

# Pharaoh's Hard Heart

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At the beginning of our study together we talked about a possible time frame for the Exodus in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC. We discussed that if this was actually the correct place in history for the Exodus (which has not been proved by the archeological record) this event likely took place during the reign of Amenhotep II.<sup>1</sup> We talked about Moses being raised in Pharaoh's court, possibly the Court of Hatshepsut, followed by his forty years in Midian during the reign of Thutmose III, who likely wanted to kill Moses not only because he murdered the Egyptian slave driver, but also because he may have been raised as Hatshepsut's successor. When Moses returned to Egypt he was 80 years old.<sup>2</sup> If we can align the biblical timeline with the historical timeline of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Egypt, Amenhotep II was about 22 years old.<sup>3</sup> This youthful Pharaoh, no doubt well educated as a Prince of Egypt and heir to the throne, never being deprived of a single thing in his life, and constantly told that he is an Egyptian god, would undoubtedly have an ego the size of the empire he ruled.

One thing we need to bear in mind is that not only did the Egyptians believe their Pharaoh was divine, so did the Pharaoh! I know this sounds simple and obvious, but when we consider the fact that Pharaoh himself completely bought into the idea of his own divine power, we can come to understand the lofty heights to which his pride exalted him. When he says in Exodus 5:2, *"Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go."* He is speaking from the frame of reference that he is the great and mighty God of Egypt and the people of Israel are his slaves. In his eyes the Israelites are filthy (they are shepherds after all!), worthless, poor, and certainly not a superior race like the Egyptians. In his mind they are less than human. Compare what Egyptian culture and education had achieved with the squalor of the Israelite slave ghettos. Pharaoh viewed the Israelites as a sub-human, enslaved people put on earth to serve his purpose and then cast aside at his whim. These people certainly cannot have a god of any power. Had they a god of power they never would have become enslaved in the first place. This is Pharaoh's view of the Israelites and his attitude towards Israel's God when Moses first approaches Pharaoh.

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<sup>1</sup> Teacher's Commentary

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 7:7

<sup>3</sup> Teacher's Commentary

*"Then the LORD said to Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. <sup>2</sup> You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. <sup>3</sup> But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and though I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt, <sup>4</sup> he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out my divisions, my people the Israelites. <sup>5</sup> And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it." Ex 7:1-5*

The Lord tells Moses he will make Moses *"like God to Pharaoh"*. Moses will appear to have the power of a god as he inflicts plague after plague upon Egypt, and Pharaoh's priests are impotent to stop them. In the eyes of Pharaoh Moses will appear to have divine power just as Pharaoh himself believes he too holds divine power. God will elevate Moses to a level of equality in Pharaoh's mind. Pharaoh will not only receive Moses in his court, he will hear him out. He obviously does not view Moses as superior to himself as he constantly refuses Moses' request to release the Israelites. We will see a power struggle between Pharaoh and Moses. Moses knows from where his power to initiate or terminate each plague comes. Make no mistake, Moses has no misconception of where this power comes. He is utterly humbled and fearful of the position he is in, in relation to the God he serves. Pharaoh on the other hand has no such understanding. Despite Moses' perceived power Pharaoh will not relent, in fact his heart will be hardened by each mighty act of God. The purpose of our discussion today is to delve into what it means that Pharaoh's heart will be hardened, by whom it will be hardened, and to what end it will be hardened.

The concept that God would harden anyone's heart against him is appalling and difficult to comprehend. It leads us to think that God would condemn a man for God's own purposes, taking away that man's free will and his salvation. This leads to the fear in our own thinking, "Could God do this to me?" and "If God says he loves his creation and desires that none should perish, how does this type of condemnation fit into his salvation plan?" A hard heart is an eternal life and death dilemma. This is a concept that is extremely important for us to get a good grasp on as we study the plagues and God's role in Pharaoh's hard heart.

