

STUDIES IN EXODUS No. 9

Exodus 6:13-7:7

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Review

To say the least, Moses and Aaron were unenthusiastic about returning to court for another interview with Pharaoh. The first had gone badly, had backfired, or so it seemed, and they felt no more confident that the next would go any better. That is where we left matters in 6:12.

Text Comment

The narrative will be picked up again at v. 28. Meanwhile we are given a genealogical record of Moses and Aaron. In other words, before the fireworks begin and the narrative of the contest between the Lord and Pharaoh begins to rush along, the narrator pauses to identify the two protagonists on Israel's side more precisely. In literary criticism, such a pause is called a "narrative caesura." [Alter, 342] The genealogy is a digression, but one that both eases the tension before the narrative builds to its climax and sets the account squarely within the history of the people of God, his covenant community. And clearly what we are given is an excerpt from a much larger genealogy. You will notice that the sons of Jacob are listed in order: Reuben, Simeon, and Levi, but then the descendants of Levi are given in greater number and no other of the 12 sons of Jacob are named. What is more the genealogy continues after Aaron, especially to Eleazar, who became high priest after the death of Aaron, and his son Phinehas. This is, in other words, the high priestly line at the beginning of Israelite history. You will see that Moses' descendants are not mentioned. At this point in the history, Moses needs no further introduction and legitimation. Not so Aaron, so he is the focus of this particular genealogy. [Durham, 83]

It is worth pointing out, given the number of genealogies that we find in the Bible, that in the modern world, when we are threatened by the crushing anonymity of modern urban society, this is the Bible's own witness to a true individuality. When we look at history as a whole, of course, we do not see the unnamed millions who lived and toiled in this world and whose very names were swept away by the onward march of time. We are ourselves likely to suffer the same fate. But while the individual person may be lost in the sea of names who have made up mankind through the ages, he or she has not been forgotten of God. These genealogies are a wonderful reminder that every person has played his or her part in the story of human life as God has ordered it and not a one has been forgotten by him. [Ellison, 37]

v.14 We had the 12 sons of Jacob named at the very beginning of the book, but without any of their descendants (1:1-5). The first two are named primarily simply to set Levi in his proper place among the descendants of Jacob. The family of Levi is the narrator's interest and Levi was Jacob's third son.

v.17 Now we break off the genealogy of Jacob's 12 sons to name the three sons of Levi and then his eight grandsons. Remember that the OT genealogies are not exhaustive. We are not to assume that Aaron and Moses are literally great grandsons of Levi. All that is meant is that, as Amram's sons, they were direct descendants of Levi. Remember, Israel

was in Egypt some 430 years (Ex. 12:40). Many more generations would have come and gone between Levi and Aaron. This is typical of biblical genealogies in which “son of” clearly means “descendant of” and in which any number of generations may be left out between one name and another.

In any case, as we will now see, this is a genealogy with a specific point. Of the three sons of Levi only Kohath’s line is traced beyond one generation and of the four sons of Kohath only Amram’s line is followed through to the third generation.

- v.20 We are reminded that Aaron was Moses’ *older* brother, a point that will confirmed in 7:7. Interestingly, marriage to one’s father’s sister is expressly forbidden in the Mosaic law. But this is not the only instance in which a union later prohibited in the law is recorded without comment. Jacob, remember, married two sisters at the same time, a marriage also forbidden in the law of Moses (Lev. 18:18).
- v.22 The reason why Izhar’s line and Uzziel’s line are traced is not known. It may be due perhaps to nothing more than the fact that, at the time, these were prominent men. [Childs, 117]
- v.25 Phinehas is an Egyptian name. This may indicate that Eleazar’s wife was Egyptian. Interestingly, Phinehas is the man who, much later, will show himself unusually zealous for the purity of Israel!
- v.27 The narrator, Moses or someone who wrote the material Moses later used to make up his narrative, tells us precisely what the preceding genealogy was for. It was to identify Aaron and Moses, to place them in the line of God’s covenant people, and to identify their offices as spokesmen for God.
- v.30 Following a common OT narrative technique, the narrative is resumed by picking up the complaining question with which it was broken off in 6:12. In a narrative that will exalt the mighty acts of God, we are reminded at the beginning how feeble were the instruments he used.
- v.4 “My hosts” or “battalions” or “armies” are other translations. To be sure the nation *was* an army in the sense that each Israelite man was a citizen soldier and could and would be called up to do battle as needed. There was no standing army. The Lord is often “the Lord of Hosts” in the OT. He has an army; and what an army. A mass of wretched slaves suffering under the Egyptian boot. Only the Lord can make an all-conquering army out of such rabble!
- v.5 We have such an exalted view of Moses that we can forget that in the biblical narrative itself the emphasis does not fall on what *he* does, but always and everywhere on what *God* does through him. He may worry about his faltering lips, but the question, again and again, is not what *Moses* can do, but what *God* will do. And once again, for the second time, we are told precisely what God will do and how it will come to pass by elaborate steps that Israel is delivered from bondage in Egypt. That Moses will be a god to

