

DIVINE HARDENING IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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The Old Testament sometimes pictures God as “hardening” the human heart or spirit. The plague narratives recorded in the Book of Exodus attribute Pharaoh’s obstinance, at least in part, to divine hardening. Deuteronomy 2:30 and Joshua 11:20 speak of divine hardening in the context of Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land, and Isaiah 6:9–10 and 63:17 seem to indicate that God hardened His own covenant people.

These passages disturb many people, for they raise questions about God’s fairness and goodness.¹ Why would God cause someone to resist His will and then hold that person accountable for the sin He prompted? In an effort to preserve human moral responsibility and to avoid the conclusion that God would override the human will or manipulate free moral agents like puppets, some argue that the objects of divine hardening first hardened themselves. Others say the biblical statements, because they reflect ancient Hebrew idiom, cannot be taken at face value. According to this latter explanation, the biblical text replaces the immediate agent (the individual himself) with the ultimate agent (God). God simply allowed individuals to resist His will, but the Old Testament idiom bypasses the human subject and describes what God allowed as if He actually initiated and directly caused the action.

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¹ For example Jože Krašovec states, “The declaration that the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart cannot be interpreted literally, for such an explanation would contradict the essential presuppositions about the Lord, such as his righteousness, benevolence and love, and would inevitably open wide the door for the ideology of predestination” (“Unifying Themes in Ex 7, 8–11, 10,” in *Pentateuchal and Deuteronomistic Studies*, ed. C. Brekelmans and J. Lust [Leuven: University Press, 1990], 62).

A close reading of the texts, a reading that includes being sensitive to literary features and genre considerations, allows one, however, to give the biblical references to divine hardening their full force, while preserving human moral responsibility. Divine hardening took either a direct form, in which God supernaturally overrode the human will, or an indirect form, in which He used intermediate causes to “harden” the object. Whether accomplished directly or indirectly, this hardening was an element of divine judgment whereby God exhibited His justice and sovereignty. The objects of such judgment were never morally righteous or neutral, but were rebels against God’s authority. Divine hardening was never arbitrarily implemented, but was in response to rejection of God’s authoritative word or standards.

THE HARDENING OF PHARAOH’S HEART

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS AND REPRESENTATIVE VIEWPOINTS

Four times in Exodus 4–14 Yahweh declared that He would harden the heart(s) of Pharaoh and/or the Egyptians (4:21; 7:3; 14:4, 17); and six verses describe Him as having done so (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8). On the other hand three verses state that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (8:15, 32; 9:34), while six verses attribute hardness to his heart with no direct reference to a source or agent (7:13, 14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35). The following lists divide the texts into three groups and indicate the distribution of the statements.

A. Texts in which Yahweh is the subject of the verb

4:21	“I will harden [חזק, Piel, yqtl ²] his heart”
7:3	“I will harden [קשה, Hiphil, yqtl] Pharaoh’s heart”
9:12	“Yahweh hardened [חזק, Piel, wyqtl] Pharaoh’s heart”
10:1	“I have hardened [כבד, Hiphil, qtl] his heart”
10:20	“Yahweh hardened [חזק, Piel, wyqtl] Pharaoh’s heart”
10:27	“Yahweh hardened [חזק, Piel, wyqtl] Pharaoh’s heart”
11:10	“Yahweh hardened [חזק, Piel, wyqtl] Pharaoh’s heart”
14:4	“I will harden [חזק, Piel, wqtl] Pharaoh’s heart”
14:8	“Yahweh hardened [חזק, Piel, wyqtl] Pharaoh’s heart”
14:17	“I will harden [חזק, Piel, participle] the Egyptians’ hearts”

B. Texts in which Pharaoh is the (or a) subject of the verb

² In these lists notations regarding tense are as follows: qtl = perfect; wqtl = perfect + *waw* consecutive; yqtl = imperfect; wyqtl = preterite + *waw* consecutive, sometimes called imperfect + *waw* consecutive.

- 8:15 (Heb., 11) "he hardened [כבד, Hiphil, infinitive absolute] his heart"
 8:32 (Heb., 28) "Pharaoh hardened [כבד, Hiphil, wyqtl] his heart"
 9:34 "he and his officials hardened [כבד, Hiphil, wyqtl] their hearts"

C. Texts in which no source or agent is specifically mentioned

- 7:13 "Pharaoh's heart was hard [חזק, Qal, wyqtl]"
 7:14 "Pharaoh's heart is unyielding [כבד, predicate adjective]"
 7:22 "Pharaoh's heart was hard" [חזק, Qal, wyqtl]"
 8:19 (Heb., 15) "Pharaoh's heart was hard [חזק, Qal, wyqtl]"
 9:7 "Pharaoh's heart was unyielding [כבד, Qal, wyqtl]"
 9:35 "Pharaoh's heart was hard [חזק, Qal, wyqtl]"

From these verses scholars have drawn a variety of conclusions about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Source critics attribute the variety of expressions to blending different literary traditions and deny the existence of a unified hardening motif in this section. They parcel out the statements to the alleged Pentateuchal sources J, E, and P. One writer, who represents the source critical consensus, observes that J uses כבד and does not speak of Yahweh as the agent of Pharaoh's hardening. (Exodus 10:1, where Yahweh appears as the subject of כבד, is attributed to a redactor, not J.) E and P employ the verb חזק and do attribute the hardening to Yahweh. (P also uses the verb קשה in 7:3.)³ But this atomistic approach lacks literary sensitivity and linguistic sophistication at the discourse level. A close reading of the narrative reveals its thematic unity and suggests rhetorical purposes for the variety of expressions reflected in the above outline.

Many attribute the texts in category A to Hebrew idiom and/or consider the passages in categories B and C as primary. For example Driver suggests that in Hebrew idiom God hardened Pharaoh "in so far as he [Pharaoh] hardened himself. . . . But even supposing that the passages mean more than this, we must remember that, especially in His dealings with moral agents, God cannot be properly thought of as acting arbitrarily; He only hardens those who begin by hardening themselves."⁴ For God to do otherwise, Driver reasons, would be immoral and unjust. The biblical account, he says, pictures Pharaoh "as from the first a

³ Robert R. Wilson, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979) 18–36

⁴ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 53

self-willed, obstinate man who persistently hardens himself against God, and resists all warnings: God thus hardens him only because he first hardened himself.”⁵

Fretheim attempts to treat more seriously the texts in category A. He proposes a more balanced interpretation of Pharaoh’s hardening, but one that still tilts toward human responsibility and away from divine sovereignty.⁶ He suggests a “limited determinism,”⁷ but he also argues that Pharaoh resisted Yahweh and hardened himself before the divine hardening occurred.⁸ Fretheim admits that “deterministic language” is used “at the end of the narrative,” but that it was not “in place from the beginning.”⁹ He says Pharaoh reached the point of no return only after the eighth plague.¹⁰ God’s primary goal in His dealings with Pharaoh was self-glorification, but God would not really be glorified if He controlled Pharaoh like a puppet.¹¹

⁵ *Ibid.*, 54 Driver correctly affirms that God would not arbitrarily cause someone to disobey Him, and he rightly observes that Pharaoh was obstinate from the outset. It is also true that Pharaoh’s obstinance prompted divine hardening. However, Driver downplays Yahweh’s sovereign involvement in the drama and fails to note that hardening terminology is used primarily of Yahweh’s acts, not Pharaoh’s, and that the divine hardening both precedes and follows that of Pharaoh. For an argument similar to Driver’s, see Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. I Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 55–57.

Walter C. Kaiser Jr. also argues that Pharaoh first hardened his own heart and that Yahweh did not make Pharaoh’s heart hard until in the sixth plague (*Toward Old Testament Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], 255). See also Nahum Sarna, *Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 23. However, the text indicates Yahweh’s involvement in Pharaoh’s hardening long before the sixth plague. Kaiser also appeals to C. F. Keil’s distinction between “permissive hardness and effective hardness” (*Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 255–56) and says there is no indication that God “secretly influenced Pharaoh’s will or forced a stubborn resolution, which was otherwise incompatible with Pharaoh’s basic nature and disposition” (*ibid.*, 256). This last statement is true, but it overlooks the important fact that the narrative suggests that Pharaoh would have relented, against his basic nature, if God had not hardened him.

⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation (Louisville: Knox, 1991), 96–103.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 101.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹¹ To support his position Fretheim attempts to show that the narrative does not view Pharaoh’s decision as a foregone conclusion. He maintains that the “if” statements in 8:2, 21, 9:2, and 10:4 point to Pharaoh’s freedom and indicate that God’s foreknowledge is not absolute. If Pharaoh’s refusal was certain, Fretheim argues, then the statements are deceptive (*ibid.*, 99). The “if” statements do indeed point to Pharaoh’s autonomy, but, contrary to Fretheim’s claim, they do not necessitate an open-ended future. Yahweh’s offer was legitimate because Pharaoh was autonomous at those points. At the same time Yahweh knew the king would reject His

Others place greater emphasis on the element of divine sovereignty in the narrative. For example Gunn, while sympathetic to the view that the story holds in balance both divine sovereignty and human responsibility, nevertheless stresses the deterministic side of the narrative.¹² He asks if Pharaoh's contempt in 5:1–9 might be the outworking of the prediction in 4:21,¹³ and he observes that the clause "as Yahweh said" in 7:13 suggests that "Yahweh's announced manipulation has begun" at this early point in the story.¹⁴ According to Gunn, by 9:12 "what was previously implicit has become explicit," and by chapter 14 Yahweh had "split" Pharaoh's "mind [and] stolen his will."¹⁵ The "early stages of the story" seem to present Pharaoh "as his own master," but

as the narrative develops it becomes crystal clear that God is ultimately the only agent of heart-hardening who matters. If Pharaoh may have been directly responsible for his attitude at the commencement, by the end of the story he is depicted as acting against his own better judgment, a mere puppet of Yahweh.¹⁶

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Prelude (Exod. 1:1–4:31). The first two chapters of Exodus depict the Egyptians as extremely hostile to Israel. Strange as it may seem, Psalm 105:25 attributes this hostility to Yahweh Himself, who "turned" the hearts of the Egyptians "to hate His people" and "to conspire against" them.¹⁷

ultimatums. Fretheim also argues that Moses' statement in 6:12 implies that he did not assume (on the basis of 4:21) that Pharaoh's decision was determined absolutely (ibid., 99–100). But 6:12 simply reflects Moses' emotional state at that time. His faith in the whole enterprise was still undeveloped. Also according to Fretheim the refrain "as the Lord had said" (7:13, 22, 8:15, 19, 9:12) indicates that matters progressed as God thought they would, not that He determined them (ibid., 100). However, God did not say earlier that He expected Pharaoh would harden his heart, instead He said He Himself would do the hardening.

¹² David M. Gunn, "The 'Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart' Plot, Character and Theology in Exodus 1–14," in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, ed. D. J. A. Clines, D. M. Gunn, and A. J. Hauser (Sheffield: JSOT, 1982), 72–96.

¹³ Ibid., 74.

¹⁴ Ibid., 75.

¹⁵ Ibid., 77, 79.

¹⁶ Ibid., 79–80.

¹⁷ Psalm 105:25 apparently refers to the events of Exodus 1–2, not Exodus 5. Psalm 105:23–27 seems to be in chronological order. Verse 23 refers to Exodus 1:1–5, verse 24 relates to Exodus 1:6–7, verse 25 refers to Exodus 1:8–14 primarily, but perhaps also encompasses the rest of chapter 1 and all of chapter 2, verse 26 refers to Exodus 3–4, and verse 27 relates to Exodus 7. On the relationship between Exodus 1:7, 9 and Psalm 105:24–25, see Lyle Eslinger, "Freedom or Knowledge? Perspective and

When Egypt's oppressive measures persisted, Yahweh commissioned Moses to deliver His people from slavery. However, Yahweh also told him that Pharaoh would not let the people go until he was forced to do so by a series of mighty deeds (3:19–20). The Lord was somewhat vague at this point—He spoke of “all” these deeds, but did not specify a number. One may be tempted to ask, “Why must Yahweh force Pharaoh to grant permission? Why not simply obliterate him and deliver Israel from Egypt?” The answer lies in the fact that He may have had more in mind than just the deliverance of Israel because He later explained this larger purpose quite clearly (9:15–16).

As Moses journeyed toward Egypt, the Lord announced that He would harden Pharaoh's heart.¹⁸ As a result Pharaoh would not let the people go, despite the miraculous wonders performed in his presence (4:21).¹⁹ At first glance this announcement seems to be at odds with Yahweh's earlier declaration that He would use miraculous judgments to force Pharaoh to release the people. Did He want Pharaoh to let the people go or not? The narrative does not resolve the tension at this point, but one suspects that the Lord's agenda included more than just saving His people from slavery. It is revealed later that He wanted to display His power to the watching world so that all observers, including the Israelites and Egyptians, might recognize that He is indeed Yahweh (6:7; 7:5; 9:16; 10:1–2; 11:9; 14:4). Prolonging the series of judgments by hardening Pharaoh's heart would allow Yahweh to accomplish this larger purpose. Though Israel's deliverance might be slightly delayed, Yahweh's reputation would be greatly enhanced.

Purpose in the Exodus Narrative (Exodus 1–15),” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 52 (1991) 53–54 Why would the Lord move the Egyptians to do this? Perhaps He wanted to prevent His people from becoming assimilated into Egyptian culture, but more likely He was setting the stage for His self-glorification (for a possible New Testament parallel, see John 9 1–3)

¹⁸ The Piel stem of קָרַח is here used with a factitive nuance “to make rigid, unyielding, resolute, stubborn” A particularly illustrative text is Jeremiah 5 3, which speaks of sinners making their faces more rigid than a rocky cliff and stubbornly refusing to repent G K Beale's attempt to explain the Piel form as intensive-iterative and as indicating repeated action is linguistically unsound, for the Qal of the verb is intransitive (“An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4–14 and Romans 9,” *Trinity Journal* n s 5 (1984) 134

¹⁹ Verse 21b seems to encompass all the instances of divine hardening before the announcement of the final plague (referred to in 4 22–23) However, the combination “I will harden” (חִמְקֵהוּ) and “he will not let the people go” (שִׁלַּח) resembles most closely the statements in 9 35, 10 20, 27, which use חִמְקֵהוּ and שִׁלַּח and refer to divine hardening before the announcement of the final plague (11 1–8) Then 11 10 provides a concluding summary in terms used by 4 21

Moses confronts Pharaoh (5:1–7:7). When Moses confronted the Egyptian ruler and demanded that he allow Israel to celebrate a festival to Yahweh, Pharaoh answered, “Who is Yahweh that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh and I will not let Israel go!” (5:2). Does this response mean the divine hardening had already begun? Probably not. Six times after this (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8) the narrative notes that Yahweh had hardened Pharaoh’s heart. (In 9:12 allusion is made to 4:21.) Four other times (7:13, 22; 8:19; 9:35) the observation is made that Pharaoh’s heart was hard and this condition is attributed to Yahweh by alluding back to 4:21 and 7:3 (note also 8:15). However, 5:2 makes no mention of God’s involvement, so it is better to view Pharaoh’s action as autonomous. Furthermore 4:21 clearly relates divine hardening to the signs Moses would perform before Pharaoh. The disjunctive/circumstantial clause (וַאֲנִי אֶקְרַח) in verse 21b qualifies the preceding statement (“Do them [the miraculous signs] before Pharaoh, yet I will harden his heart”) and juxtaposes Moses’ and Yahweh’s actions, respectively. (This type of construction is also used with a similar qualifying sense in 3:19. It seems to indicate complementarity of action in 2:9; 7:3; 14:17.) In the following narrative Moses did not perform any signs in Pharaoh’s presence until chapter 7 (although he did perform signs before Israel; 4:29–30), so it seems unlikely that 5:2 should be interpreted in light of 4:21.²⁰

