedom for the Israelites, why wouldn't God soften Pharaoh's heart, as he has softened the hearts of so many? Is God toying with Pharaoh? Are we seeing here a god at work who is simply a different god than the God of the New Testament?

No. God is God, Old and New Testaments alike. The key to understanding the confrontation between God and Pharaoh is to realize that there is more at work here than the liberation of the Israelites. God explains it himself in 9:14-16, when he tells Pharaoh, ". . . I will send my plagues . . . so that you may know there is no one like me in all the earth . . . to show you my power, and to make my name resound through all the earth."

God's confrontation with Pharaoh is not only about freedom for God's people, but also God's sovereignty. The knowledge of God is the expressed aim of the plagues. God is not going to let Pharaoh leave the contest until Pharaoh acknowledges who the one true God really is. This direct contest makes all the more sense when we remember that Pharaoh was seen to be divine by the ancient Egyptians.

This is a bit like the story in Genesis where Jacob wrestles with God all night long (Gen. 32:22-32). Jacob won't let go until he gets the blessing he seeks. In Egypt, God won't let go of Pharaoh. God hardens Pharaoh's heart until not only Pharaoh, but all the people as well, acknowledge that YHWH alone is God. Sadly, the only unequivocal acknowledgement of God comes as the waters pour over Pharaoh's army.

I would also point out that sometimes the "hardening text" is in the passive voice, making unclear the source of the hardening (e.g. 7:13, 7:22, 8:18). Indeed, there are times that Pharaoh hardens his own heart (8:15, 8:32). It is only in 9:12, the sixth plague, that God's hardening begins. Not very cut and dry!

Because this is such a difficult and important question, I thought it would be helpful to share with you some analysis and reflections from a few noted Old Testament scholars.

From Terence Fretheim, whose writings have greatly shaped my understanding of the Old Testament:

The beginning of God's hardening (9:12), and its constancy from 10:1 on, parallels this growing inevitability of the full force of the judgment. At these points the divine hardening itself participates in the judgment which is to come; in fact, it may be said that God's hardening activity gathers momentum and drives the judgmental events toward their disastrous end. To use other words, God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart is an aspect of the larger judgmental picture. While we might want to use stronger language for God's involvement, Ps. 81:11–12 captures its force quite well: "But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would have none of me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels." God's activity makes Pharaoh's own obduracy of such a character that he is driven to the point of no return. . . .

It should be noted that these events would not redound much to the glory of God if it were only a matter of God's outwitting a windup toy. If Pharaoh is an automaton, a "puppet in the hands of God," then God is not shown to be much of a God at all, a divine objective in the narrative. The reality of the conflict and the power of evil are important matters if the divine name to be declared is one that will in fact "get God honor and glory" (14:4, 18) among the nations. God's struggle with evil is real; God does not rid the world of evil with a flick of the wrist. There will be genuine conflict in moving a people from bondage to freedom; the pharaohs of this world do not give up easily.

God's relationship to Moses should be related to this issue. In both cases, God struggles with the human will; there are a number of parallels in their different contests with God. God is clearly not in absolute control of Moses. For all of God's powers, Moses is not easily persuaded to take up his calling. In fact, God resorts to a backup plan in providing Aaron to stand with him (see at 4:14). God relates to Moses in such a way that his will is not overpowered. There is no reason to deny that this is God's way with people more generally. At the same time, Pharaoh is guilty of violating God's order in a massive way; his genocidal behavior might even be described as Hitlerian. Hence one ought not simply conclude that God's ways with Pharaoh can readily be transferred to others. Yet, even though Pharaoh is an embodiment of the forces of chaos, he remains a human being whose own will contributes to the shaping of his future.<sup>1</sup>

From Walter Brueggemann, a much respected Old Testament scholar:

Verse 3 promptly undermines and threatens both the assurance and the command of vv. 1–2. In the very same breath, Yahweh now escalates the power struggle with Pharaoh. On the one hand, Yahweh will "harden" Pharaoh. On the other hand, Yahweh will do "signs and wonders," gestures of dazzling, inscrutable power. The fact that Yahweh both hardens and does signs appears to be simply a literary device for intensification, but there is a quality of political realism in the escalation. That is, action for liberation leads to greater repression, and greater repression produces more intense resolve for liberation. In that process, it is never known who will be first to lose nerve. Moreover, the very sign itself becomes the means whereby the hardening is accomplished, as the very gesture toward liberation is what evokes more repression—i.e., hardening.

Yahweh is undeterred by Pharaoh's refusal to listen (v. 4). Yahweh will (no matter what) bring Israel out from Egypt. Yahweh's "hand" (massive power) will rest on Egypt, and in the end it cannot be resisted. Yahweh's power will be evident in great "acts of judgment." The phrase suggests that the coming plagues are to be understood as acts that enforce Yahweh's sovereign governance, as the punishment of a recalcitrant vassal. (Cf. Ezekiel 28 for a critique of Egypt's imagined autonomy.) In his abuse of Israel, Pharaoh has sought to secede from Yahweh's magisterium. The sure indication of a

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<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 102–105.

