

Hardening Pharaoh's Heart

Did God harden Pharaoh's heart or did Pharaoh harden his own heart? (Exodus 9:34-10:1) If so what does that mean? Is God here manipulating Pharaoh's mind in order to accomplish His goal of getting the children of Israel out of Egypt? Who killed the firstborn in Egypt, and why?

Discussion:

In ancient times, most nations worshiped multiple "gods". But usually each nation had one chief "god". The surrounding nations and peoples would usually "rate" these gods as to their power and might based on how well their followers did in battle. This meant that a powerful nation like Egypt was thought to have one or more powerful gods that protected them and fought for them. A group of people that had not even had their own country for 400 years and furthermore had been slaves for perhaps a quarter of that time would be thought of as being very weak and their "god" would also be thought of as very weak. Even the children of Israel had begun to think of their "god" as weak when He didn't rescue them from slavery, didn't protect their children, etc.

In order for the true God to get some respect in this kind of environment He had to show His power in some dramatic way. This was the purpose of the ten plagues. The ten plagues of Egypt were each directed at one of the Egyptian "gods". Evidence for this is as follows:

Exodus 9:14-17: "This time I will punish not only your officials and your people, but I will punish you as well, **so that you may know that there is no one like me in all the world**. If I had raised my hand to strike you and your people with disease, you would have been completely destroyed. **But to show you my power I have let you live so that my fame might spread over the whole world**. Yet you are still arrogant and refuse to let my people go." (GNB) Compare NIV and TLB

Exodus 12:12: "On that night I will go through the land of Egypt, killing every first-born male, both human and animal, and **punishing all the gods of Egypt**. I am the LORD." (GNB) Compare NIV and TLB; Compare Exodus 18:11; 2 Samuel 7:23

Numbers 33:3,4: "The people of Israel left Egypt on the fifteenth day of the first month of the year, the day after the first Passover. Under the LORD's protection they left the city of Rameses in full view of the Egyptians, ⁴ who were burying the firstborn sons that the LORD had killed. **By doing this, the LORD showed that he was more powerful than the gods of Egypt.**" (GNB) Compare NIV and TLB

Egyptologists have discovered that the ancient Egyptians worshiped almost everything that they could not understand. They worshiped flies, bulls, and even beetles apparently because of their phenomenal ability to reproduce. They worshiped the sun and the river Nile because they seemed to be controlled by very powerful but unexplainable forces. If you visit Egypt today, you will be able to buy souvenirs that are small replicas of these "gods" of ancient Egypt.

First-born sons were considered the special property of the "gods". Pharaoh was worshiped as a "god" and his first-born son was worshiped as the next "god" in line for the throne.

Pharaoh had come to believe that his "gods" were very powerful. He felt that they had helped his family to conquer and drive out the Hyksos rulers that had controlled Egypt at the time when Joseph first came to Egypt. (See Exodus 1:8) They had helped his armies be successful in many battles. He saw no reason why his "gods" couldn't deal easily with the God of these slaves.

Each of the plagues of Egypt was specifically directed at one of the Egyptian "gods". (See Exodus #5 - ***Pagan Gods of Egypt***) As Pharaoh saw his "gods" being destroyed and even being

turned into plagues, it made him very angry. He became more and more stubborn and determined to defeat this bunch of slaves and to discredit and disgrace their God.

Pharaoh was not prevented from saying yes to Moses and God after any of the plagues. Moses originally asked simply that the children of Israel be allowed to leave the country so they could worship Yahweh before he mentioned the threat of any plagues. Pharaoh responded by demanding that they work harder. (Exodus 5:6-9)

Biblical references:

What is implied by the hardening of hearts? Did God harden Pharaoh's heart or did Pharaoh harden his own heart? Read carefully the following passages:

God hardened Pharaoh's heart: Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8,17

Pharaoh's heart was hardened: Exodus 7:13,14,22; 8:19; 9:7,35

Pharaoh hardened his own heart: Exodus 8:15,32; 9:34

Compare similar passages:

Joshua 11:20: "For it was the LORD's doing to harden their hearts that they should come against Israel in battle, in order that they should be utterly destroyed, and should receive no mercy but be exterminated, as the LORD commanded Moses." (RSV); compare Isaiah 6:9,10; 2 Thessalonians 2:7-12.

1 Samuel 6:1-6: "1 The ark of the LORD was in the country of the Philistines seven months. 2 And the Philistines called for the priests and the diviners and said, 'What shall we do with the ark of the LORD? Tell us with what we shall send it to its place.' 3 They said, 'If you send away the ark of the God of Israel, do not send it empty, but by all means return him a guilt offering. Then you will be healed, and it will be known to you why his hand does not turn away from you.' 4 And they said, 'What is the guilt offering that we shall return to him?' They answered, 'Five golden tumors and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines; for the same plague was upon all of you and upon your lords. 5 So you must make images of your tumors and images of your mice that ravage the land, and give glory to the God of Israel; perhaps he will lighten his hand from off you and your gods and your land. 6 **Why should you harden your hearts as the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their hearts?** After he had made sport of them, did not they let the people go, and they departed?'" (RSV)

Some substances harden when heated, like clay. Others melt, like ice, and butter. If you put all of these into an oven and turn up the heat one will harden and the other two will melt. All you did was warm it up. God revealed Himself to Pharaoh so clearly in many ways. He demonstrated the impotence of Pharaoh's "gods". And Pharaoh said, "No, No, No!" until his heart got harder, and harder, and harder. God precipitated that by bringing him the light. But Pharaoh actually did it to himself by saying "no".

Exodus 9:34-10:1: "34 But when **Pharaoh** saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again, and **hardened his heart**, he and his servants. 35 So **the heart of Pharaoh was hardened**, and he did not let the people of Israel go; as the LORD had spoken through Moses. 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," (RSV)

Even in our day people respond differently to the presentation of truth. Some love it and are attracted to it. Others see that it will require changes in their lives and become angry—their hearts become harder. But all we can do is present the truth to them in the most attractive way possible.

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