

The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

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In the book of Exodus there are twenty references that deal with the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Ten of these directly state that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. The question to which this study is addressed regards the other ten references. Who do they say hardened Pharaoh's heart? What is the relationship between Pharaoh's free will and God's sovereignty? These are some of the issues I hope to grapple with in this study.

To set the stage, in Exodus 3 God calls Moses to be the Deliverer of Israel from Egypt. In verse 19, He warns Moses: "I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion." In other words, God is telling Moses that Pharaoh will resist the suggestion that he allow the Israelites to cease from their labors to serve their God. Pharaoh's heart is not inclined to showing them favor or to responding to the commands of some unknown God of the enslaved Israelites (cf. Ex.5:1-21). This is the starting point of the coming events. The condition of Pharaoh's heart toward the children of Israel and their God was already somewhat hard and set in a certain attitude. It was because of this condition of Pharaoh's heart that, in the next verse, God promises Moses that He will strike Egypt with all His miracles. After these Pharaoh will let Israel go.

Let us examine the various references to Pharaoh's heart-hardening. The references to the Lord hardening Pharaoh's heart will be indented from the margin more than the other references in order to facilitate identification and still allow for examining them as they occur in sequence.

- (1.) 4:21 -- "I will harden Pharaoh's heart so that he will not let the people go". This is a promise that God will harden Pharaoh's heart at some future time. This is, indeed, before there is any interaction between Moses and Pharaoh, and reveals God's intention. As to when or how often He intends to do this, it is not clear, except that He makes reference to Moses doing all the wonders that God empowers him with, so that the stage is set for the final plague, i.e., the plague of the firstborn, or the Passover.
- (2.) 7:3 -- "I will harden Pharaoh's heart..." This again is a promise of some future act. It is significant here, and in verse 5, we have given to us some reasons why God intends to harden Pharaoh's heart. He says He will harden Pharaoh's heart so that "I may multiply My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt" and so that "the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord" by these displays of power in deliverance of the Israelites. The implication is that if God does *not* harden Pharaoh's heart, there will not be the occasion for His miracles to be multiplied and that it might not be clear that He is God.

1. 7:13--"Pharaoh's heart was hardened". This is the first questionable reference of those that do not directly state that God would actually harden Pharaoh's heart. At this juncture it would be good to discuss the meaning of the Hebrew words that are translated as "harden". The word in this verse, and also in 4:21, is from a root meaning "to be hard" or "to be strong". The idea is that the heart is unyielding, unshapeable, or unwavering because it is strong in its conviction. The literal Hebrew in 4:21 would be better translated with this idea in mind. In other words, in 4:21, God is saying that He will give Pharaoh strength of heart to continue in his heart's resolve. Here, in 7:13, the Hebrew actually says that Pharaoh's heart was strong, not even necessarily that it was strengthened or changed in any way at all. The verb states the condition of Pharaoh's heart. This is the root of the word in 12 of the 20 references, and in 8 of the 10 where the Lord

definitely is acting upon Pharaoh's heart.

The word in 7:3 literally means to harden in the sense of to make unyielding or difficult. A literal translation would be: "I will make unyielding the heart of Pharaoh."

The phrase "as the Lord had said" has been construed by some to mean that God had hardened Pharaoh's heart as He had said He would. My response is that the Lord had said that Pharaoh would not eagerly comply with the request, and this is the idea meant by "and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said." Secondly, as I said above, the verb here does not necessarily state that *any* action was done upon Pharaoh's heart at all. It is merely a statement of the condition of Pharaoh's heart. If no action was done, then of course, there is no other explanation for the phrase in question. Finally, the circumstances involved Moses' throwing down his staff before Pharaoh and it becoming a serpent. When the magicians were able to do the same thing by their magic or trickery, and Moses' serpent ate up their serpents, was this such an awesome display of authority and power that Pharaoh needed divine intervention to keep from buckling under the weight of truth and fear inspired by these events? I seriously doubt if I would have been convinced by that alone! No, I don't think the finger of God was necessary to support Pharaoh's arrogant heart here and I believe that careful translation and exegesis does not necessarily imply that it did. (see further comment in #4 below, referring to Ex. 8:15).