We can already see that Pharaoh's heart was unreceptive to Yahweh. He had no patience and no interest in the God of Israel. At first the God of Israel was something of an irritation, an interruption in the slave labor force of the Israelites demanding worship in the desert. Pharaoh had neither time nor interest in the spiritual needs of his slaves. He was unimpressed by the first miraculous signs performed by Moses because his own priests could do the same thing by deceit or trickery. Exodus 7:14 tells us, *"The the Lord*

*said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is unyielding; he refuses to let the people go.'*" From the beginning we hear the Pharaoh's heart is already hard.

The description of Pharaoh's "hard heart" refers to an unbending or unyielding attitude, a stubborn refusal to change. We see that in some instances Pharaoh is the one who hardened his own heart. Sometimes the translation is such that he just has a hard heart, pointing to neither Pharaoh nor God as the one doing the hardening – hard seems to be its natural or regular state of being in that moment. Sometimes we see that it is God who hardened Pharaoh's heart. Scripture does not imply that God hardened Pharaoh's heart permanently, but only with the intent to harden it in that moment to reveal his glory. This does not mean that Pharaoh could not have repented later had he so chosen. Pharaoh's heart either "being stubborn", or "made stubborn" (both literal translations of the Hebrew figurative idiomatic phrase translated "as having a hard heart") can likely be used interchangeably without truly effecting the meaning of scripture.<sup>4</sup>

Pharaoh already reveals himself to be unbending and resistant to the work and movement of God before him. With the first few plagues, he only relents and gives permission for Israel to depart in order to get Moses to end the plagues. He doesn't reveal a changed heart, just a deceitful one. With each plague Pharaoh resumes his stubborn stance against the Israelites as soon as Moses terminates the plague. Pharaoh's stubborn stance is based on his misplaced pride in his exalted and deified position and his ethnic prejudice against the Israelites. His continued willful refusal to release the Israelites even at the cost of great economic hardship reveals that his heart is already closed to the truth of Yahweh's identity. He would prefer to dig in his heels and repeat the mantra, "I am god" rather than face the fact that there is a God more powerful than he. A God who can control nature in such a way as to contaminate his water, destroy his crops, spread disease throughout the livestock and decimate his male population, all utterly destroying the agricultural, economic, and military livelihood of the entire nation. His own willfulness will not permit even the remotest softening of heart which would surely allow the truth of God to sink in.

Pharaoh's hard heart is integral to the succession of each plague. Had Pharaoh capitulated at the outset, Yahweh's power would not be seen to defeat each idol of the Egyptian pantheon. Pharaoh would not be utterly defeated, humiliated and punished for his self-exalted pride and tyranny over Israel. God used Pharaoh's hard heart to reveal his power and glory to the punishment of Egypt and at the same time to draw the Israelites and many Egyptians to himself. God could also have wiped all of Egypt out with one plague in the beginning, just as he said in Exodus 9:15-16: *For by now I could have stretched out my hand and struck you and your people with a plague that would have wiped you off the*

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<sup>4</sup> New American Commentary

*earth. But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”* But that would not accomplish God’s goal. His goal was to reveal his power and glory, and he chose to use this ruthless, defiant, proud man as his means of revelation.

*“I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.... But I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.”* (Exodus 9: 14-16)

This is Yahweh’s proclamation to the Egyptians. In the process of delivering the Israelites from the tyrannical rule of the Egyptians, Yahweh will reveal his might for the benefit of both groups. He will humble and bring down the haughty Pharaoh and all of Egypt with the great and terrible plagues that will be visited upon them rendering their own gods powerless, impotent and irrelevant. At the same time he will show the Israelites that he is a God of power and might who shows compassion to his own.

The Plagues in Exodus are a series of signs that illustrate Yahweh’s sovereignty over Egypt – over Pharaoh, the Egyptians, nature, and the Egyptian gods. They are designed to:

- Humiliate Pharaoh
- Prove Yahweh’s sovereignty over Pharaoh and nature
- Show definitively that their gods not only powerless but non-existent

By humiliating Pharaoh and his priests, God is revealing who he is, and teaching them to have fear and respect for the God of the Universe. Up to this point Pharaoh has not taken the time to recognize or acknowledge Yahweh. The plagues we soon show him definitively who Yahweh is.

The plagues are each a form of natural phenomena native to Egypt that can cause devastation. Each of these events seems to have natural explanations. But as described by Moses, each event is beyond the scope of past experience of such phenomena. The miraculous aspect of each plague is first in its intensity and second in that it is then quickly followed by each subsequent plague. In past experience Egyptians may have experienced each phenomena individually to a lesser degree, but not all of them in succession, each one progressively worse than the preceding, and at an inconceivable intensity, beginning and terminating at Moses’ command. (In actuality the strength and duration is controlled by God, but seen through Moses’ actions.) The supernatural intensity of each plague reveals that Yahweh has control over nature.

The supernatural intensity of the plagues also reveals that Yahweh is more powerful than their idol-gods derived from nature. The Egyptian priests are powerless to do anything to stop or lessen the effects of each plague. They and the idols they serve are

revealed to be powerless and ineffectual. Each plague is a humiliation of its relative idol-god from Egypt's pantheon and is an illustration of the power of the One True God. For example, the Nile itself was viewed as a god of life, or the source of life. Yahweh's plague rendered their source of life (water for drinking and irrigation, as well as, fish for food) odious and it becomes a potential source of death. A humiliation of the Nile-god is seen in Yahweh's power to make the source of life a source of death.

The explanation that each plague is a "naturally occurring phenomena" is defeated by the description of Moses and/or Aaron initiating each plague on command. For example, the Nile is turned to blood the *moment* Moses issues the command *when* Pharaoh comes to the water. The plagues come about instantaneously or immediately, and uniformly, according to timing that is not controlled by nature but by God. The plague of frogs exemplifies this point. The frogs appear with the 2<sup>nd</sup> plague, 7 days *after* the Nile is contaminated. Not immediately after, but 7 days later, upon Moses' command a vast number, enough to cover the land come out of the water and into homes. They don't just come out of the water as it is turned to blood on the first day, they come up out of the water seven days later and move away from it invading habited space that is not their usual habitat.

By mighty signs Yahweh reveals his power and authority over nature and mankind. God, knowing the motives of this man's heart, uses this already hardened heart to bring himself greater glory and further humiliate this obdurate Pharaoh. Humiliate may seem like a vindictive word, but what it really means is "to humble". Pharaoh had exalted himself to claim equality with God. God will reveal Pharaoh's pride to be empty arrogance. His claim to be a god will be proven false by his inability to prevent any single plague or even to mitigate the damage cause by each plague. He is proven ineffective, impotent and utterly human. There is nothing divine about him. These displays of God's power and might render the so-called powerful Pharaoh and his priests powerless, and draw the attention not only of the Israelites but the Egyptians as well. They come to see the might and power of Israel's God and the weakness of their own idols. Many Egyptians will cry-out to the Pharaoh to heed the God of Israel, and many will even come to follow the Israelites out of Egypt.

God hardened Pharaoh's heart long enough to achieve two goals. First, to bring wave after wave of plagues upon Egypt rendering each associated idol-god impotent and irrelevant. His power and might revealed to the Israelites and all Egypt as he is the *only* all powerful God, there is no other. Through these displays he turns the hearts of not only the Israelites, but many Egyptians to acknowledge him. The second goal achieved by the temporary hardening of Pharaoh's heart is that God's plan of delivering Israel is set to his timetable and the humiliating of Pharaoh is completed according to his design. Egypt itself is destroyed. The source of Egypt's economy was its fruitful and plentiful agriculture. The plagues destroyed crops, livestock and stored grain. Egypt was not only unable to support

its own population, it couldn't export surplus to surrounding nations either. The final plague decimated the male population, young and old. Not only was its slave force departing, its own labor force had dwindled considerably. In this patristic culture the loss of the male heir would devastate families as they lost head of households as well as future head of households. The final blow would come against Egypt at the Red Sea when God would wipe out Pharaoh's military as well. No longer would Egypt be a formidable foe to the Israelites.