

Pharaoh's Heart Was Hardened

Most of you are aware of the biblical teaching that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. What does that mean? God did this. To Pharaoh's heart. What does it mean to harden a heart?

Make it insensitive, make it evil, make it rebellious, make it want to disobey God, make it slow, make it hard to not respond to God, the opposite of a soft heart -mean, belligerent, criminal,

Any other meanings? ?

This can be used to make God look rather mean, arbitrary.

No matter what Pharaoh wanted to do, God hardened his heart. Pharaoh had no choice.

Romans 9:17 For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED ^[k]THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH."

So was Pharaoh just a puppet that God used to accomplish His purpose? Is Pharaoh a victim here?

On the face of it, you could make it out to *sound like that*. But of course, we know that God is always right. Even if we don't understand it.

But did God cause Pharaoh to rebel, to sin? God doesn't cause us to sin. We know He is not the author of evil.

I was discussing another issue with Seth Wachtel, one of our pastoral interns, when he mentioned that Pharaoh actually hardened his own heart first, twice. I guess I knew that, you know, we've all read the Exodus account before, but it spurred me to really look into it to find out what the scriptures really say about this. I'd always just read it as a story, like a movie script. Yul Brenner and Charlton Heston and a cast of thousands. But really, the character of God was on display in this story, (as in all of the Old Testament, and of course the New Testament). Is it just something we need to accept, even though we don't understand it? Well, it did bother me if the implication is that somehow, God had some sort of influence toward evil, for rebellion toward Himself. It just didn't fit, or make logical sense with what we are taught about the character of God. God does not coerce evil, or try to cause it to happen.

James 1:13 New American Standard Bible (NASB)

¹³ Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted ^[a]by God"; for God cannot be tempted ^[b]by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone.

So now, let's actually go to the text: Exodus

There are actually 25+ verses that speak about this issue, this concept of Pharaoh's heart being hardened. Rather than print them all here, in their entirety, I've decided to show you a spreadsheet, listing all the references to this hardening and rebellion. I made this spreadsheet because I found an interesting trend that I'd never noticed before. I also found something that totally shocked me!

There are three different words in the Hebrew translated in the English as "harden" used in these passages. That's no big deal until you find that typically, usually, one of the terms is used when God does the hardening and a different term is used when Pharaoh hardens his own heart. But it gets even better. The three terms for "harden" don't have the same meaning or definition. However when they translated them into English, they used the same word, "harden" for all three. It's not hard to see why they did this, but when you begin deeper study, it makes a huge difference on how the passages read.

Spreadsheet notes:

"Chazaq" is used 55 times outside of Exodus. The only time it is translated as "harden" is in Exodus. In all other occurrences, it is translated as "strengthen", "encourage", "repair", "fortify", etc.

"Kabed"- literally means "heavy", usually with a negative connotation as in heavy plagues, etc.

Chazaq is most often used to explain God's action on Pharaoh's heart

Kabed is most often used to explain Pharaoh's action on his own heart.

While Pharaoh made his heart heavy and rebellious toward God, it appears that God, knowing Pharaoh's heart (7:14) was heavy and rebellious, strengthened it to act as he (pharaoh) wanted to act. Seems like an important distinction here, one that the Jews would have easily seen as they read the scriptures, for these were two, even three different words. For us, it's harder, nearly impossible to get it as we read it, since our translation uses one word to translate all three words. This distinction between the two words and their meanings seems to remove the dilemma of wondering if God caused Pharaoh to act rebelliously, or if this came from Pharaoh's own heart. Although God obviously knew Pharaoh's heart, that it was evil and rebellious, as He knows all things, it was Pharaoh that was the one who caused his own heart to rebel. And it perfectly suited God and His purpose to strengthen Pharaoh's heart so that the ten plagues would be carried out to their climax in an undeniable display of God's power.

Timing:

I wondered, "Who started this hardening process, God or Pharaoh?" Well, the first couple of times this is mentioned in Exodus, it was God speaking. But it was God *predicting* that He would do it in the future. Ex. 4:21 and Ex. 7:3 (Strengthen it or make it unfeeling.)

Next in 7:13 and 14 we are told that his heart was hardened, (kabad)made heavy, and as outward evidence, he did not listen to Moses and he refused to let the people go.

13Yet Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said.

14Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pharaoh's heart is stubborn (hardened); he refuses to let the people go.

8:2 places some of the responsibility for rebellion on Pharaoh, "if you refuse"

8:15 Pharaoh actually is the clear heart hardener in this passage, he did it to himself

Etc.

Now as it gets further into the plagues, it becomes more and more the action of God clearly to strengthen Pharaoh's heart so that he doesn't wimp out and give in to the plagues to relieve his suffering and pain and embarrassment.

16"But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth.**17**"Still you exalt yourself against My people by not letting them go.... Exodus 9:16-17

God truly did want these plagues carried out so that He would be glorified among the nations. Surely we can see how Pharaoh, evil, rebellious man that he was, was probably experiencing "plague fatigue". In fact, God admitted that He was holding back for a big finale, for if He had really turned loose on Pharaoh, He would have wiped them off the earth by now.

15"For if by now I had put forth My hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, you would then have been cut off from the earth. (this is the same verse that Paul was quoting above in Romans 9:17)

Final sub point from the spreadsheet- Notice 1 Samuel reference, where they refer back to the Pharaoh, they attribute the actional force behind the hard heart to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. This doesn't deny that God was working in the story, but their hardening of their own heart was the thing he pointed to.

Main point:

As we see the original Hebrew terms used in this famous passage in Exodus, it can really help alleviate some of the questions that can arise if they are inaccurately interpreted. We don't have to wonder about whether God caused someone to act in an evil way. It can help remove one of those little areas where we feel compelled to say, "well, I don't get it, but I'll accept it by faith". For actually, it's pretty clear and simple when we view the original terms and meanings.

Notes:

It is not that difficult to understand this in light of further passages in the Bible, where God lets people indulge themselves in their evil ways as He did Pharaoh.

Romans 1:28 Furthermore, since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, He gave them up to a depraved mind, to do what should not be done.

God gives the credit for hardening of hearts to the Israelites and others throughout the Bible.

Hebrews 3

⁷ Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says,

“TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE,

⁸ DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS ^[b]WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME,

AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS,

⁹ WHERE YOUR FATHERS TRIED *Me* BY TESTING *Me*,

AND SAW MY WORKS FOR FORTY YEARS.

¹⁰ “THEREFORE I WAS ANGRY WITH THIS GENERATION,

AND SAID, ‘THEY ALWAYS GO ASTRAY IN THEIR HEART,

AND THEY DID NOT KNOW MY WAYS’;

¹¹ AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH,

‘THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST.’”

The Peril of Unbelief

¹² Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart ^[c]that falls away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called “Today,” so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end, ¹⁵ while it is said,

“TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE,

DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS ^[d]WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME.”

¹⁶ For who provoked *Him* when they had heard? Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt *led* by Moses? ¹⁷ And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸ And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹ So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief.