

IF GOD HARDENED PHARAOAH'S HEART, DID GOD CAUSE EVIL?

EXPLORING THE EPIC SHOWDOWN IN THE EXODUS STORY

TIM MACKIE*

Let's be honest, **Exodus 1-18** is a super intense part of the biblical story, which raises some heavy theological questions. The epic showdown between God and Pharaoh over the fate of the enslaved Israelites is a page-turner. Pharaoh is a really bad man—actually the worst person we have met in the Bible so far. As you read these stories, you may be tempted to ask, who is really calling the shots here? Is it God? If so, why would he allow this? And why does this showdown become so violent and intense?

PHARAOH WITH A CAPITAL "P"

Pharaoh is not one single king in Exodus. If you pay attention, you'll see that this royal title refers to a sequence of Egyptian kings over many generations. It raises the interesting question of why the author doesn't actually name the Pharaoh who opposed Moses (was he Thutmose II or III, or Ramses I or II?). This was almost certainly on purpose. The author doesn't want us to focus on one single king. Rather, he wants us to see Pharaoh as an archetype of the pattern of human rebellion that began in the garden and culminated in Babylon.

This king, or sequence of kings, is the epitome of human evil. He embodies the strange and tragic turn the human heart can take when one person or society places their own values and well-being above another person or society. Pharaoh is what happens when an entire nation redefines good and evil apart from God's wisdom. You get an Egypt building its wealth and security on the backs of an abused, oppressed, and enslaved Israel. As the story develops, Pharaoh even places his own reputation and pride above the well-being of his own people. This is a horrific situation, and it's the Bible's diagnosis of the human condition in corporate terms.

but his heart when he cried to him
from you comes my praise in the great
congregation
my eyes I will perform before those
who fear him
The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied
those who seek him shall praise the
Lord!
May your hearts live forever!

The Lord is My Shepherd
23
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall
not want.
He makes me lie down in green
pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

EVIL TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

A common question readers have about this story, concerns the repeated theme of Pharaoh's "hard heart." Sometimes we're told Pharaoh hardens his heart against God, but other times we read that God hardens his heart. Who is really behind all this evil? And what does this story tell us about God's relationship to evil at other times in history, or in our own lives?

To answer this question you have to be patient, and read the story slowly and in sequence. Otherwise you'll short-circuit the experience the author wants you to go through. In Moses' commissioning (Exodus 3-6), God first says he "knows" Pharaoh will resist the demand to let the Israelites go (Exodus 3:19-20), so God says that he will harden Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 4:21 and 7:3). God knows the hearts of humans and can anticipate their responses, a sobering thought echoed throughout the Bible (see Jeremiah 17:10). God will turn Pharaoh's evil back on his own head, but does that mean God is responsible for Pharaoh's rebellion from beginning to end? You have to keep reading, and stay alert.

HARDENING OF HEARTS

In Moses' and Pharaoh's first encounter (Exodus 7:13-14), Pharaoh's heart "became hard." Get your Bible-nerd hat on because there's a translation issue here that unfortunately complicates things. The Hebrew verb for "became hard" (pronounced, khazaq) is not passive, nor does it indicate who is initiating the action (it's called a "stative" verb, meaning it doesn't say whether it's Pharaoh or God). If you're reading in the NIV, it's ambiguous, which seems to be the point. However, some other modern translations have regrettably inserted their interpretation into the text and rendered this verb "was hardened." In other words, they turn it into a passive verb. You walk away from chapter 7 thinking God was hardening Pharaoh's heart from the first, which isn't what the text says. As you read on, you'll notice a fascinating pattern emerge. In the first five plagues that God sends on Egypt, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart happens by his own will, or is again ambiguous, just as we saw in the opening scene. In the last five plagues, the pattern changes.

...and he has not hidden his face from him
but his heart, when he cried to him,
from you comes my praise in the great
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my voice, I will perform before those
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The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied
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A Psalm of David
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THE TEN PLAGUES AND PHARAOH'S HEART

- Blood: Pharaoh's heart "became hard" (**7:22**)
- Frogs: Pharaoh "hardened his own heart" (**8:15**)
- Gnats: Pharaoh's heart "was hard" (**8:19**)
- Flies: "Pharaoh hardened his own heart" (**8:32**)
- Livestock die: Pharaoh's heart "was hard" (**9:7**)
- Boils: "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart" (**9:12**)
- Hail: Pharaoh "hardened his own heart" (**9:34**)
- Locusts: God announces that he has "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (**10:1,10:20**)
- Darkness: God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (**10:27**)
- Death of the firstborn: God "hardened Pharaoh's heart" (**11:10**)

Here we are able to draw several conclusions. First of all, in plagues 6-10, we hear four times that God has hardened Pharaoh's heart. Can you see how this is a distinct change from plagues 1-5? In those stories, Pharaoh explicitly hardened his own heart (plagues 2 and 4), or the source of the hardening was ambiguous (plagues 1, 3, and 5). Interestingly, in the seventh plague of hail, we first see Pharaoh harden his own heart (**Exodus 9:34**), but afterward the narrator uses the ambiguous verb "became hard" to describe it. This means that all of the other uses of the ambiguous verb (plagues 1, 3, and 5) do not imply that God hardened Pharaoh's heart, but just the opposite!

THE POINT

Why does the author use this back-and-forth technique in describing Pharaoh's heart? It's all part of the brilliant diagnosis of the human condition in this story, which is about the mysterious nature of human evil. God called Pharaoh to humble himself and acknowledge that God is his authority and that he cannot redefine good and evil on Egyptian terms. Pharaoh's response (see Exodus 5:1-2) is to balk at the God of Israel.

...ed he has not hidden his face from him
but his heart when he cried to him
from afar comes my praise in the great
congregation
my voice I will perform before those
who hear him
The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied
those who seek him shall praise the
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May your hearts live forever!

The Lord is My Shepherd
A Psalm of David
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After this, God gives Pharaoh five opportunities to repent and humble himself. And five times Pharaoh hardens his heart. The author wants us to see that even the most heinous and absurd forms of human evil are not a true threat to God's purposes. He can steer even this kind of evil toward his plan to bless all humanity through Abraham's family.

THE CLIMAX

Ultimately, whether it was God or Pharaoh, at the end of ten plagues, Pharaoh wants the Israelites gone. After losing his own son, Pharaoh releases the Israelites. Not surprisingly, Pharaoh has yet another change of heart and goes back on his decision to let the Israelites go (Exodus 14:5). Pharaoh musters his army and we're told that God "hardens his heart" (Exodus 14:8). We know how this story ends. The evil turn of Pharaoh's heart turns back on himself, resulting in an empire-wide catastrophe.

THE ROMANS 9 RESPONSE

Romans 9 is the lengthiest reference Paul makes to Exodus in the New Testament. Many point to this chapter to say that God was ultimately behind the evil of Pharaoh from the beginning. He writes, "Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and He hardens whom He wills." (**Romans 9:18**)

Paul sees in Pharaoh's hard heart, a pattern that was again at work in his own day, namely the rejection of Jesus the Messiah by many of his own, Jewish, people. In this passage, Paul is not offering a commentary on the complicated theme of Pharaoh's hard heart, nor is he claiming that God alone was responsible. He is summarizing the main point of the Exodus story's diagnosis of Pharaoh's evil (God's purpose to bless cannot be thwarted by heinous human evil) and applying it to an apparent tragedy in his own day. Jesus' execution was actually part of God's plan to bring blessing to all the nations. It is Paul's exploration of God's justice and mercy. The fact that God can steer evil towards his purposes does not mean he engineered it. Pharaoh is responsible for his own evil, just as Joseph's brothers were. However, there is no force of human evil that can resist God's purpose to bring salvation and blessing to all nations.

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from you comes my praise in the great
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WHAT DID THIS MEAN FOR PHARAOH, AND WHAT DOES THIS MEAN TO ME?

When human evil goes unchecked, bad things happen, and bad people can sometimes turn into monsters. The author of Exodus is showing us that Pharaoh was responsible for the evil in his heart. At a clear point in the story (after plague 5), he crossed a point of no return. At this point, God re-purposes this “vessel” (as Paul puts it in Romans 9) for his own good purposes. The point of the story is not to tell us that God engineers evil. Rather, it is a cautionary warning to you, the reader, saying, “Don’t be like Pharaoh!” Strange things happen in the human heart and mind when we let the evil urges of our broken nature go unchecked. God will always graciously offer us chances to turn back (would you have given Pharaoh so many chances?!). But sometimes a person can cement themselves in a destructive path and reach a point of no return. God can and sometimes will allow our evil to destroy us. BUT the good news is, if that last sentence kind of freaks you out, you’re not Pharaoh! The fact that you’re asking the sobering question means that your heart is soft and wants to do the right thing. As we progress through the rest of the biblical narrative, you’ll see this theme of the hard vs. soft heart develop more. For now, let’s ponder the mysterious justice and mercy of God, who wants to save us from ourselves.

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and stand in awe of him, all you
offspring of Israel!
For he has not despised or abhorred
the affliction of the afflicted,
and he has not hidden his face from him,
but has heard when he cried to him.
From you comes my praise in the great
congregation;
my vows I will perform before those
who fear him.
The afflicted shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the
Lord!
May your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth shall remember

• I can count all my bone
they stare and gloat over me;
they divide my garments among

The Lord Is My Shepherd

23

A PSALM OF DAVID

The LORD is my shepherd;
I shall not want.

2 He makes me lie down in green
pastures;
He leads me beside still waters.
3 He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name's sake.

• I am not in want, for the LORD is with me;
he will not allow me to be troubled.

who is the generation of those who
seek him.
who seek the face of the God of
Jacob.

Lift up your heads, O gates!
And be lifted up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in battle!
Lift up your heads, O gates!
And lift them up, O ancient doors,
that the King of glory may come in.
Who is this King of glory?
The LORD of hosts,
he is the King of glory!

12 Him will he instruct in the way of
peace,
he should choose.
13 His soul shall abide in well-being,
and his offspring shall inherit the land.
14 The friendship of the LORD is for those
who fear him,
and he makes known to them his
covenant.
15 My eyes are ever toward the LORD,
for he will pluck my feet out of the
net.
16 Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
17 The troubles of my heart are enlarged;
bring me out of my distresses.
18 Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.