

# A NOTE ON THE HARDENING OF PHARAOH'S HEART

By Ashby L. Camp

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In Ex. 3:10 God tells Moses in Midian that he is going to send him to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egyptian bondage. He says in Ex. 3:18 that Moses and the elders shall go to the king of Egypt and request that he allow the Israelites to go a three days' journey into the wilderness that they may sacrifice to the LORD their God. Then God declares (Ex. 3:19), "But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go, not even with a mighty hand."<sup>1</sup> In other words, God knows that from the beginning Pharaoh will be adamantly opposed to allowing the Israelites to leave, to the point that he would resist even strong pressure (a mighty hand) to do so. But as the next verse makes clear (Ex. 3:20), Pharaoh will indeed yield to the ultimate mighty hand, the hand of God. He will relent after God strikes the Egyptians with all his wonders, with the full complement of plagues revealed in the following chapters. That, of course, is precisely how things unfold.

At the start of Moses' journey back to Egypt, the LORD tells him (Ex. 4:21-23):

When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go.<sup>22</sup> Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son,<sup>23</sup> and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me." If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.'

Moses (with Aaron) is to be God's instrument for the plagues on Egypt (Ex. 7:17-20; 8:5-6, 16-17; 9:8-10, 22-25; 10:12-15, 21-23; 11:10). God is here telling him to be faithful in that responsibility, to do before Pharaoh all the miracles he empowers him to perform, up until the final plague that will take Pharaoh's firstborn son. During the imposition of the plagues, as part of his judgment on Pharaoh and the Egyptians and as a display of his superiority over Pharaoh, God will strengthen Pharaoh in his resistance, stiffen his resolve to oppose him,<sup>2</sup> so that the contest Pharaoh initiates will not end until God exhibits his glory by pouring out in waves all the punishment he had determined to inflict. Part of his judgment of Pharaoh will be to implicate him in the eyes of the people in the calamity that befalls Egypt, to reinforce his pride to the point of abject foolishness. Even his servants will say to him in bewilderment (Ex. 10:7b), "Do you not yet understand that Egypt is ruined?"

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew of 3:19b is :לֹא בְיָד חֲזָקָה [wəlō' bēyād hāzāqā]. It usually is rendered "unless compelled by a mighty hand" (e.g., RSV, NRSV, ESV) or "except under compulsion" (e.g., NAS, NASU), but according to the NET note, "and not with' does not have the meaning 'except' or 'unless' in other places." It seems best, therefore, to translate the phrase along the lines of the NET: "not even under force." The NKJV has "no, not even by a mighty hand."

Translated that way, the clause is intended to highlight how staunchly Pharaoh is opposed to letting the Israelites go.  
<sup>2</sup> The verb rendered "harden" in 4:21b is קָיָם [hāzaq], which in the Piel stem means to "strengthen, fortify, reinforce." Robin Wakely, "חזק" in Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2:64, 68. Thus, God will fortify Pharaoh's intention, not impose on him an alien one. This is the same word routinely translated "harden" in 7:13, 22; 8:15; 9:12, 35; 10:20, 27; 11:10.

After returning to Egypt and gaining the confidence of the elders and the people, Moses and Aaron say to Pharaoh (Ex. 5:1), "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.'" There is no mention here of any hardening, but as foretold in Ex. 3:19, Pharaoh responded (Ex. 5:2), "Who is the LORD, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and moreover, I will not let Israel go." The intensity of Pharaoh's opposition to God's command is evident in the fact he punishes the Israelites, God's people, in response to it. He forces them to gather their own straw for the bricks they were compelled to make, without reducing their production quota, thereby causing them great hardship (Ex. 5:6-23). Thus, Pharaoh, of his own volition, threw down the gauntlet before the LORD, and in so doing, got more than he bargained for. His arrogance and rebellion led to Egypt's devastation, his personal humiliation and grief, the revelation of God's greatness and glory, and the birthing of Israel in furtherance of God's plan.

In Ex. 7:1-4, God sends Moses and Aaron back to Pharaoh to tell him to let the people of Israel leave the land, and he confirms his intention to "harden" Pharaoh's heart.<sup>3</sup> Despite the miracle of Aaron's staff becoming a snake and swallowing the snakes produced by Pharaoh's wise men, sorcerers, and magicians (Ex. 7:10-12), Pharaoh's heart "was hardened,"<sup>4</sup> and he refused to heed their demand (Ex. 7:13-14). This refusal is followed by the well-known series of ten plagues that culminates in the death of Egypt's firstborn and the expulsion of the Israelites from Egypt.