²⁰ Gunn raises the question of Yahweh’s involvement in 5:2, but he is hesitant to commit himself on the issue (“The ‘Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,’” 74) Beale argues that the prophesied hardening began here (“An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Exodus 4–14 and Romans 9,” 135–36) He offers five lines of argument First, contrary to what the grammar of the text seems to indicate, he states that “the hardening of 4:21 is not conditional on the performance of signs” In a footnote he writes that one’s interpretation of the *waw* cannot be determinative here, because the word is so “fluid” This comment betrays an overly atomistic syntactical approach The construction of the *waw* + subject (pronoun) + verb is vital here Second, he argues that even if the hardening were conditioned on the giving of the signs, “it still could not be shown that Moses did not perform a sign similar to the ones he performed for Israel in the immediately preceding verses” In support he observes that ellipsis does occur elsewhere in the narrative However, in response one should note that when ellipsis is utilized, it has a clear rhetorical function and can be readily identified as such from the immediate context (See the present writer’s comments on 8:5 on page 420 and the observations on 14:23 later in this note on page 417) Unless one has solid contextual and rhetorical reasons for filling a story’s gaps, such reading between the lines is unwarranted and makes one’s argument appear tendentious

Beale’s third argument is theological in nature He contends that “the divine omnipotence necessary for a proper effecting of the *Heilsgeschichteplan* of Exodus is incongruous with a ‘by chance’ refusal of Pharaoh, since this refusal was already an integral part of his plan” His attempt to support this argument from 3:18–20 falters when he suggests that יָדַע in 3:19 implies the exercise of sovereign power The verb is semantically conditioned here by the following כִּי When כִּי follows יָדַע, it

In the macrostructure of chapters 3–14, 4:29–5:3 is linked with 3:16–22, not 4:21–23. The announcement of 3:16–22 encompasses the events of 4:29–12:36 as follows: (1) Verses 16–18 are fulfilled in 4:29–5:3, (2) verses 19–20a telescope events recorded in 5:2–12:30, (3) verse 20b anticipates 12:31–32, (4) verses 21–22 look forward to 12:33–36. The announcement in 4:21–23 expands on 3:16–22. It is further expanded in 6:28–7:5 and its fulfillment is restricted to 7:8–11:10. Exodus 4:21 anticipates the events of 7:6–10:29 (7:6–12 tells of the first of many signs performed in Pharaoh's presence, while 7:13 is the first of many references to his having been hardened), and 11:1–10 describes the outworking of 4:22–23.

If Pharaoh had acceded to Moses' request, he would have acknowledged that Yahweh's authority over Israel superseded his own. His arrogant question and affirmation make it clear that he did not view himself as being subject to Yahweh.²¹ This attitude, anticipated by Yahweh (3:19), prompted the judgments and divine hardening that followed.

When Pharaoh implemented more oppressive measures

simply introduces a noun clause giving the content of the subject's knowledge and in no way implies that the subject is responsible for the condition of what is known. See, for example, Genesis 12 11, 22 12, Exodus 4 14, 9 30, 18 11, Deuteronomy 31 29, Joshua 2 9, Judges 6 37, 17 13, 1 Samuel 24 20, 29 9, 1 Kings 17 24, 2 Kings 5 15, Job 42 2, and Psalm 140 12. None of the supporting texts cited by Beale (taken from Bultmann's study) have this construction.

Fourth, Beale contends that Exodus 5 22, when compared with 5 23, suggests the presence of divine hardening in verse 2. But 5 22 says nothing about divine hardening. It refers generally to Yahweh's decision to intervene in Egypt through Moses, which in turn caused Pharaoh to tighten his grip on Israel. The verb translated "brought trouble" in verses 22–23 (the Hiphil of עָרַב) is a play on עָרַב ("trouble") in verse 19, which clearly has in view the increased brick quota. Fifth, Beale argues that Psalm 105 25 supports his interpretation, but, as noted above, that passage more likely refers to Exodus 1, not Exodus 5. Even if Psalm 105 25 includes the actions of the Egyptians described in chapter 5, it refers specifically to Egyptian hostility to Israel (5 6–18), not necessarily to Pharaoh's refusal to recognize Yahweh's authority.

In support of Beale's view one might point to Exodus 14 23, which records a clear instance of divine hardening, though it omits any reference to Yahweh's involvement. In verse 17 Yahweh announced he would harden the Egyptians' hearts and would cause them to follow Israel into the sea. Verses 23–28 clearly fulfill this prediction and bring the story of Egypt's demise to a screeching (and wet!) halt. After this, no other events qualify as the fulfillment of verse 17. However, the relationship between 4 21 and 5 2 is not so clearcut. As stated in note 18, the announcement in 4 21 seems to telescope the following narrative in its entirety (it jumps to the final plague), there are multiple fulfillments of 4 21 after 5 2, and the closest verbal parallels to this announcement come in chapters 9 and 10.

²¹ "Know" is probably used in the sense of "to recognize, answer to," rather than "to know about." Pharaoh was denying Yahweh's authority, not claiming ignorance of His identity (Walter Brueggemann, "Pharaoh as Vassal: A Study of a Political Metaphor," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 57 [1995] 35–37).

against the Israelites, prompting them to criticize Moses, Yahweh reassured the reluctant leader and reaffirmed His intention to deliver Israel through His powerful judgments. However, in conjunction with these judgments He would harden Pharaoh's heart so that the king would not immediately release the people.²² This prolonging of judgment would force the Egyptians to recognize the Lord for who He really is—the ever-present Helper of His people (7:3–5).²³ Yahweh's stated purpose corresponds directly to Pharaoh's defiant question, "Who is Yahweh?" and his proud proclamation, "I do not know Yahweh" (5:2). When Yahweh's judgment was complete, Pharaoh's question would be answered in no uncertain terms and the Egyptian ruler would be forced to acknowledge Yahweh's superiority and sovereignty.

An initial sign (7:8–13) When Aaron turned his staff into a snake, Pharaoh's magicians seemingly duplicated the miracle. When Aaron's snake swallowed theirs, Pharaoh should have detected some symbolism, but instead he was obstinate (lit., "his heart was hard") and he refused to listen to Moses and Aaron.²⁴ The statement about Pharaoh's hardness is written from the standpoint of an observer who saw Pharaoh's obstinate response to the miraculous sign, but there is more here than meets the eye. (The language of appearance dominates chapters 7 and 8 [but also see 9:35], while Yahweh's involvement is more directly pictured in chapters 9 and 10.)

Why did the miracle and symbolic act have no impact on Pharaoh? The final clause of 7.13, "as the Lord had said," provides the clue. To what earlier divine announcement(s) does this statement refer? The use of the verb *חזק* recalls 4.21 ("I will harden [*חזק*] his heart"), and the observation that Pharaoh did not

²² Exodus 7:3 uses *קשה*, rather than *חזק* or *כבד*, to describe the divine hardening. The Hiphil stem of this verb is used in a causative sense, meaning "make hard, stiff, stubborn," as the frequent idiomatic use with "neck" as object illustrates. This is the only place this verb is used of divine hardening in the entire narrative. The reason for this is not clear, but the verb may be a play on the adjective *קשה* used earlier to describe the oppressive labor to which the Egyptians subjected the Israelites (cf. 1:14 and esp. 6:9). Yahweh's treatment of Pharaoh mirrored Pharaoh's crimes against Israel.

