

The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

The Hardening of Pharaoh's heart has always been a difficult matter for those who study the Exodus story. There are a number of reasons for this. First, and perhaps primarily, it appears out of character for God to harden a person's heart in advance of giving the message. This seems patently unfair, for if God hardens the heart before giving the message, it is sure that the message will not be received. This makes the whole matter of Divine revelation a kind of "sick, cosmic game" where an arbitrary God plays upon the weak, inabilities of mankind to satisfy his own hunger for power. Thus, this initial perspective has caused many to reject any reference to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart as fallible additions to the biblical record.

A second perspective is one which attempts to "clear" the reputation of God by saying that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first, and only after he did this did God confirm the actions by hardening Pharaoh's heart even further. In this way, God only confirmed in Pharaoh what was already present as a result of his own choices.

Both of these perspectives, however, begin with a view of God that is clearly unbiblical. The Bible does not present God as someone who must answer to anyone other than Himself. God is not required to submit Himself to any law or standard which resides above Him. He is, by nature, fully consistent with His own character, but does not "play second fiddle" to any other sovereign or law. As such, all that is righteous is determined by God Himself. It is therefore both unbiblical and illogical to subject God and His actions to the scrutiny of some supposed standard of "fairness." God, and all He does, is the standard of righteousness and fairness.

The idea that God only confirmed what Pharaoh had already decided is not satisfying either, for the simply reason that salvation is ever, only possible where God breaks in and overrides man's decisions. That is to say, for God to allow man to go his own way is in every case to condemn that person to damnation, for only when God breaks into one's life and over-powers the will does that person turn from wickedness to serve God with a pure heart. But even from the perspective of a humanist, a God who has the power to save from damnation but does not is as guilty as if he had condemned the person outright.

The Exodus texts make the following amply clear:

1. God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would reject the pleas of Moses and Aaron, so that God's power in bringing Israel out of Egypt would be manifested (7:3-5).
2. God promised Moses that He would harden Pharaoh's heart before Moses ever stood before Pharaoh (4:21).
3. Pharaoh participated in the hardening of his own heart (8:15, 32; 9:34)
4. The story makes it clear that a "hardened heart" manifests itself in rejecting God's commands.

There are three different words used in the texts relating to

the hardening of Pharaoh's heart: חזק (chazak), קשה (qashah) and כבד (kabad). The following chart notes the distribution: The three words have various shades of meaning. חזק (chazak), the most often used word, simply means "to be or make strong." It can be in a good or evil sense; in this case Pharaoh's heart was strengthened against God. קשה (qashah) means "to be difficult or heavy" and is used of "oppression, hard labor" and even of "labor in birth." This term might be best used to describe Pharaoh's heart as "obstinate." כבד (kabad) generally means "to encourage or honor" and "to be heavy." From a Hebrew perspective, to make someone or something "heavy" is to laden that thing or person with praise.

It should be noted that the only word used in connection with Pharaoh "hardening" his own heart is כבד (kabad), "to honor or encourage." Pharaoh's actions precede from his pride and desire to establish his own greatness. The word most often used of HaShem's part is חזק (chazak), "to strengthen or make strong." In other words, God strengthened Pharaoh's heart to remain rebellious against His command. The one time HaShem "encourages" Pharaoh in his pride (10:1) makes it clear that God acts sovereignly to accomplish His purposes and plans. While it may seem that God "dirties" His hands by encouraging Pharaoh's pride, the reality is simply that God encourages Pharaoh to be what he in fact is: selfish and prideful. In this regard we may have an illustration of what the Apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 1:28, "And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind . . ."

The following chart lists each occurrence in Exodus of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Where the subject of the verb is clearly known, it is indicated. Blanks indicate the subject of the verb is ambiguous.

חזק	קשה	כבד
4:21 HaShem	7:3 HaShem	8:15 Pharaoh
7:13	13:15	8:32 Pharaoh
7:14		9:7
7:22		9:34
8:19		10:1 HaShem
9:12 HaShem		
9:35		
10:20 HaShem		
10:27 HaShem		
11:10 HaShem		
14:4 HaShem		
14:8 HaShem		
14:17 HaShem		