Pharaoh will be Yahweh's doing. Moses will be speaking the Lord's words and wielding the Lord's power. And what will be the result of all of that? Not that the Egyptians, or the Israelites for that matter, will know something about Moses, but that they will know that *Yahweh is the Lord!*

- v.7 A summary statement serves to introduce the narrative that follows. It is typical of Hebrew narrative to introduce the fact of a man's age at the time of some momentous event. We are told in Genesis, for example, how old Abraham was when Hagar bore Ishmael to him and, again, how old he was when he circumcised his household. The two men were experienced men, men of advanced years, men of dignity when they took on Pharaoh in the Lord's name. Their age also reminds us how long Israel had been suffering in Egypt.

Now we come to the matter of the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart, mentioned here in 7:3. We had already read of the Lord's plan to do this in 4:21. And, of course, as you may remember, in the narrative of the plagues which begins in the next paragraphs we read again and again of Pharaoh's heart being hard and of his refusing to let the Israelites go, often even after first promising that he would.

Partly because of the emphatic and repetitive assertion of the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart and partly because Paul himself uses it as his principal illustration of the divine sovereignty in salvation in Romans chapter 9, the matter of Pharaoh's heart and how and why it remained so obstinately hard has become through the ages the subject of endless debate and controversy. Whenever the two principal positions on divine grace have butted heads in the history of Christian thought – whether between Augustine and the Pelagians in the early church, or between Luther, Zwingli, Calvin and Knox, on the one hand, and the Anabaptists, on the other, at the time of the Reformation; or between the Reformed and the Arminians in the 17th century; or between Whitefield and Edwards, on the one hand, and the Wesleys, on the other, at the time of the Great Awakening, or between the descendants of each of the theological schools in the modern era – the meaning of the statement that the Lord would harden Pharaoh's heart has been a principal point of contention.

Insofar as we are going to encounter this matter over and over again in the succeeding narrative, I thought now was the best time to consider the meaning of this statement: "I will harden his heart." Now, by harden, we understand that the Lord is saying that he will make Pharaoh's heart obdurate, stubborn, unyielding. That is clear. What is controversial is the suggestion that God will actually *make* Pharaoh's heart hard. After all, being stubborn, especially in the face of a divine command to let Israel go, is a bad thing, a sinful thing. How can we say that God makes Pharaoh behave sinfully? Does that not make God the cause of sin? The Bible says not only that God is holy; it says he does not tempt anyone to sin. And, if God hardens Pharaoh's heart, does it not relieve Pharaoh of the responsibility for his sinful stubbornness, it being God's doing after all? These are the questions that have always been raised about God's hardening Pharaoh's heart. And because Paul uses the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as an illustration of what God does with many human hearts – including many hearts among the Jews in his own day – these questions have become all the more pressing. Paul obviously saw this history in Exodus as

illuminating the larger question of why anyone is saved; why one person believes and another does not; why the gospel is embraced by one and not by another.

To these questions, the following replies may be made.

1. First, if words and grammar yield any clear meaning, then unmistakably the Bible says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. God is the subject, harden is the verb, and Pharaoh's heart is the direct object. All of the problems that swirl around that statement, swirl as they do precisely because and only because the statement is so unequivocal. God will harden Pharaoh's heart, make it stubborn, make it unyielding.

What is more, as the narrative proceeds, we quickly understand why such hardening was required. As one plague after another is visited upon Egypt, as one punishing blow after another is delivered by the divine hand, as disaster follows disaster, an explanation is required as to why Pharaoh does not more immediately get the point, realize his helplessness in the face of such divine power, and, for his own good and for the good of his nation, acquiesce to Yahweh's demand to let his people leave Egypt. Pharaoh continues to refuse this request, time after time, and so Egypt continues to endure one catastrophe after another, because his heart was hard, because God hardened it and he was inordinately, irrationally stubborn as a result. "I will harden his heart" is an explanation of why the plagues do not achieve the result they would seem to be intended to achieve and, he thinks should have achieved. The divine hardening of Pharaoh's heart is, in other words, a fact of history. It explains what happened and why Israel was not released sooner and more easily than she was.