The source of Pharaoh's hardening in Ex. 7:13-14 is not specified. The verses simply report that Pharaoh's heart "was hardened" (Ex. 7:13) and "is hardened" (Ex. 7:14). Many assume that God was the source because he says in Ex. 7:3-4a that he will harden Pharaoh's heart and that Pharaoh will not listen to them, and then in Ex. 7:13 it is reported that "Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, *as the LORD had said.*" But it is unclear that "as the LORD had said" refers to the statement in Ex. 7:3-4a. In three other places where it is reported that Pharaoh "would not listen to them, *as the LORD had said,*" it was Pharaoh who had hardened his own heart. In those cases, "as the LORD had said" refers not to Ex. 7:3-4a, which identifies the LORD as the source of hardening, but to the LORD's declaration in Ex. 3:19 that Pharaoh would not let them go, i.e., would not listen to them. Therefore, it is reasonable to think that Pharaoh was the unidentified source of the hardening in Ex. 7:13-14.

The first place where Pharaoh hardened his own heart and it was reported that he "would not listen to them, as the LORD had said" is Ex. 7:22. We are told there that Pharaoh's heart

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<sup>3</sup> The verb rendered "harden" in 7:3 is  $\text{קָשָׁה}$  [*qāšā*], which in the Hiphil stem means "to make hard, stiff, stubborn." Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), 904. Again, the sense is that God, as part of his judgment, will fortify Pharaoh in his rebellion; he will make him stubborn in the desires of his heart, not impose those desires upon him.

<sup>4</sup> The adjective rendered "hardened" in 7:14 is  $\text{קָבֵד}$  [*kābēd*]. It means "heavy, thick, unresponsive." The related verb in the Hiphil stem (used in 8:15, 32; 9:34; 10:1) means "to make dull, make unresponsive" and in the Qal stem means "to be heavy, dull" (used in 9:7). Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. and trans. M. E. J. Richardson (New York: E. J. Brill, 2001), 1:455-456. To be dull or unresponsive is to be stuck in one's existing state; it does not connote being put into that state.

became hard<sup>5</sup> (*hāzaq*) because<sup>6</sup> the magicians of Egypt were able to duplicate *by their magic arts* (God is not mentioned) the plague of the water turning to blood. In other words, the magicians' success strengthened Pharaoh's resistance to Moses' demand by diminishing the distinctiveness of the miracle that Moses and Aaron had performed. That implies that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. He used the external input from the magicians to reinforce his resistance. Indeed, the NAB and NABRE render the clause, "So Pharaoh hardened his heart." The verse includes "and he would not listen to them, *as the LORD had said.*"

Exodus 8:15 states expressly that after the plague of frogs ceased, Pharaoh "hardened his heart and would not listen to them, *as the LORD had said.*" Exodus 9:34 likewise states that after the plague of hail ceased, Pharaoh "hardened his heart." This hardening is described in Ex. 9:35 as "the heart of Pharaoh was hardened," so clearly one cannot assume that passives in this context are "divine passives."<sup>7</sup> That verse includes the equivalent of "and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said." It states, "and he did not let the people of Israel go [i.e., did not listen to Moses and Aaron], just as the LORD had said through Moses."<sup>8</sup> Since Pharaoh in Ex. 7:22, 8:15, and 9:35 hardens his own heart and would not listen to Moses and Aaron, "as the LORD had said," there is no warrant for insisting that the unidentified source of the hardening in Ex. 7:13-14 was God.

The statement in Ex. 8:19 that Pharaoh's heart "was hardened" is sandwiched between Pharaoh hardening his own heart in Ex. 8:15 and 8:32, so one should not assume God was the source of the hardening in Ex. 8:19. The same goes for the statement in Ex. 9:7 that his heart "was hardened."<sup>9</sup> Yes, God does harden Pharaoh's heart, strengthens his resolve, as he said he would (Ex. 4:21, 7:3) and as is declared in Ex. 9:12, 10:1, 10:20, 10:27, and 11:10, but Pharaoh is perfectly capable of stiffening his own neck against the demands of Yahweh. It is when Pharaoh begins to lose heart prematurely from God's perspective, before God has achieved all his purposes in the contest that Pharaoh initiated, that God strengthens him in the battle. God will not let it be over until he says it is over, and he uses Pharaoh to keep it going to make him an object of humiliation and scorn as part of his just punishment.

The first unequivocal indication of the LORD hardening Pharaoh's heart, stiffening his resolve, is in Ex. 9:12 after the sixth plague, the plague of boils. With that strengthening, Pharaoh remained steadfast in his refusal to let the Israelites go despite the extent and severity of the boils (Ex. 9:8-11). Apparently, this plague caused him to begin to waver in his resistance so that he needed to be fortified.