²³ On the meaning and theological significance of the name Yahweh, see Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *In Search of God*, trans. F. A. Cryer (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 33–36, 40–42.

²⁴ The construction *שָׂמַע אֵל* is metonymic here, meaning "yield to." For other examples of this idiom see Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1903), 1034. The Qal of *חזק* describes the state or condition of the subject, as illustrated in Genesis 41:56, 1 Samuel 17:50, 2 Samuel 13:14, 18:9, 24:4, 1 Kings 16:22, 2 Kings 25:3, Isaiah 39:1.

listen to Moses and Aaron (7:13) alludes to 7:4 (“Pharaoh will not listen to you”). Both verses emphasize God’s initiative in hardening Pharaoh. In verse 4 Pharaoh’s refusal to listen is directly attributed to divine hardening (v. 3). Though verse 13 does not specifically say “Yahweh hardened Pharaoh’s heart” (as later in the narrative), one cannot escape that conclusion. While the first part of the verse is simply written from the standpoint of an observer, the second half of the verse, by correlating Pharaoh’s response with Yahweh’s earlier statements, provides a theological perspective of the event.²⁵

The plagues begin (7:14–24). After observing that Pharaoh’s heart was “unyielding” (כָּבֵד, v. 14) and that he was unwilling to release the people, Yahweh commissioned Moses to perform another miraculous deed so that Pharaoh might know that He is Yahweh, the covenant Lord of Israel.²⁶ When Aaron turned the waters of Egypt into blood, the magicians again seemingly duplicated the miracle. Even so, Pharaoh should have realized that he was on the path to destruction. If his own magicians started matching such destructive signs, the result would certainly be harmful for Egypt.²⁷ But once more Pharaoh did not act with common sense or reason. Again he was obstinate and would not listen to Moses and Aaron (v. 22), and he did not take even this to heart (v. 23).²⁸ With the words “as the Lord had said” (v. 22), the author again (cf. v. 13) gave the real reason for Pharaoh’s obstinance and insensitivity—Yahweh’s hardening activity.

²⁵ Some overlook the significance of verse 13b (e.g., Driver, *The Book of Exodus*, and Sarna, *Exodus*). Fretheim paraphrases verse 13b, “as God thought they would” (ibid., 100). But Yahweh did not simply state or predict that Pharaoh’s heart would be hard; He said He Himself would do the hardening! Others see the clear implications of the clause. For example John I. Durham notes that “Yahweh’s own role in Pharaoh’s intransigence is subtly anticipated” by this “closing reminder” (*Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1987], 92). Also see John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 254; Gunn, “The ‘Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,’” 75; and Beale, “An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Exodus 4–14 and Romans 9,” 140–41.

²⁶ The root כָּבֵד is used here of Pharaoh’s hardened heart for the first time. The adjective here carries the force of “immovable” or “unyielding.” It may play on 5:9, which uses the related verb to describe Pharaoh’s oppressive acts, as well as later verses that characterize the plagues as “heavy” or “severe” (8:24; 9:3, 18, 24; 10:14). The word choice is appropriate since Pharaoh’s arrogance in 5:2 and 9 prompted these first two acts of divine hardening.

²⁷ On this point, see Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 99, and Durham, *Exodus*, 98.

²⁸ This expression, literally, “to set one’s heart to,” means “to be impacted emotionally by something” (2 Sam. 13:20), “to commit something to memory” (Ps. 48:13), or “to pay close attention to something” (Prov. 22:17; 27:23), such as road directions (Jer. 31:21).

The second plague (7:25–8:15). Seven days later the Lord sent an ultimatum to Pharaoh: “Release My people, so they may worship Me” (8:1, author’s translation). He also warned, “If you refuse to let them go, I will smite your whole country with frogs” (v. 2).²⁹ Apparently Pharaoh could have avoided this plague, if he had let the people go. Though the text does not record the delivery of the message or Pharaoh’s response, one can assume that Pharaoh rejected the warning, for the Lord instructed Moses to bring the plague on the land (v. 5).³⁰ The omission has a rhetorical function, as if the narrator were saying, “I won’t even bother reporting the actual delivery of the message and Pharaoh’s response. You know he didn’t listen.” There is no mention made at this point of God’s hardening activity, so it seems that Pharaoh was acting autonomously (as in 5:2).³¹ His obstinance prompts two rounds of judgment, facilitated by divine hardening.

When Aaron brought the frogs on the land, the magicians seemingly duplicated the destructive miracle (v. 7). However, the frogs were too much for Pharaoh, who begged Moses to remove the plague and promised to release the people (v. 8). (His motives, of

²⁹ On the form of the conditional sentence here, see A B Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, 3d ed (Edinburgh Clark, 1901), 176. For an instructive parallel, see Jeremiah 38:21.

³⁰ Fretheim speaks of the narrative being “telescoped” (*Exodus*, 99).

³¹ One might argue that the effect of Yahweh’s hardening, once set in motion sometime between 7:3 and 7:13, continued through chapter 7 and on into chapter 8, explaining why Pharaoh took no heed to the ultimatum. But in this case the ultimatums here and in later verses are disingenuous. Fretheim’s point is well taken. He observes, “This ‘if’ language is problematic if only a negative decision of Pharaoh is possible. That is, if God says ‘if,’ such language conveys to Pharaoh (and to Moses) that his ‘refusal’ is only a future possibility, not a certainty. But if, in fact, Pharaoh’s ‘refusal’ is a certainty, then to hold it out as a possibility is deceitful” (*ibid.*). However, Fretheim then extends his argument too far. He adds, “The use of ‘if’ language by God also implies that God’s foreknowledge of Pharaoh’s decision is not absolute at this point.” On the contrary, there is every reason to believe Yahweh knew quite well that Pharaoh would reject the ultimatum, but He still offered it in good faith and allowed Pharaoh to reject it.

Hardening language is used to indicate closure for each plague pericope. The condition of hardening does not extend into the next pericope (possible exceptions are 7:13–25, in which one intransitive verb form [v. 22] follows another intransitive form [v. 13, see also v. 14], and 8:15–19 and 8:32–9:7, in which intransitive forms [8:19, 9:7] follow transitive verb forms [8:15, 32]). This becomes especially apparent from 9:12 in which the refrain “Yahweh hardened” appears. If hardening were like a switch turned on and left on, this repetition of the transitive verb would be unnecessary and confusing. It is better to conclude that Pharaoh returned to a “neutral” or autonomous position at the beginning of each new plague pericope, with the possible exception of the passages noted above. Transitive verbal forms also appear after the ultimatums (see 8:2 and 8:15, 8:21 and 8:32, 9:13–14 and 9:34–10:1, 10:4 and 10:20). The lone exceptions are 5:1 and 7:13 (but note 7:3) and 9:2 and 9:7 (but in this case, no mention is made of divine hardening).

course, were questionable; cf. 8:29.) However, he had already closed the window of opportunity and had again brought himself under the influence of divine hardening. When the plague subsided, he hardened his heart and again refused to listen to Yahweh's servants (v. 15). The Hiphil of כָּבַד is used in the sense of "to make unyielding or unresponsive." This is the verb form employed when Pharaoh hardened his heart after relenting (as in 8:32 and 9:34). This active construction is appropriate in these cases, because from the observer's point of view, Pharaoh was not just obstinate; rather he clearly changed from an apparently willing posture to an obstinate one. Though the removal of the plague was the catalyst for this change of heart and Pharaoh is the subject of a transitive verbal form for "hardening" for the first time, the statement "as the Lord had said" (8:15) once more states that Yahweh caused the king to respond in this way. Rather than diminishing Yahweh's involvement, the preceding active verbal construction with Pharaoh as subject highlights His sovereign activity. Yahweh's hardening forced a capitulating and relenting Pharaoh to reverse his decision and actively oppose Yahweh. The active verbal construction, when combined with the refrain "as the Lord had said," makes it even clearer that Pharaoh was a pawn in the hands of the One whose authority he mocked and denied.