Indeed, this is precisely what the Lord said was the point. In 4:12 the Lord said he would harden Pharaoh's heart *so that he will not let the people go*. That is, had the Lord not hardened Pharaoh's heart, he would have let the people go much sooner than he did. The same point is made in 7:3. The Lord said that he would harden Pharaoh's heart and the result will be that the Lord will *multiply* his miraculous signs. And the result of that would be that the Egyptians will come to know that Yahweh is the Lord. It is not only that the Lord says he will harden Pharaoh's heart; he says that he intends to do so for specific reasons, to accomplish specific goals. Without the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, there would not have been this mighty revelation of the power and glory of God.

2. Second, in the narrative as it unfolds, the divine agency, the fact that it is the Lord that is causing the hardness of Pharaoh's heart continues to be emphasized.

It has often been pointed out that elsewhere in the narrative of the plagues we read that Pharaoh hardened his own heart or, more simply, that Pharaoh's heart was hard. Three times we read that Pharaoh hardened his heart and six times we read simply that Pharaoh's heart was hard. This has been taken by some as evidence that it was Pharaoh who was the cause of his own hard heart and the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart should be understood only as a confirming of what Pharaoh had already decided for himself. The Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart, in other words, was only his acquiescence in Pharaoh's hardening his own heart. The Lord's act was conditional on Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart and was

judicial in nature, that is, it was punishment for Pharaoh's hardening of his heart. It was not, in other words, the Lord making Pharaoh's heart hard in a way that Pharaoh would not have made it hard; it was not the Lord turning Pharaoh's heart to hardness; it was simply the Lord responding to a decision Pharaoh had already made for himself.

However, ten times in the same narrative we are told that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart and, as we have already seen, additionally twice before the narrative of the plagues begins we are told that the Lord told Moses in advance that he would harden Pharaoh's heart and what the consequences of that hardening would be. So, the first time we read that Pharaoh's heart was hard, in 7:13 (also 7:22), we also read that in its being hard it was "just as the Lord had said." And the first time we read that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, or made his heart hard, we are again told that this too was "just as the Lord had said" (8:15; see also 8:19; 9:12, 35). In other words, what happened to Pharaoh's heart came about because of the Lord's promise to harden it.

And so Paul in Romans 9:17-18:

"For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: 'I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' [A citation of Exodus 9:16] Therefore [Paul concludes], God has mercy on whom he has mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden."

In other words, Paul says, what God did to Pharaoh's heart, he does to many hearts. God's hardening Pharaoh's heart in Exodus is a window on the ways of God with sinful men. And, what is clear, is that when Paul uses the history of the Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as an illustration of God exercising his sovereign right as a potter to do with his lump of clay whatever he pleases, he was not imposing an alien interpretation on the text of Exodus. He was, to the contrary, reading it in its plain sense. "It is evident from both Exodus and Romans that Pharaoh and Egypt were at the disposition of an absolute sovereign." [Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 359-360] And it is clear from the rest of the Bible that the same can be said of every other human being. He or she is at the disposition of an absolute sovereign. Paul is, after all, answering the question why some believe and some do not and he finds that answer illustrated in the history of Pharaoh and the Lord's hardening his heart. God shows mercy to whom he will and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

3. Third, the fact is, what we have here in Exodus we find many, many times in the Bible. We have God exercising sovereign control even over the sinful thoughts and actions of men. We have God determining that men will do sinful things so that God's purposes in the world will be accomplished. I have commonplacéd my Bible on this theme at Rom. 9:18 – "Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden" – and I have some seventeen texts listed in the margin there that illustrate this point. They are not the only texts in the Bible that do – there are many more – but they are the most striking illustrations of this fact and this teaching.

“But Sihon king of Heshbon refused to let us pass through. For the Lord your God had made his spirit stubborn and his heart obstinate in order to give him into your hands, as he now has done.” [Deut. 2:30]

“After Abimelech had governed Israel three years, God sent an evil spirit between Abimelech and the citizens of Shechem, who acted treacherously against Abimelech. God did this in order that the crime against Jerub-Baal’s seventy sons, the shedding of their blood, might be avenged on their brother Abimelech and on the citizens of Shechem, who had helped him murder his brothers.” [Judg. 9:22-24]

“[Eli’s] sons, however, did not listen to their father’s rebuke, for it was the Lord’s will to put them to death.” [1 Sam. 2:25]

“[The Lord said to Isaiah] Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” [Isa. 6:9-10]

And many other texts like that. And also from the New Testament.