2. 7:14 ---"Pharaoh's heart is stubborn". Literally the Hebrew word means that his heart was heavy or dull. Again this is merely a report on the condition of Pharaoh's heart toward their demands.
3. 7:22 - "And Pharaoh's heart was hardened". This is exactly the same word structure as in 7:13. The better translation would be "Pharaoh's heart was strong". A very important clue is given to us in the next verse where it says that he went into his house "with no concern even for this." The literal Hebrew states "and he did not set (or direct) his heart even to this." Who is in charge of Pharaoh's heart as he is confronted by the claims, demands, and this first plague of Moses? Pharaoh, himself.
4. 8:15 -- "He hardened (literally, he made heavy) his heart". The sentence structure makes clear that it must be Pharaoh who made his own heart heavy. "Pharaoh saw... and he made heavy his heart, and he did not listen..." It would be absurd to think that God could be the subject of the causal verb in such a structure. This therefore clarifies also the meaning of the phrase "as the Lord had said". It must refer to Pharaoh not listening to them.
5. 8:19 - "And Pharaoh's heart was hardened (lit, strong). In other words, in spite of the fact that the magicians proclaimed that this was God at work, Pharaoh's heart was strong and did not weaken or waver.
6. 8:32 - "And Pharaoh hardened (made heavy or stubborn) his heart this time also". The Hebrew allows for no other construction. Pharaoh is definitely the one hardening his heart. Note that it says "this time also", meaning that he had done so before.
7. 9:7 - "The heart of Pharaoh was hardened" (lit, was heavy, stubborn). Again, the Hebrew does not say that his heart was made heavy but rather that it *was* heavy, i.e., referring to its *condition*, not a change of some kind.

(3.) 9:12--"And the Lord hardened (lit., made strong) Pharaoh's heart." This is the first time it definitely says that God actually did something to Pharaoh's heart. This is after seven occasions describing the condition of Pharaoh's heart *without* God's intervention. This is also after six of the ten plagues have come upon Egypt. This last plague significantly showed the powerlessness of the magicians of Pharaoh to stand against

this powerful God of the Hebrews. It is interesting that at this juncture, verses 14-16, God gives an explanation for why He has not destroyed them, but actually has *preserved* Pharaoh (lit. caused him to stand). The picture that seems to be presented is that Pharaoh has resisted God's warnings seven times and, although he deserves to be judged, God has enabled him to stand in order to show him His power and in order to make His name known through all the earth (cf. Rom. 9:22,23). Note, too, that God does not change Pharaoh's heart, rather He strengthens it in the resolve it already had.

8. 9:34 – “He sinned again and hardened (lit, made heavy, stubborn) his heart”. Once again we have a clear reference to Pharaoh hardening his own heart. “He sinned again” literally should be “he added to sin” referring to the other times he hardened his heart against God's demands and authority.
9. 9:35 – “And Pharaoh's heart was hardened” (lit, strong). Another reference to the condition of his heart.
 - (4.) 10:1 – “I have hardened (lit, made heavy, stubborn) his heart...” Here, as before, God gives an explanation for what He does. A fairly literal translation of the Hebrew says, “...in order to My putting these My signs in their midst.” The implication is that if God did not make Pharaoh's heart stubborn in its resolve, Pharaoh would let the Hebrews go and there would be no more occasion for God to do these signs.
 - (5.) 10:20 – “But the Lord hardened (lit, made strong) Pharaoh's heart”. Notice Pharaoh's counselors in verse 7. They are convinced that Egypt is destroyed and counsel Pharaoh to let them go. He stands quite alone in his resistance against God. This strength of heart to continue in his intention in spite of such pressure is due to God's hand. God does not *change* his heart but *strengthens it* in its already intended purpose.
 - (6.) 10:27 – “The Lord hardened (lit, made strong) Pharaoh's heart”.
 - (7.) 11:10 – “Yet the Lord hardened (lit, made strong) Pharaoh's heart”. In 11:1, God tells Moses, “One more plague I will bring on Pharaoh and on Egypt; after that he will surely let you go from here.” In verse 9, He states again the purpose for Pharaoh's resistance: “So that My wonders will be multiplied in the land of Egypt.” Verse ten summarizes the fact that in spite of all the wonders done before Pharaoh, God strengthened his heart, and he did not let the Hebrews go.
10. 13:15 – “When Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go...” The Hebrew more correctly reads: “When Pharaoh caused to harden himself (make himself unyielding) against sending us away...” This is a clear reference to Pharaoh hardening his heart even though the word “heart” is not mentioned. This verse is to be an explanation of these events to succeeding generations on the feast of the Passover. It is a summary of what happened. It is significant to note that the Holy Spirit inspired Moses to record it this way. The main outline of events is seen to be that Pharaoh was responsible for hardening himself, and that God therefore responded with a heavy hand, i.e., the plague of the firstborn. This is what was to be remembered and taught throughout the generations: Pharaoh's hardening himself and God's response of judgment.
 - (8.) 14:4 – “Thus I will harden (lit, make strong) Pharaoh's heart”. Note the reasons for this promised action. (a) “I will be honored through Pharaoh and his army” and (b) “The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord”.