The third plague (8:16–19). The next plague came with no warning. Like the preceding plague, it was the Lord's response to Pharaoh's latest act of resistance (8:1–4). Aaron turned the dust of the ground into swarms of gnats. Though the magicians were unable, for the first time, to "duplicate" the miracle and exclaimed that a divine finger was at work, Pharaoh was obstinate and would not listen because Yahweh had once again hardened him (again the writer included the refrainlike statement "as the Lord had said," v. 19). The intransitive construction (the Qal of חָזַק) with Pharaoh's heart as subject appears again (as in 7:13, 22), for there was no visible shift in Pharaoh's attitude in this case (in contrast to his response to the second plague). (It is possible here, where an intransitive verb follows the transitive construction of 8:15, that the hardening activity referred to there extends through this pericope.)

The fourth plague (8:20–32). The general pattern of the second plague is repeated here, with at least one notable difference. Once again Yahweh gave Pharaoh opportunity and delivered an ultimatum (signaled by the words "Let My people go, that they may serve Me" [v. 20] and the "if" clause in v. 21). Once more Pharaoh apparently ignored the warning. (The words "the Lord

did so," in verse 24 certainly imply this. No mention is made of divine hardening here, implying that Pharaoh was once again acting autonomously and so predictably that the narrator could telescope the story.) When the flies swarmed over the land (v. 24), Pharaoh relented and asked Moses to intercede for him (vv. 25–28). Moses agreed to pray for him, but also warned him not to "act deceitfully" again by failing to keep his promise (v. 29; cf. v. 15).³² Yahweh removed the flies, but Pharaoh disregarded Moses' warning, hardened his heart, and refused to release the people (vv. 30–32). The Hiphil of כָּבַד is used again (as in v. 15), for, as noted above, this is the narrator's word choice when a visible shift occurred in Pharaoh's attitude and he hardened his heart after relenting.

In contrast to the earlier incidents no mention is made in the record of this plague of Yahweh's involvement in the hardening. The statement "as the Lord had said" is conspicuous by its absence. Perhaps Yahweh was involved, based on the pattern established earlier,³³ since it would seem unnecessary for the narrator to keep stating that Yahweh was the force behind the hardening. Such an omission would also be understandable from a rhetorical point of view. Though Yahweh was still hardening the king, He stepped aside for the moment, literarily speaking, so that His grand entrance after the sixth plague would be more dramatic. In this case the text is written purely from the observer's standpoint with no theological insight included.³⁴

³² Moses used the Hiphil of הִלֵּל, which has the sense of "to mock, deceive, trifle with" (Gen 31 7, Judg 16 10–15, Job 13 9, Jer 9 4). The statement is written from an observer's perspective, for Pharaoh's earlier decision to "trifle" with Yahweh was prompted by Yahweh's hardening! Moses' lack of theological precision is understandable, for Yahweh did not specifically tell Moses He had hardened Pharaoh's heart until 10 1.

³³ See Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 255, and Durham, *Exodus*, 115. Gunn also seems to lean this way ("The 'Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart,'" 76–77). In support of this view one might note that 14 23 records an instance of divine hardening without identifying it as such (see note 20). However, the relationship to 14 17 is so obvious as to make such identification unnecessary. Also there is no other possible fulfillment of the announcement after verses 23–28. This is hardly the case in 8 32 (or 9 7), where an ultimatum is delivered and Pharaoh seems to be acting autonomously. The announcements in 4 21 and 7 3 do not depend on divine involvement in 8 32 (or 9 7) for their fulfillment. There are multiple fulfillments of those earlier announcements both before and after 8 32 and 9 7.

³⁴ Perhaps the presence of the phrase "this time also" (8 32) also supports this view, for it alludes to verse 15, where Pharaoh's action is attributed to Yahweh's hardening. Beale argues this way ("An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4–14 and Romans 9," 144). However, this may be reading too much into the phrase, which may simply reflect an observer's point of view. In this case it merely draws attention to the fact that on both occasions Pharaoh was observed as hardening his heart.

On the other hand, since the text elsewhere seems to go out of its way to attribute hardening to Yahweh, it is more likely that Pharaoh was acting autonomously here. His obstinance (here and in 9:7) set the stage for the second round of plagues, in which Yahweh's involvement in the hardening is more directly described. As in 5:2, the author stated that Yahweh was not dealing with a morally righteous or neutral individual, but a proud enemy who thought nothing of trifling with the sovereign God and who came to the point where he even hardened his own heart in the face of overwhelming evidence of Yahweh's superiority.

The fifth plague (9:1-7). Pharaoh's window of opportunity remained open, however. As in 8:2 and 20 the Lord issued another ultimatum (note "let My people go, that they may worship Me" and the "if" clause in 9:1-2). The observation at the beginning of 9:6 that the Lord did so the next day implies that Pharaoh ignored this divine word too. When the plague fell on the livestock, as Moses had warned, Pharaoh remained unyielding.³⁵ Once more a reference to divine hardening is conspicuous by its absence. And once more it may be assumed that Pharaoh was autonomous at this point—but that was about to change. His resistance and self-hardening would precipitate another round of judgment and divine hardening.

The sixth plague (9:8-12). This time Yahweh gave Pharaoh no ultimatum. When the painful boils appeared on Egypt's animals and people (including the magicians), Pharaoh was unmoved. For the first time in the narrative Yahweh is the subject of a preterite form of the verb *חזק* (used in the Piel stem). This set the tone for the second panel of plagues (9.6-10), which depicted him as taking a far more active role in Pharaoh's hardening.

The seventh plague (9:13-35). Before the seventh plague Yahweh gave Moses a detailed message for Pharaoh, a message that put in perspective the entire encounter up to this point. Yahweh again issued an ultimatum, demanding that Pharaoh release His people: "Let My people go, that they may worship Me" (v. 13). An "if" clause is omitted in verse 14, but a condition is implied. The absence of the conditional element stresses the urgency with which Pharaoh should respond. Yahweh warned Pharaoh and the Egyptians that continued resistance would result in further plagues being unleashed so that Pharaoh might know that He is

³⁵ The Qal of *כבד* is used with Pharaoh's heart as subject, as opposed to the Qal of earlier. Perhaps *כבד* marks an inclusio for the first panel of plagues. The adjectival form of *כבד* is used in 7:14, at the beginning of this first cycle, before the first plague, and *כבד* is used in the description of the plague in 9:3. This may have influenced the word choice here in 9:7.

the incomparable God. The Lord boasted that He could have wiped Pharaoh and the Egyptians from the earth by now (v. 15).³⁶ Instead He prolonged His judgments so that He might reveal His power and name throughout the earth.³⁷ Despite all this, Pharaoh continued to resist and refused to release the people.³⁸ So another plague would fall on the land.

When the seventh plague, a severe hailstorm, arrived, Pharaoh relented, confessed his sin, and asked Moses to pray for relief. Moses agreed to do this, but he knew Pharaoh was motivated by mere expedience, not genuine fear of Yahweh (v. 30). When relief came, Pharaoh and his officials hardened their hearts (the Hiphil of כָּבַד is used again, for the hardening came after he had relented). This hardening came from Yahweh, as indicated by the statement “as the Lord had spoken through Moses” (v. 35). Furthermore in the introduction to the next pericope (10:1) Yahweh declared that He had hardened Pharaoh’s and the officials’ hearts, using the same verb (Hiphil of כָּבַד) employed in 9:34.

The eighth plague (10:1–20). Yahweh announced to Moses that He had hardened the hearts of Pharaoh and his officials so that Israel might know He is Yahweh through the revelation of His miraculous deeds (vv. 1–2). This statement alludes to the divine hardening in 9:34–35, but it also points to what would soon transpire. The logic seems to run as follows: The most recent act of divine hardening kept Pharaoh from fully relenting and bringing the series of judgments to an end (esp. 9:28). By reversing Pharaoh’s decision, which was purely expedient and not sincere (9:30), Yahweh opened the way for another round of miraculous deeds. Yes, Pharaoh would receive another ultimatum (cf. 10:4), but past experience showed he would reject it, prompting another round of divine judgment.

Yahweh did give Pharaoh another ultimatum (vv. 3–4a, note “let My people go, that they may worship Me” and the “if” clause), warning that refusal would be met by a plague of locusts (vv. 4b–6). At the prompting of his officials (who were obviously no longer

³⁶ On the hypothetical use of the perfect in verse 15, see William Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, ed E Kautzsch, rev A E Cowley (Oxford Clarendon 1910), 313 (par 106p) For a contrary opinion see Durham, *Exodus*, 127

³⁷ In verse 16 the Hiphil of עָמַד carries the sense of “to maintain, preserve” (Driver, *Exodus*, 73, and Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 699, 764) This form is used in 1 Kings 15 4 As Exodus 9 15 suggests, it refers here to Yahweh’s preserving Pharaoh to this point, not to his raising him to the throne at some time in the past

³⁸ The Hithpael of סָלַל appears in 9 17, used in the reflexive sense of “to lift oneself up” (Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 699)

under the effects of divine hardening, v. 7), Pharaoh began to yield again, but when Moses outlined details of the festival, Pharaoh withdrew his offer (vv. 8–11). Once more Pharaoh closed a window of opportunity (just as Yahweh's words in vv. 1–2 anticipated). His rejection of the Lord's ultimatum prompted two more rounds of divine judgment and hardening. The locusts arrived, Pharaoh relented, Yahweh drove the locusts away, and then He hardened Pharaoh's heart (v. 20). The style deviates from earlier references to divine hardening. For the second time in the narrative, Yahweh appears as the subject of a preterite form of קָח (cf. 9:12). However, this time the additional comment, "as the Lord had said," is omitted. The prediction of 4:21 is clearly being fulfilled now and no reminder to that effect is needed.

The ninth plague (10:21–29). Without warning Pharaoh, Moses brought a plague of darkness on the land. (The same pattern is seen in 8:16–19 and 9:8–12. An unannounced plague follows another plague and an instance of hardening, whether by Yahweh or Pharaoh.) Pharaoh began to yield and negotiate with Moses, but Yahweh hardened him again, causing him to change his mind.

Culminating events (11:1–14:31). Yahweh announced that the time had arrived for the culminating plague, which would cause Pharaoh to relent and release the people (11:1). However, the initial verbal warning about the plague (vv. 4–8) would fall on deaf ears so that Yahweh's power might be revealed (v. 9).

Before the narrative proceeds, however, a statement summarizing Yahweh's hardening activity is included (v. 10). The disjunctive structure (*waw* + subject + predicate) disrupts the preceding narrative structure (preterite forms are used in vv. 1, 3, and 9). Though this disjunctive clause seems to interrupt the flow of the narrative (which picks up again in 12:1), it provides closure for chapters 7–11³⁹ and supplies a brief pause before the climactic events recorded in chapters 12–14. Verse 10 of chapter 11 summarizes God's involvement and forms an *inclusio* with 7:2–4.⁴⁰

³⁹ Sarna is in agreement with this (*Exodus*, 53)

⁴⁰ The verb for "harden" (קָח) differs here (קָשָׁה is used in 7:3), reflecting the dominant word throughout the narrative, but מִפְתָּא ("wonders") is used in 7:3, 9, and 11:9–10, as well as the statement "let the sons of Israel go out of his land" in 7:2 and 11:10. Also רָבָה ("to multiply") is used in 7:3 and 11:9. None of these terms or phrases appears anywhere else between the verses cited. The overall structure of these chapters might be outlined as follows: 7:1–13 (prelude to plagues introduced by a prediction of divine hardening), 7:14–10:29 (series of nine plagues highlighted by divine hardening in response to Pharaoh's rejection of the divine word), and 11:1–10 (prelude to the culminating plague concluding with a summary of divine hardening up to this point)

As the Lord predicted (11:1), the death of Egypt's firstborn prompted Pharaoh to grant Israel permission to leave (12:31–32). But Yahweh was not yet satisfied that the Egyptians knew Him well enough. He announced that He would harden Pharaoh one more time, so He might glorify Himself and the Egyptians might fully recognize that He is Yahweh, the ever-present helper of His people (14:4). True to His word, Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart, changing the king's mind (v. 5) and prompting him to chase after Israel (v. 8). As the Egyptians approached, the Lord instructed Moses to lead the people through the sea and He announced that He would harden the Egyptians, so they would follow Israel into the sea, where they would meet their demise to the glory of Yahweh (v. 17). The remainder of the chapter describes the outworking of this sovereign hardening (esp. v. 23), which had its intended effect on both the Egyptians (v. 25) and the Israelites (v. 31).

SUMMARY

The following outline reviews the structure of the plot development of the narrative and shows the interplay between Pharaoh's autonomous actions and Yahweh's sovereign intervention. Each cycle begins with an ultimatum and concludes with an act of divine hardening.

- I. Prelude (1:1–4:31)
 - A. Yahweh announces His intention to deliver His people (3:1–18).
 - B. Yahweh anticipates Pharaoh's resistance and announces His plan to send judgments on Egypt (3:19–22).
 - C. Yahweh announces His intention to harden Pharaoh as He unleashes his judgments (4:21–23).

- II. Cycle One (5:1–7:24)
 - A. *Ultimatum No. 1*: Yahweh demands that Pharaoh release His people (5:1).
 - B. *Refusal*: Pharaoh refuses to acknowledge Yahweh's authority (5:2). (This eventually prompts a sign and a plague [7:1–13]).
 - C. Yahweh announces His intention to deliver His people so that Israel might recognize Him as their ever-present Helper (6:6–8).
 - D. Yahweh announces His intention to harden Pharaoh (7:1–4) so the Egyptians might know He is the ever-present Helper of His people (7:5).

- E *Divine Hardening* Pharaoh rejects an initial sign because Yahweh has hardened his heart (7 8–13)
- F *Divine Hardening* This prompts the first plague, which has no impact on Pharaoh because Yahweh has hardened his heart (7 14–24) (The hardening noted in verses 13–14 may continue through this pericope, accounting for the intransitive construction in verse 22)

III Cycle Two (7 25–8 19)

- A *Ultimatum No 2* Yahweh demands that Pharaoh release His people and warns that refusal will bring another plague (8 2–4)
- B *Refusal* Pharaoh's failure to respond prompts the second plague (8 5–7)
- C *Yielding and Divine Hardening* The second plague causes Pharaoh to yield (8 8–14), but when the plague is removed he reneges on his promise because Yahweh has hardened his heart (8 15)
- D *Divine Hardening* This prompts the third plague, which has no impact on Pharaoh, because Yahweh has hardened his heart (8 16–19) (The hardening noted in verse 15 may continue through this pericope, accounting for the intransitive construction in verse 19)

IV Cycle Three (8 20–9 12)

- A *Ultimatum No 3* Yahweh demands that Pharaoh release His people and warns that refusal will bring another plague (8 20–23)
- B *Refusal* Pharaoh's failure to respond prompts the fourth plague (8 24)
- C *Yielding and Self hardening* The fourth plague causes Pharaoh to yield (8 25–29), but when the plague is removed he hardens his own heart and reneges on his promise (8 30–32)
- D *Ultimatum No 4* Yahweh demands that Pharaoh release His people and warns that refusal will bring another plague (9 1–5)
- E *Refusal* Pharaoh's failure to respond prompts the fifth plague (9 6)
- F *Self hardening* The fifth plague has no impact on Pharaoh because his heart is hardened (9 7) (The hardening noted in 8 32 may continue through this pericope, but it is a self-hardening at this point, not divine)