“For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.” [2 Thess. 2:11]

“Jesus said, ‘For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.’” [John 9:39]

“For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to give the beast their power to rule until God’s words are fulfilled.” [Rev. 17:17]

The fact is the Bible is never unwilling to say that God’s sovereignty is so absolute, his rule so complete that even the sinful acts of human beings accomplish his purposes. He will use sin sinlessly to bring about his will in the world.

4. Now, it is absolutely true and never to be forgotten that God’s hardening of a heart is always also judicial in character. It is a sovereign work but it is also a holy judgment. Pharaoh was a wicked man and he had abused the people of God terribly. What befell him was divine judgment. That God hardened his heart resulted in his suffering a greater judgment – more plagues – but certainly no greater than he and his nation deserved.

To be sure, as Paul unmistakably asserts in Romans 9, God used Pharaoh to reveal supremely important truth to him, to Egypt, to Israel, and to the world. He hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that the divine revelation would be given with crystal clarity and terrible power. He will humiliate the great imperial power of the world of that day, and when it is down he will lift it up to strike it down again – over and over; ten times in all – and so he will have demonstrated for all time the impotence of the false gods of mankind and the grace and power of the one living and true God. But in using Pharaoh to disclose this truth – the truth

that sets men free – he was not pulling a marionette’s strings, as if Pharaoh was some unthinking, unfeeling, inanimate puppet. Pharaoh was manifesting his own character – callous, arrogant, resistant to instruction. When God hardened Pharaoh’s heart he did nothing but encourage the willful king in his natural pride and cruelty. [Alter, 329-330] God often judges sin with more sin in the Bible and in human life. Pharaoh is not let off the hook. He got nothing but what he deserved. And if God hardened his heart, made it still more stubborn, more cruel, more stupid, it was because he deserved to suffer the consequences of his brutal ways. If you would be cruel, the Lord was as much saying, then see where cruelty will get you when taken to its logical end and its spiritual culmination. Choose sin, the Lord says, and I will see to it that you get what you chose. Give yourself to sin and I’ll see to it that you see where sin will take you. So not only do we read that the Lord hardened Pharaoh’s heart, but that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

I do not wish to say much more here. Obviously we stand before a great deep and we should be careful not to say more than the Bible actually says. God’s absolute sovereignty – his unqualified control over everything that happens in this world, down to the most absurdly inconsequential details, such as the number of hairs you have on your head at this moment – God’s absolute sovereignty which is so often, so emphatically taught in Holy Scripture, is a doctrine of the most fundamental importance. *The Almighty does what pleases him in heaven and on earth!* His will is the ultimate explanation of everything. But there is much that we do not and cannot understand and, if we are wise, we will put our hands over our mouth.

We cannot deny the doctrine, the truth, the fact of God’s absolute rule over human life and human history without giving up our Christian faith in the one, living God, our Savior, who has promised us a very definite, specific, detailed future. He knows how the drama will end because he is in complete control of every detail of the plot. He directs human history and the history of every individual human life step by step to ensure that it reaches the goal he intends. Surely one of the reasons why the Bible does not hesitate to tell us that God is in control even of the sinful acts of human beings and also uses their sins to accomplish his will – a teaching that might have been left out of Holy Scripture, after all – is to assure us that God *is* in absolute control, that nothing happens in this world that is not subject to his rule, that nothing, absolutely nothing can interfere with the accomplishment of his will in the world.

When we read that what Judas did in his betrayal of the Lord was foreordained by God, when we read that those wicked men who crucified the Lord of glory were, in fact, fulfilling the divine purpose and plan for the salvation of the world, we are assured that, at the last, even the greatest evil in this world does not escape divine control and must at last fulfill God’s perfect plan for this world. That is, that must be, in the face of the great darkness of so much in this world, an immense encouragement. For whatever reason, God has seen fit for the world to suffer these things, for individuals to endure this injustice or this sorrow or this suffering. It is his will in the deepest sense. And so we are not left without hope even in the face of the worst that this world can do. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart meant more suffering for Israel; almost surely it meant the death of some Israelites before they could escape Egypt. But God had a plan and all of this happened according to that plan. It was essential that it should and it did.

It is all very well to question how the holy God can, in any way, be involved in the sinful thoughts and deeds of human beings. But, at the last, *if he is not*, if the Almighty has no control over human sin, if human sin does not accomplish his will and purpose for the life of mankind, if it does not lead inexorably to that place where God intends human history to end, then there is an immense part of human life and of the story of this world that is not under the divine rule and we can no longer know that things will turn out as God has promised. We may, in one way, wish to separate God entirely from the wickedness of human life. But that would be a Pyrrhic victory. The cost would be the loss of our assurance that God is in absolute control and can bring history, as he promised, to its appointed end and each and every individual human life with it.