(9.) 14:8 – “The Lord hardened (lit, made strong) the heart of Pharaoh”. After being completely broken by the plague of the first born and, as God had said, sending Israel away under compulsion, the desire of Pharaoh had not changed at all. He had not conceded freely but rather his heart had become faint, and his determination had collapsed before these awful events. Now, however, with new strength to bear up his heart’s already established determination to restrict the Hebrews, he pursues them with his army. The important point to see is that God did not change His heart, but strengthened it to pursue the direction in which it was already set.

(10.) 14:17 – “I will harden (lit., make strong) the hearts of the Egyptians ...” With this promise regarding Pharaoh’s heart, God also gives His reasons for His actions in this final situation: (a.) I will be honored through Pharaoh and his army, and
(b.) then the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.

In summary, then, of the twenty passages referring to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, it is significant that there is an equal number of ten references regarding Pharaoh’s own resistance against God, as there are occasions where God will, or does, strengthen or solidify His intention of resistance. The number ten is a significant number to the Hebrew mind, representing a picture of wholeness and completeness. Also, the number seven has been described as a number of perfection and completeness by those who have studied Biblical numerology. Thus an important truth is revealed regarding man’s freedom, and God’s intervention in the human heart, by the fact that Pharaoh had resisted the truth of God seven times, and had thoroughly established the direction of his heart, before God Himself ever is said to actually touch his heart at all. God’s dealing with Pharaoh’s heart was not to turn a truth seeker away from knowing Him, rather God used Pharaoh as a tool by which He could reveal truth about Himself. In doing this, He did not change his heart at all, rather He gave Pharaoh the ability to continue in the direction he already had in his heart:

The Scriptures reveal several reasons why God hardened Pharaoh’s heart:

- 1.) To multiply His signs and wonders (Ex. 7:3; 9:16; 10:1,2; 11:9)
- 2.) To judge Egypt (Ex. 6:6; 7:4; cf. Gen. 15:14).
- 3.) That the Egyptians would know He is the Lord (Ex. 7:5; 14:4).
- 4.) That they would know that there is no other God like Him (Ex. 9:14).
- 5.) That Israel would know that He is the Lord (Ex. 10:2).
- 6.) To make a testimony for Himself to be passed down to future generations (Ex. 10:2; 13:14-16).
- 7.) To execute judgments against all the Egyptian deities (Ex. 12:12).
- 8.) To bring Him honor (Ex. 14:4).
- 9.) To make a name for Himself (Neh. 9:10; 2 Sam. 7:23).
- 10.) To proclaim His name through all the earth (Ex 9:13-16; cf. Josh. 2:8-11; I Sam. 4:5-8; 6:1-12).

God used His confrontation with Pharaoh to accomplish these purposes. It was essential that all ten plagues could be brought upon Egypt to fulfill all that He desired. If Pharaoh had weakened and given up sooner, less would have been accomplished. Therefore God strengthened Pharaoh so that he could hold to his convictions until all could be done.

An examination of Ex. 9:15,16 reveals an interesting concept. God says that although He could have killed Pharaoh and the Egyptians with pestilence, yet He graciously prolonged their lives so that He could show them His power and to proclaim His name through all the earth. In other words, it was God's grace and kindness to harden Pharaoh's heart and allow him to live. Furthermore, not only would God allow him his life, He would clearly expose the false gods of Egypt and reveal the truth about who He Himself is. We see that the people of Egypt were beginning to be convinced of this truth revealed by God (Ex. 9:20; 10:7; 11:3). When Joshua and the children of Israel prepare to enter Palestine some forty years later, we discover that the reputation of their God has preceded them. Rahab tells the spies that the Canaanites had no courage because of them "for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath." (Josh. 2:11). The Egyptians themselves were undoubtedly party to the proclamation of the events involving the release and exodus of Israel.

What of Pharaoh? It is not recorded that he perished in the Red Sea with his army. Was he finally humbled in his heart before God? Romans 2:4 tells us that God's kindness, forbearance, and patience are meant to lead us to repentance. Certainly Pharaoh, who had seen the outstretched hand of God make mockery of the Egyptian deities, and of his own will and power, had much to consider at the conclusion of these events. The record is silent, but we have the testimony of another king, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, who was of similar arrogant viewpoint which states: "Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride." (Dan. 4:37)