- G *Divine Hardening* This prompts the sixth plague, which has no impact on Pharaoh because Yahweh hardens his heart (9 8–12)
- V Cycle Four (9 13–35)
- A *Ultimatum No 5* Yahweh demands that Pharaoh release His people and warns that refusal will bring another plague (9 13–21)
- B *Refusal* Pharaoh's failure to respond prompts the seventh plague (9 22–26)
- C *Yielding and Divine Hardening* The seventh plague causes Pharaoh to yield (9 27–28), but when the plague is removed he reneges on his promise because Yahweh hardens his heart (9 29–35, cf 10 1)
- VI Cycle Five (10 1–14 31)
- A *Ultimatum No 6* Yahweh demands that Pharaoh release His people and warns that refusal will bring another plague (10 4–6)
- B *Refusal* Pharaoh initially yields, but then refuses (10 7–11), prompting the eighth plague (10 12–15)
- C *Yielding and Divine Hardening* The eighth plague causes Pharaoh to yield (10 16–17), but when the plague is removed he reneges on his promise because Yahweh hardens his heart (10 18–20)
- D *Yielding and Divine Hardening* This prompts the ninth plague (10 21–23) Pharaoh initially yields (10 24), but then reneges on his promise because Yahweh hardens his heart (10 25–29)
- E *Yielding and Divine Hardening* This prompts the tenth plague Pharaoh yields and releases the people, but then Yahweh hardens him and the Egyptians, leading them to destruction (chaps 11–14)

CONCLUSIONS

From this narrative three conclusions may be drawn. First, from the outset Pharaoh was an obstinate rebel whom Yahweh kept alive so that He might reveal His greatness through humiliating and defeating him. Six times Yahweh gave Pharaoh a window of opportunity by issuing a demand and warning, but each time Pharaoh closed it. In the middle of this process, he even hardened his own heart. When he closed these windows, he placed himself in a position to be hardened. His first refusal (5 2) brought two rounds of divine hardening (7 13, 22), his second refusal (8 1–4) brought two as well (8 15, 19), his third and fourth refusals (8 20–

23; 9:1–5) brought one (9:12), his fifth refusal (9:13–14) brought one (9:35). The sixth refusal (10:1–11) brought three rounds of divine hardening (10:20, 27; 14:8). Yahweh was more than patient with him.

Second, though Pharaoh did harden himself (8:32; 9:7), it is not correct to say he initiated the hardening process. Yahweh was the first to harden him (in response to his autonomous rejection of Yahweh) and this hardening activity continued throughout the narrative in response to Pharaoh's rejection of Yahweh's command. Nine times the hardening prevented Pharaoh from responding positively to a sign or plague. There is a rhetorical shift as the story unfolds. Early on, the writer observed that Pharaoh's heart was hard "as the Lord had said." Later, the hardening was attributed directly to Yahweh. In 4:21 and 7:3 God, the divine "Puppeteer," announced the program; in the early stages of the narrative one barely sees the puppet's strings, but by the end of the narrative the curtain covering the platform is pulled aside to reveal the Puppeteer in action.

Third, divine hardening was a form of judgment, which on five occasions even went so far as to reverse a seemingly positive response by Pharaoh. An initial act of refusal precluded repentance later. Any move toward repentance was aborted by God. But four of these "reversals" (in which Yahweh hardened a yielding Pharaoh) came after the king's fifth refusal, and three reversals came after the sixth refusal. Once more Yahweh's patience is apparent. Also Yahweh's hardening activity ironically forced Pharaoh to act in accord with his deep-seated nature. Any yielding on Pharaoh's part was born out of expedience and panic, not a genuine fear of Yahweh (cf. 9:30, the truth of which is validated by 10:1–12).

THE HARDENING OF SIHON AND THE CANAANITE KINGS

Divine hardening also played a role in Israel's conquest of Transjordan and Canaan. In Deuteronomy 2:30 Moses wrote that Yahweh hardened the "spirit" of Sihon the Amorite king, causing him to reject Moses' peace offer and attack Israel.⁴¹ Yahweh's purpose (למען) in doing this was to deliver Sihon into Israel's hand. Joshua 11:20, in summarizing Israel's conquest, records that Yahweh hardened (Piel of חזק) the hearts of the kings west of the Jordan so they might attack Israel and be exterminated.

⁴¹ The word רוח probably has here the sense of "disposition, or will." The Piel of חזק is used in a factitive sense, "to make firm, strengthen, make obstinate, harden." Note especially its use in Deuteronomy 15:7 and 2 Chronicles 36:13.

At first glance Yahweh's motives seem to be purely genocidal and His actions appear mean-spirited. However, on further reflection one realizes that the divine hardening described here was part of Yahweh's sovereign judgment on a morally corrupt culture. Israel's invasion of Canaan was not an imperialistic "land grab" directed against morally neutral people. Yahweh had endured the Amorites for hundreds of years, patiently waiting for their sinfulness to reach its full measure (Gen. 15:16). (Joshua included the Amorites among the peoples of Canaan and seemed to link the two Amorite kings of Transjordan with the Amorites of the west [Josh. 2:10; 3:10; 7:7; 9:1, 10; 10:5, 12; 11:3; 12:2, 8; 13:4, 10, 21; 24:8, 11, 15, 18].) The inhabitants of Canaan had defiled the land with their sexual perversity, bringing Yahweh's judgment down on them. Their deeds were so detestable that the very land is depicted as vomiting them out (Lev. 18:24–28). These nations were guilty of idolatry (1 Kings 21:26) and child sacrifice (2 Kings 16:3). Yahweh gave Israel the land because of the wickedness of the native population (Deut. 9:4–5). In short, Israel was Yahweh's instrument of judgment in bringing this corrupt civilization to an end. The hardening of its kings was an important element in this divine judgment, for it expedited Yahweh's purposes and forced Israel to launch its military campaign in full force, rather than delaying and risking the possibility of being assimilated into Canaanite culture.

ISAIANIC REFERENCES TO DIVINE HARDENING

ISAIAH 6 10

As the prophet Isaiah stood before the heavenly assembly, Yahweh commissioned him, "Render the hearts of this people insensitive (Hiphil of שָׁמַן), their ears dull (Hiphil of כָּבַד); and their eyes dim, lest they see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and repent and be healed." Once again a reference to divine hardening appears, but in this case Yahweh did not directly and supernaturally harden pagans. Instead He would harden His own people indirectly through the ministry of His prophetic messenger.

Does this verse mean that Yahweh wanted to prevent His people from understanding, repenting, and being healed? This is indeed another instance of genuine divine hardening, but one must also be careful not to miss the militant irony that permeates verses 9–10.⁴²

⁴² Studies on this text tend to drift in various directions. For example Bruce Holmberg emphasizes the ironic nature of the verses and downplays the sovereignty

Verse 9, which ostensibly records the content of Isaiah's message, is clearly ironic. Isaiah did not literally proclaim these exact words. The imperatives and jussives are employed rhetorically in anticipation of the response Isaiah would receive. Isaiah might as well have prefaced and concluded every message with these ironic words, which, though imperatival in form, might be paraphrased as follows: "You continually hear, but don't understand; you continually see, but don't perceive."⁴³ Isaiah might as well have commanded them to be spiritually insensitive, because, as the preceding and following chapters make clear, the people were bent on that anyway.⁴⁴

Verse 10b is also clearly sarcastic. On the surface it seems to indicate Isaiah's hardening ministry would prevent genuine repentance.⁴⁵ But, as the surrounding chapters clearly reveal, the people were hardly ready or willing to repent. Therefore Isaiah's preaching was not needed to prevent repentance!⁴⁶ Verse 10b reflects the people's attitude and might be paraphrased accordingly: "Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their mind, repent, and be restored, and they certainly wouldn't want that, would they?!"

Of course this sarcastic statement may also reveal that Yahweh Himself was now bent on judgment, not reconciliation. Just as Pharaoh's rejection of Yahweh's ultimatum ignited judgment and foreclosed, at least temporarily, any opportunity for repentance, so Yahweh may have come to the point where He had decreed to bring judgment before opening the door for repentance

theme ("Lest They Should Turn and Be Forgiven Irony," *Bible Translator* 34 [1983] 312–21) On the other hand Craig A. Evans emphasizes divine sovereignty, but seems less sensitive to the text's rhetorical features (*To See and Not Perceive*, 64 [Sheffield: Sheffield, 1989], 17–52)

⁴³ On the rhetorical uses of imperatival forms, see Gesenius' *Hebrew Grammar*, 324 (par. 110c), Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax*, 87, and Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 571–72

⁴⁴ The language of verses 9–10 may also contain a subtle reference to the people's idolatry (G. K. Beale, "Isaiah VI 9–13: A Retributive Taunt against Idolatry," *Vetus Testamentum* 41 [1991] 257–78). In this case their culpability in prompting the divine hardening is hinted at

⁴⁵ The word פֶּנַּי introduces a negative consequence and may be translated "so as not to" or "otherwise." The terms used seem to refer to a genuine change of heart and restoration. On בִּין (to "understand or discern") see Isaiah 32:4, for שׁוּב (to "turn") see Isaiah 10:21 and Hosea 3:5, on רָפָא (to "be healed") see Jeremiah 30:17, 33:6. True repentance and reconciliation are in view, not a purely expedient response like Pharaoh's

⁴⁶ John L. McLaughlin seems oblivious to the possibility of irony here ("Their Hearts Were Hardened: The Use of Isaiah 6, 9–10 in the Book of Isaiah," *Biblica* 75 [1994] 5–6)

once more. The sarcastic statement in verse 10b would be an emphatic way of making this clear. (Perhaps the suggested paraphrase could be expanded: “Otherwise they might . . . repent, and be restored, and they certainly wouldn’t want that, would they?! Besides, it’s too late for that!”)

Within this sarcastic framework, verse 10a must also be seen as ironic. As in verse 9, the imperatival forms in verse 10 should be taken as rhetorical and as anticipating the people’s response. One might paraphrase it this way: “Your preaching will desensitize the minds of these people, make their hearing dull, and blind their eyes.” From the outset the Lord may as well have commanded Isaiah to harden the people, because his preaching would end up having that effect.

Despite the use of irony, this passage should still be viewed as a genuine, though indirect, act of divine hardening. After all, God did not have to send Isaiah. By sending him, He drove the sinful people further from Him, for Isaiah’s preaching, which focuses on Yahweh’s covenantal demands and impending judgment on covenantal rebellion, forced the people to confront their sin and then it continued to desensitize them as they responded negatively to the message. As in the case of Pharaoh, Yahweh’s hardening was not arbitrarily imposed on a righteous or even morally neutral object. Rather, His hardening was an element of His righteous judgment on recalcitrant sinners. Ironically, Israel’s rejection of prophetic preaching in turn expedited disciplinary punishment and brought the battered people to a point where they might be ready for reconciliation. The prophesied judgment (6:11–13) was fulfilled by 701 B.C. when the Assyrians devastated the land (a situation presupposed in 1:2–20, esp. vv. 4–9). At that time the divine hardening had run its course and Isaiah was able to issue an ultimatum (vv. 19–20), one which Hezekiah apparently took to heart, resulting in the sparing of Jerusalem (see Isa. 36–39 and cf. Jer. 26:18–19 with Mic. 3:12).

This interpretation, which holds in balance both Israel’s moral responsibility and Yahweh’s sovereign work among His people, is consistent with other pertinent passages in Isaiah and elsewhere. Isaiah 3:9 declares that the people of Judah “have brought disaster upon themselves,” but 29:9–10 indicates that God was involved to some degree in desensitizing the people.⁴⁷ Zechariah 7:11–12 looks back to the preexilic era (cf. v. 7) and notes that the earlier generations stubbornly hardened their hearts, but Psalm 81:11–12, recalling this same period, states that

⁴⁷ Ibid., 10–12.

Yahweh “gave them over to their stubborn hearts.”

To summarize, Yahweh’s hardening of Israel through Isaiah came in response to their covenantal rebellion and was an important element in His temporary discipline of His people designed to expedite judgment and, ironically, reconciliation as well.

ISAIAH 63 17

This verse, part of a lament written with an exilic or early postexilic perspective (cf. 63:18; 64:10–11), assumes that divine hardening had overtaken the people and was prolonging judgment. The speaker, representing the nation at large, asked, “Why, O Lord, dost Thou cause us to stray from Thy ways, and harden our heart from fearing Thee?” The verb used in the second line, the Hiphil of קָשָׁה , is rare, but it seems to mean “to make hard or stubborn.” Though one might think the verse is expressing toleration (“allow us to be stubborn”), the parallelism (cf. the Hiphil of $\text{תָּעַה$ in the preceding line) favors the causative translation.⁴⁸

It is difficult to know how direct this hardening was. The speaker may have envisioned direct involvement on Yahweh’s part. The Lord had brought the exile as judgment for the nation’s sin and now He continued to keep them at arm’s length by blinding them spiritually. The second half of 64:7 might support this, though the precise reading of the final verb is uncertain.

On the other hand the idiom of lament is sometimes ironic and hyperbolically deterministic. For example Naomi lamented that Shaddai was directly opposing her and bringing her calamity (Ruth 1:20–21), while the author of Psalm 88 directly attributed his horrible suffering and loneliness to God (vv. 6–8, 16–18). Both individuals made little, if any, room for intermediate causes or the principle of sin and death which ravages the human race. In the same way, the speaker in Isaiah 63:17 (who evidenced great spiritual sensitivity and was anything but “hardened”) may have been referring to the hardships of exile, which discouraged and even embittered the people, causing many of them to retreat from their faith in the Lord. In this case the “hardening” in view is more indirect and could be lifted by Yahweh’s intervention. Whether the hardening here is indirect or direct, it is important to recognize that the speaker saw it as one of the effects of rebellion against Yahweh (64:5–6).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ The Hiphil of תָּעַה appears to be tolerative in Jeremiah 50 6, but elsewhere it is preferable or necessary to take it as causative (see Isa 3 12, 9 16, 30 28, as well as Gen 20 13, 2 Kings 21 9, Job 12 24–25, Prov 12 26, Jer 23 13, 32, Hos 4 12, Amos 2 4, and Mic 3 5)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 16

SUMMARY

When God hardened the pagan kings (Pharaoh, Sihon the Amorite, and the kings of Canaan), He did indeed override the human will, but this was not inconsistent with His justice, nor was it a violation of human moral freedom. In Pharaoh's case Yahweh gave the Egyptian ruler several "windows of opportunity," each of which the stubborn king closed. Divine hardening was Yahweh's sovereign response to Pharaoh's arrogant rejection of His authoritative demands. In the case of Sihon and the Canaanite kings, divine hardening was an element of God's holy war against ethnic groups whose judgment had been decreed because of past sins.

Because of their highly literary character, the Isaiah passages are more difficult to analyze. Isaiah 6:9–10 pictures a more indirect type of divine involvement that initiated disciplinary judgment of His covenant people through, of all things, prophetic preaching. Isaiah 63:17 refers to either an indirect form of hardening through the hardships of exile, or direct divine hardening that brings to culmination God's judgment against His people.

Divine hardening, whether accomplished directly or indirectly, is an element of divine judgment whereby God exhibits His justice and sovereignty. The objects of such judgment are never morally righteous or neutral, but are rebels against God's authority. Divine hardening is never arbitrarily implemented, but comes in response to rejection of God's authoritative word or standards.



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