Some of you older folk may remember the name of Bill Vukovich, the Indy car race driver who won the Indianapolis 500 three times in the 1950s until he was killed in a crash on the same race track. When the investigation was complete it was reported that Vukovich was killed as a result of the failure of a 10 cent cotter pin in one of his wheel assemblies. That expensive, sophisticated race car was crushed into a heap of twisted metal because a ten cent part broke. Little things can have immense consequences. Well, in the same way, if there is a molecule wheeling in some distant corner of the universe that God does not have under his control, how can we know, how would it be possible to know that that molecule is not going to be the undoing of all of God's plans and purposes for the world. The Bible offers this relentless logic many times: if God is to bring the future to its appointed end he must be in control, absolute control, of the present, of every tiny circumstances. Well, in this world, if God is in control of this world, he must be in control of sin, one of the most powerful forces abroad in human life and one of the most powerful influences on history. And the Bible says that he is.

But, at the same time, we are taught countless times in this same Word of God that human beings do evil out of the wickedness of their own hearts, that God never forces them to sin against their will, that man is absolutely responsible for his own thinking, his own attitudes, and his own behavior. Our text from the Gospel of Matthew this morning, the encounter of the Lord with the rich young man, is a case in point. The entire episode is presented as a case study in man's free will. He came to Jesus because he was impressed with him. He turned away from Jesus, however sadly, because the Lord demanded more than he was willing to give. That was a foolish man who has paid a terrible price for his foolishness. He was on the cusp of eternal life and he has no one to blame but himself for squandering his chance to live in joy forever. The Bible places countless texts like that side by side with texts that express the sovereignty of God in a manner so absolute, so unqualified as to seem almost calculated to offend. Paul knew that having spoken of God's hardening Pharaoh's heart as he had in Romans 9:17-18, people would think that he was nullifying the human will and would think that he was teaching that God was unjust, treating different people so differently, hardening some, showing mercy to others. Paul knew what he was saying. Knew how people would struggle with this truth. But he taught it anyway because it must be taught and must be believed, however many difficulties it raises in our minds.

How God exercises his control without staining in any way, to the slightest degree his own terrible purity; how God rules over human sin without in any way becoming the author of sin or a responsible party to that sin, how God can harden Pharaoh's heart without in any way being accountable for the sin of the king's stubbornness, these are questions we cannot adequately

answer. We stand before a great deep that we will never plumb. An absolutely sovereign God; an absolutely free and responsible man. The Bible says both things many, many times. The Bible insists on both facts many, many times. The Bible does not at any point seek to explain to us how to hold these facts together or to reconcile them with one another. They are both true and we are left to believe them both. That is all.

We know both are true from both the teaching of God's Word and the observation and experience of life. How they are both true at one and the same time we cannot really explain. But, then, there are many things that are of absolute importance to our human life that we cannot begin to explain. The ways of God are far above us whether we are thinking about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart or something as fundamental to our daily life as our own human self-consciousness. We cannot explain that either: or the origin of our soul, or the reality of prayer, or a hundred other things that are fundamental to our life as human beings and our Christian life as the children of God.

We know that God is sovereign. We know that man is free and responsible. That is enough for us to know. But, here in Exodus, we emphatically know that the living God is an absolute sovereign. We are taught here that God rules over all and that everything that happens in this world comes to pass in conformity to the purpose of his will. And, lest there be any misunderstanding, any underestimation of the character, quality, and sweep of the divine sovereignty, the Bible makes the point unmistakably clear by telling us straightaway that God's rule extends to even the worst things that human beings do. Even at his most rebellious, man does not escape the divine rule. Indeed, when he plays the rebel full tilt, pathetically he only manages to do what God had planned and to fulfill God's purpose for his life and the life of others. Pharaoh will rage and the result will be that God has revealed himself in his glory to the world! That is how absolute God's sovereignty is!

He is the Lord! And the acknowledgement of that fact, the confession of that fact from the heart, the acceptance of the fact that we cannot, can never escape his rule and control should cause us to fear him, to fall before him and beg his mercy, and promise that, by his grace, we will submit our lives to him in every way. And, if we are Christians, the fact of the Lord's universal rule must console us in the knowledge that the Lord Christ, who loves us with an everlasting love, has everything, absolutely everything, under his complete control.