Robert Durfee

Ina Lipkowitz

21L.458 The Bible

4 April 2019

He Hardens Whom He Wants to Harden

The Israelites are still living in Egypt, but they are no longer in the Egyptians’ favor and have become enslaved (New Revised Standard Version, Exod. 1:10-11). Yet the Lord has not forgotten his people and calls Moses as his servant to deliver them from suffering (Exod. 3:7). The task of freeing the Israelites was not going to be easy. The king of Egypt would not let the people go without powerful motivation (Exod. 3:19). Through the hands of Moses, the Lord bestows ten terrible plagues on Pharaoh and the people of Egypt. Only after the final plague, when his firstborn son is murdered by the Lord, does the king of Egypt relent and let the Israelites leave the country (Exod. 12:31).

The recount of the ten plagues bestowed on Egypt in the first chapters of Exodus provide a spectacle of the awesome power of God[[1]](#footnote-1). The nature of God in this setting is not immediately apparent. God displays an overwhelming sense of loyalty to a single nation even at the expense of other nations. Furthermore, God directly observes the existence of gods other than Himself (Exod. 12:12). If God is meant to be a universal god, a god to more than just Israelites, many difficult questions arise that require careful answers. In particular, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart through the apparent suspension of free will question the morality of God. With deep analysis of the first chapters of Exodus and connections to other books of the Bible, God should be considered a universal god and the act of hardening Pharaoh’s heart is a demonstration of His strength, divine plan, and unconditional judgement.

It is tempting to consider the God of Exodus as a national god. This sentiment arises from several common statements expressed through Exodus. God is first introduced to Moses in Exodus 3:6 as, “the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” and again in Exodus 7:2 as the Lord who, “appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty.” By so strongly tying His identity to a group of people and insisting on mentioning His people during every introduction, God displays substantial nationalistic ties to Israel. God’s nationalism is revealed not only in His behavior towards the Egyptians, but also to the gods of Egypt. In a telling example in Exodus 12:12, God executes His judgement, “on all the gods of Egypt.” In other words, God reveals a world of gods and nations pitted together against gods and nations.

With all the evidence for a national god contained within Exodus, it’s useful to consider the chapters in the context of other books of the Bible. When God is introduced as, “the God of [Moses’] father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob,” its easy to focus on the emphasis placed on the ties to Israel (Exod. 3:6). Nonetheless, consider the nature of God of the Israelite patriarchs as revealed in Genesis. From Genesis 1 and 2, God is described as the creator of the heavens and the earth. This creator god can be connected to the God of Exodus as they use the same name Yahweh in both Genesis 2:4 and Exodus 3:15. This universal god is later explicitly connected to Abram (and thus to all the descendant patriarchs) in Genesis 14:19 when Abram says, “I have sworn to the Lord, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth.” If God of Exodus is God of Abraham, and God of Abraham is the creator of the universe, then God of Exodus must be the universal Lord[[2]](#footnote-2) God of all people on earth.

With the establishment that the God of Exodus is a universal god, several aspects of the story of the ten plagues require deeper analysis. First, why is the connection to the Israelite people stressed so strongly such that it often leads to the conclusion of a national god? This is answered upon close inspection of the first theophany. After God is revealed to Moses, he insists upon knowing His name (Exod. 3:13). In the current time period, the gods in Egypt that Moses and the Israelites are familiar with have names and belong to nations. Thus, to make Himself more understood and to reassure His people, God strongly attaches Himself to the nation of Israel and reveals His name to them as I am (Exod. 3:14-15). This makes it clear that He is looking out for His chosen people and fulfilling His covenant with them.

The more concerning aspect of the ten plagues is the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Prior to inflicting the plagues on Egypt, the Lord warns Moses that He, “will harden [Pharaoh’s] heart, so that he will not let the people go” (Exod. 4:21). If the Lord is a national god, this statement would not have moral significance. After all, the Lord would be looking out for His own people no matter the cost to others. Yet if He is a universal god, His love and protection extend beyond the Israelites to all people on earth. Thus, it would be immoral for Him to suspend the free will of one of His people. Since it was established that He is a universal god, the possible motivations must be examined in detail.