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<sup>5</sup> A literal rendering of the Hebrew is "and the heart of Pharaoh became hard." Some English versions understand the phrase contextually to represent the continuation of a prior condition, and thus state that Pharaoh's heart "remained hard." Those that opt for a more literal rendering include KJV, ERV, ASV, NAS, NASU, NKJV, HCSB, NIV, LSB.

<sup>6</sup> The NET note states, "The *vav* consecutive on the preterite introduces the outcome or result of the matter – Pharaoh was hardened." This is expressed in various translations by "so" (RSV, NRSV, HCSB, NAB, NABRE, NET, ESV, CSB, NRSVUE).

<sup>7</sup> A "divine passive" is where God is assumed to be the subject of the action that is described in the passive voice.

<sup>8</sup> The addition of "through Moses" presumably is an acknowledgement that Moses was the source of the revelation that God delivered directly to him in Ex. 3:19.

<sup>9</sup> The NET renders it "remained hardened," which would refer back to Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart in 8:32.

Some time later, however, the LORD tells Moses to go before Pharaoh again and to say to him (Ex. 9:13b-18):

'Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, "Let my people go, that they may serve me. <sup>14</sup> For this time I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth. <sup>15</sup> For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. <sup>16</sup> But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. <sup>17</sup> You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go. <sup>18</sup> Behold, about this time tomorrow I will cause very heavy hail to fall, such as never has been in Egypt from the day it was founded until now.

Though God strengthened Pharaoh's resistance to Moses' demand in Ex. 9:12, Pharaoh apparently renewed his courage so that he was again resisting God's demand on his own. That is why God, with a view toward Pharaoh's refusal to let the Israelites go when threatened with the plague of hail, said Pharaoh was *exalting himself* against God's people and was *unwilling* to let them go (Ex. 9:17). And that is why that refusal was sinful (Ex. 9:27, 34).<sup>10</sup> If he was unable to let them go because of divine hardening, his failure to do so would not be culpable; rather, it would be part of his punishment. It was sinful because it was volitional.

The fact God raised Pharaoh up, to show him his power, so that his name may be proclaimed in all the earth (Ex. 9:16) means that God orchestrated Pharaoh's rise to the throne because God foreknew that he was the person who would fulfill God's larger purpose. It does not mean that the punishment of Pharaoh that was part of that larger purpose was unjust. As I say, Pharaoh was sufficiently egomaniacal to cross swords with the Almighty, which resulted in his and Egypt's punishment, God's glorification, and the furtherance of God's plan.<sup>11</sup>

After the hail battered Egypt (Ex. 9:18-26), Pharaoh tells Moses and Aaron that he sinned in rejecting their demand, that he and his people were in the wrong, and that he would let the Israelites go if they pleaded with the LORD for the hail to end (Ex. 9:27-28). Moses tells him that he will stretch out his hands to the LORD to end the hailstorm as soon as he is out of the city (Ex. 9:29), and he adds that he knows that Pharaoh and his servants "do not yet fear the LORD God" (Ex. 9:30). He knew that despite Pharaoh's current concession to the pressure, his promise to free the Israelites if the hail stopped, his arrogance was not yet broken. That is borne out in the

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<sup>10</sup> Pharaoh's confession to Moses and Aaron in 9:27 in the midst of the hailstorm, "This time I have sinned," refers to his refusal to heed God's demand delivered in relation to the threatened plague of hail (Ex. 9:13-21). The accuracy of Pharaoh's assessment that this refusal was sinful is confirmed by the statement in 9:34 that in reneging on his promise to let them go if the hailstorm would cease, "he sinned *yet again*."

<sup>11</sup> Paul, of course, famously refers to this verse in Rom. 9:17-18: "For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' <sup>18</sup> So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills." In using Pharaoh for his purposes, God not only brings Pharaoh to the throne, but in his sovereignty hardens him in fulfillment of those purposes. He does so, however, consistently with his righteous nature. Pharaoh is strengthened in his resistance so as to be unable to relent not to provide a basis for punishing him but as part of the punishment already earned. God uses that means of punishment to incorporate it into his larger purpose.

fact that, once the storm ceased, Pharaoh "sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants" (Ex. 9:34). Not only is Pharaoh declared to be the source of this hardening, but he is said to have sinned in the process. He was culpable for reneging and thus had the ability to do otherwise. In other words, he was not incapable of keeping his promise because of divine hardening.