“break-away state” is that it refuses to practice justice toward the powerless, a practice to which Yahweh is fully committed in all areas of Yahweh’s realm.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, the following (lengthy, yes!) is from a Wesleyan scholar, Junia Pokrika:

*The texts in which God hardens Pharaoh’s heart indicate a divine confirmation of prior human sinfulness, not an arbitrary instigation of sinful actions.* The motif of hardening Pharaoh’s heart begs for further reflection as it can raise the suspicion that all human resistance to God is generally divinely willed and caused. Yahweh’s predictions of his own hardening action in 4:21 and 7:2–4 do not indicate when the divine act of hardening occurred. Only later texts shed light on the question of whether it preceded or followed Pharaoh’s hardening of his own heart.

Upon closer analysis, it appears that the condition of Pharaoh’s heart is described by three separate phases. In the beginning of the plague narrative, the text simply describes Pharaoh’s heart as being hardened, resolute, and unyielding, without saying who hardened it (7:13, 14, 22, 23; 8:19 [15 HB]; 9:7). In this way, Pharaoh’s character is portrayed from ch 5 and onward as already set in stone, presumably due to his arrogance, status, and power. In the middle (mostly in the second through seventh plagues), Pharaoh is said to willfully harden his own heart (8:15, 32 [11, 28 HB]; 9:34–35), making it increasingly calloused against severer plagues. In the last phase (sixth, eighth through tenth, the Red Sea), God is described as hardening Pharaoh’s heart (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17). If there is any danger of Pharaoh’s will weakening due to the severest of punishments, Yahweh hardens Pharaoh’s heart to ensure his continued resistance until the complete fulfillment of God’s divine purposes.

In his comment on 4:21 in his notes on the Bible, John Wesley says that it is as if God is saying, “I will harden his heart—After [Pharaoh] has frequently hardened it himself, willfully shutting his eyes against the light, I will at last permit Satan to harden it effectually” (Wesley’s Notes on the Bible, Wesley Center Online). The text of Exodus does not clarify whether Satan is involved but does confirm Wesley’s view that it is only after Pharaoh hardened his own heart that God hardened it. Although the text does not resolve the mystery of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, God’s eventual hardening of Pharaoh can be understood as a form of wrath or judgment in which God gave him over to his own sinful tendencies, which, in turn, led to his destruction (as with all humanity in Rom 1:24, 26, 28). Careful study of Exodus underlines that Pharaoh was responsible for his own sinful actions, a point that the Wesleyan tradition has consistently stressed in the treatment of humanity’s relationship with God.

Of course, not every Bible scholar agrees with this interpretation. Hamilton claims that in 7:13 and 7:22 Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart as predicted earlier, even before Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart in ch 8 (2011, 87). But since the text clearly names God as the subject of the verb “to harden” when it is God who hardened Pharaoh’s heart, the texts in ch 7 are better interpreted as saying that Pharaoh was being unyielding because he already was arrogant and stubborn.

Regardless of whether one is Calvinistic/Reformed or Arminian/Wesleyan in forming a theological interpretation of the text, both sides agree that Pharaoh’s story provides an instructive paradigm for the hardness of the sinful human heart that, apart from God’s grace, afflicts all humanity. Accordingly, the incorrigibly stubborn heart is not a condition unique to Pharaoh and his officials. Despite the numerous experiences of Yahweh’s supernatural power and mercy, the Israelites hardened their hearts on countless occasions in the wilderness. Not only that, in their persistent rebellion, the Israelites ultimately rejected Yahweh, most notably in creating the golden calf at Sinai (ch 32) and in the rebellion at Kadesh (Num 14), which brought Yahweh’s judgment on them.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), 738–739.

Later biblical texts also mention the hardening of the human heart, some explicitly attributing it to God (e.g., Isa 63:17; John 12:40; Rom 9:18) while others do not (Rom 11:7, 25; see Isa 6:8–10; Mark 4:10–12; Luke 8:9–10; 2 Cor 3:14). A closer look at each of these cases reveals that the hardening of Israel resulted from Israel's persistent resistance to God, which yielded Yahweh's withdrawal of favor (or exile or temporary rejection), producing, in turn, a growing stubbornness.

The examples of Pharaoh and the Israelites (in the exodus, the exile, and in Jesus' day) give us a strong warning not to harden our own hearts (1 Sam 6:6; Ps 95:8). As the author of Hebrews admonishes: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion" (Heb 3:15; 4:7). This admonition warns of the possibility of God rejecting rebellious Christians. More positively, it indicates that even if we do have a "hard" heart (whatever the root cause), we can choose to submit to God and avert severe divine judgment (even as the Philistine lords chose to do, surprisingly enough [1 Sam 6:6]). We must choose to bend our will to that of Yahweh, not only when chastised (like Pharaoh under the plagues) but also ideally even in the absence of such discipline or judgment.<sup>3</sup>

I hope all this can help you come to a deeper understanding of these difficult passages, for this is how we come to be better readers of Scripture.

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<sup>3</sup> H. Junia Pokrifka, *Exodus: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, ed. Alex Varughese, Roger Hahn, and George Lyons, New Beacon Bible Commentary (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2018), 104–106.