The clearest motivation for God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is to simply demonstrate His power to His people and all other nations. When the Lord prepares Moses for his confrontation with Pharaoh, He once again warns him that He will harden Pharaoh’s heart and after all the plagues have been bestowed, He says, “the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out from among them” (Exod. 7:5). This is corroborated in the New Testament when Paul reflects on this, repeating what the Lord says regarding Pharaoh, “I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth” (Rom. 9:17). From this, it appears that the Lord has clearly predetermined Pharaoh’s response to the plagues and is just using them to put on a sadistic show of His power. Without even giving Pharaoh a chance to repent or to change his mind, this certainly seems immoral and uncharacteristic of a universal, benevolent god. Perhaps this is the true nature of the universal God of Exodus, or perhaps there is some other motivation for the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart.

Since the Fall of Man, the human will has often preferred evil over good. In Genesis, God acts through this evil will of man to accomplish His divine plan. In Exodus, the same God is at work. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that His divine plan is being executed through the evil will of Pharaoh. However, before the plagues, God apparently has predetermined Pharaoh’s hard-heart. If this is the case, Pharaoh couldn’t be acting within his own evil will. But by looking closer to the language used during the administration of the plagues, it is not always clear how Pharaoh’s heart is hardened. For plagues one, three, and five, Pharaoh’s heart “remained hardened” or “was hardened,” but it’s not known who was responsible for the hardening (Exod. 7:22; Exod. 8:19; Exod. 9:7). For plagues two, four, and seven, Pharaoh “hardened his heart” (Exod. 8:15; Exod. 8:32; Exod. 9:34). In the first five plagues (plus the seventh), Pharaoh’s heart was hardened either directly by himself or it was ambiguous. Since plagues six, eight, nine, and ten directly attribute the heart-hardening to God, the ambiguous cases cannot be immediately attributed to God (Exod. 9:12; Exod. 10:1; Exod. 10:27; Exod. 11:10).

This curious pattern in the phrasing of how Pharaoh’s heart was hardened reveals an important detail about Pharaoh’s free will and God’s predestination. It certainly appears that Pharaoh has control of himself for at least plagues two, four, and seven. It can also be argued that he has control for one, three, and five. God’s predestination only undoubtedly steps in later with plagues six, eight, nine, and ten. As a result, God certainly seems to give Pharaoh many opportunities to repent for his disobedience and to release the Israelites, but he actively chooses against. God uses Pharaoh’s evil will to show the world His power, which is seemingly part of His divine plan. Furthermore, by actively hardening his heart for plagues six, eight, nine, and ten, God introduces a theme repeated often throughout the rest of Exodus: those who go against His will are to be punished. Pharaoh’s hard heart is used to simultaneously achieve God’s plan of displaying His power and to demonstrate His just punishment.

A final explanation for God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart comes from the New Testament Book of Romans. In Romans 9:18, Paul writes specifically about this story with Pharaoh saying, “He has mercy on whomever He chooses, and He hardens the heart of whomever He chooses.” This passage again suggests that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart from the beginning. Yet there is something more profound hidden in this passage. There is a parallelism drawn between God’s mercy and his hardening. In effect, his mercy is unconditional and so is his hardening (Piper 2003). If it’s expected God’s love and mercy are to be unconditional and applicable to all His people, why should His hardening and judgement be anything else? This leads to a very confusing situation where free will is supposed to exist, yet God has the ultimate say as to who is shown mercy and who is shown judgement. Perhaps this is not meant to be known. After all, who are mere mortals to question God’s divine will?

The ten plagues of Egypt demonstrate the awesome power of a God with a strong loyalty to His people. This strong tie to the Israelites is rooted in a historical covenant made with the Israelite patriarchs years ago. Yet the God of the Israelites is still a universal god, a god for all the people of earth. His judgement on Pharaoh and the people of Egypt raise many concerning questions about the morality of God. His motivations for His actions can range from simply demonstrating his power to the world to exercising His divine plan through the evil will of man. However, the question remains how to reconcile free will with the contrasting predestined actions exhibited by Pharaoh’s hardened heart. It could be the punishment justly delivered after plenty of opportunities to repent or the unconditional judgement complementing His unconditional mercy.

Works Cited

Coogan, Michael David., et al. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha.* Oxford University Press, 2018.

Piper, John. “The Hardening of Pharaoh and the Hope of the World.” *Desiring God*, 9 Feb. 2003.

1. The use of lowercase and capitalized ‘god’ in this essay was chosen with care. When referring to a type of god (e.g. universal, national, or creator god), the lowercase is used to indicate no specific deity is being discussed. When referring to God of Exodus, the capitalized is used to indicate this specific deity. The name of this God will be rigorously established in the body of the essay. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Henceforth, God of Exodus will also be referred to as Lord or I am as both are used as the name of God in Exodus and the connecting passages of Genesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)