Exodus 10:1-2 states: Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them,<sup>2</sup> and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and of your grandson how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD." This is best understood as a declaration of God's fixed determination to harden Pharaoh's heart in relation to *upcoming demands* by Moses for him to free the Israelites. That is, the perfect verbal form ("have hardened") should be taken as what is variously called a prophetic perfect, perfect of certitude, perfective of confidence, or an accidental perfective. By whatever name, it is an indication that a future act of God is so certain that it is expressed as having already occurred.<sup>12</sup> For example, the perfect verb in Ex. 15:14 ("have heard") is often understood as a prophetic perfect and thus rendered as "will hear" (e.g., NKJV, NIV, NET). Genesis 17:5 is an example of God using this figure of speech in direct address. He there tells Abraham in advance, "I *have made* you the father of a multitude of nations." In other words, it was a "done deal," a foregone conclusion.

God explains to Moses that he is to again go before Pharaoh because God will make Pharaoh dull or unresponsive to Moses' demands. Moses is to be an instrument in God's plan for pouring out in the final plagues the full cup of his just wrath on Pharaoh and the Egyptians, through which his glory will be exhibited. Referring to Pharaoh's most recent refusal to allow the Israelites to leave, his hardening of his heart and reneging on his promise after the plague of hail, Moses and Aaron tell him (Ex. 10:3-5a), "Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Let my people go, that they may serve me. For if you refuse to let my people go, behold, tomorrow I will bring locusts into your country,<sup>5</sup> and they shall cover the face of the land, so that no one can see the land.'

Pharaoh's heart is not yet divinely hardened. That is suggested by the fact God announced in Ex. 10:2 that he was going to harden the heart of Pharaoh's servants as well as that of Pharaoh, but in Ex. 10:7 Pharaoh's servants are urging him to free the Israelites. Pharaoh apparently wavers, calling Moses and Aaron back for further discussion (Ex. 10:8), but then he slams the door, presumably under divine hardening, and Moses and Aaron are driven from his presence

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<sup>12</sup> "The prophetic QĀTAL/PERFECT is a use of the QĀTAL/PERFECT FORM to present future events as if they have already happened." Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jacobus A. Naudé, Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2017), 539. Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi state in *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 55-56, "As a rhetorical device, the perfect presents future events as if they have already occurred, which often requires the present or future in translation." S. R. Driver states in *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881), 20, "The perfect is employed to indicate actions the accomplishment of which lies indeed in the future, but is regarded as dependent upon the unalterable determination of the will that it may be spoken of as having actually taken place: thus a resolution, promise, decree, especially a divine one, is very frequently announced in the perfect tense."

(Ex. 10:9-11). Thereafter, Moses, at God's behest, initiates the plague of locusts, which devastates the land.

Pharaoh apparently is unaware that his latest refusal involved a divine hardening that rendered him incapable of relenting, because when he summons Moses and Aaron after the locust invasion, he says he had sinned against the LORD and against them (Ex. 10:16). That was his sense, but that sense was inaccurate if his response was indeed determined by God's hardening. In that case, he was not sinning in refusing to let them go but was being punished for prior sins by being made to refuse so as to implicate him in the further disaster. Unlike his declaration of having sinned in Ex. 9:27, which the Spirit in Ex. 9:34 confirmed was sinful ("sinned *yet again*"), there is no confirmation that his conduct on this occasion was sinful.

Pharaoh urged Moses and Aaron to plead with the LORD to remove the locust plague (Ex. 10:17) and presumably promised that he would allow the Israelites to leave if the LORD did so. The LORD drove the locusts from Egypt, but he then hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he did not let the people go (Ex. 10:19-20). The LORD then had Moses initiate the plague of supernatural darkness. Pharaoh again wavered, summoning Moses and offering to allow all the people to leave but without their livestock. When Moses told him that their livestock needed to come with them because they may be needed in serving the LORD, the LORD again hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he refused to let them go (Ex. 10:21-27).

At that point, Pharaoh ordered Moses to leave and threatened to kill him if he ever saw his face again (Ex. 10:28). Moses agreed this would be their last meeting (Ex. 10:29), but before he left Pharaoh's presence, which does not occur until Ex. 11:8, he delivered to him the news of the LORD's final plague, the death of every firstborn in the land of Egypt, except among the people of Israel (Ex. 11:4-8). Once again, the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart that he refused to heed the command (Ex. 11:9-10). As reported in Ex. 11:29: At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sat on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the firstborn of the livestock.

In keeping with what the LORD told Moses in Ex. 3:19-21 and 4:21-23, the result is reported in Ex. 12:31-36:

<sup>31</sup> Then he summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, "Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as you have said. <sup>32</sup> Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!" <sup>33</sup> The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste. For they said, "We shall all be dead." <sup>34</sup> So the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading bowls being bound up in their cloaks on their shoulders. <sup>35</sup> The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. <sup>36</sup> And the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians.