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## *§11 God Hardens Pharaoh's Heart: Locusts and Darkness (Exod. 10:1–29)*

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The Lord begins actively to harden Pharaoh's heart late in the plague cycles, and more frequently in the last three plagues. God's hardening functions alongside the choices Pharaoh himself made to "self-harden" his heart. The Hebrew has two different words, both generally translated "hardened," that the narrative uses interchangeably (without pattern). *Khazaq* refers to physical or political strengthening, as in "making tough" or uncompassionate. *Kabed* refers to being stubborn, self-satisfied ("fat"), or self-fulfilled ("honored"). Together these words convey Pharaoh's calcified will, encrusted stubbornness, and the rigor mortis of his reason.

Four times God actively hardens Pharaoh's heart ("the Lord hardened"): after the plague of boils (9:12), after the locusts (v. 20), after the darkness (v. 27), and before the death of the firstborn (11:10). Additionally, before the plague of the locusts (v. 1), God claims to have hardened Pharaoh's heart immediately after the narrator twice states that Pharaoh and his officials hardened their own hearts. Later in the narrative, after Pharaoh had begun preparations to pursue the people to the sea (14:8), the text states that the Lord again hardened his heart.

The Lord promised to harden Pharaoh's or the Egyptians' hearts in the future ("I will harden," 4:21; 7:3; 14:4, 17). The balance of the references to his hard heart remind us that Pharaoh himself was responsible for his hard heart (7:13–14, 22–23; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34–35). He enslaved and oppressed the people of his own volition long before the Lord began this hardening.

God claimed to harden the pharaoh's heart (thereby prolonging the slavery of the Israelites and the plagues) in order to "perform these miraculous signs of mine among them." These signs further revealed to the Israelites who God is ("these signs of mine"). As we see in both Genesis and Exodus, the Lord's identity

is complex. By means of the plagues we see that Yahweh controls the creation, using natural phenomena in supernatural ways. Yahweh worked among them and with individuals (e.g., Moses and Aaron) to accomplish these purposes. Yahweh distinguished between those who were under the pharaoh's protection and those who were under the Lord's protection. God did not liberate them quickly, but used strategies that worked with the creation and the political structures that were in place.

**10:1-2 / "Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his officials."** The first two verses of Exodus 10 give reasons ("so that") for the Lord's actions. The explanations are brief, but they are critical to understanding who the Lord is. The focus is on the Israelites and their progeny: **so that I may perform these miraculous signs of mine among them that you may tell your children and grandchildren.**

The Lord wanted their "children and grandchildren" to know about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the signs of Egypt. What exactly did God want them to know? Three things: the Lord is the dangerous and powerful redeemer of the oppressed; the Lord is the Creator of the entire creation; you are the people who must tell the world the story of how God redeemed and recreated you.

The Lord is the dangerous and powerful redeemer of oppressed people. The Lord's statement, "**how I dealt harshly with the Egyptians,**" is an anathema for Christians who struggle with the harsh actions of God in the OT. The narrative context of the pharaoh's crimes is essential here. The Lord wants to be known as one who responds with strength when God's children cry out for relief from violent oppression. God is a restorer of justice (23:2, 6). God redeems and delivers the helpless (6:6). In the plagues, for the first time, God acted to deliver a people from slavery. God's restrained and measured power—that is, nonetheless, by its calculated nature and its effect, "harsh"—met Egypt's power, which was no match.

The RSV translation represents the "harsh" treatment communicated in verses 1-2 as "I have made sport of." The NRSV has "I have made fools of," and the NASB translates the phrase "I have made a mockery of." The word may simply mean that God had personally "occupied himself" with the arrogance of the Egyptians. God actually used this limitless power with measured con-

trol, as earlier the Lord had said, “I could have . . . wiped you off the earth” (9:15).

In the NT, this sort of harshness does not disappear. In the incarnation and cross God sought out and suffered the harshness of oppression to overthrow it with love. The combination of the protection of love and the harshness of judgment against rebellion is also a NT theme (Matt. 25:33–34, 41; 2 Cor. 5:10). This refrain has its beginning in the protection of the children of Israel and the story of God’s harshness against the oppressors in Egypt.

The second part of the explanation in verses 1–2 is that you may know **“how I performed my signs among them.”** The creation-based signs themselves hold the theological interpretive key. The Lord is the Creator of the whole creation. God used creation and its symbolic undoing to communicate the sins and false gods of Egypt. God used the signs of the creation in a negative way to show that God is the Creator as well as to intervene for Israel. The Lord could have intervened with a delivering army, as in Babylon with Cyrus the Persian. Rather, God “performed signs,” demonstrating for all future generations that human sin and creation run amok are related. God’s performance of signs links ecological disaster with the pharaoh’s theological and moral failures (see Fretheim, “The Plagues as Ecological Signs”). Later, in the wilderness, the Lord would teach the children of Israel the relationship between the glory of the Lord and the fullness of the created order (Num. 14:21; Exod. 16:7).

The final reason for the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (and the extended plagues) is **“that you may know that I am the LORD.”** In this context the phrase “that you may know” indicates an active and continual knowing, generation after generation. Scripture provides two illuminating Psalms (105, 78) that retell the story of the plagues for future generations in worship settings.

**10:3–20** / The eighth plague was **locusts** that blackened the face of the ground. It begins with the same narrative markers as the second (frogs) and fifth (death of livestock) plagues: Then the LORD said to Moses, “Go to Pharaoh,” continues with the familiar words, **“This is what the LORD . . . says,”** and concludes with the freedom to serve Yahweh formula, **“Let my people go, so that they may worship me.”** This is the final statement of the main reason for the exodus (as in 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). God would not ask Pharaoh again.

God had established Aaron as Moses' prophet, and Aaron acted as the agent of the first three plagues (vv. 9-10, 12, 19). They repeated the Lord's command to "let the Israelites go."

God told Moses and Aaron again, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart and . . . he will not listen to you." How much harder could the pharaoh's heart become? This expression of God's involvement seems odd at first. Pharaoh's decisions not to let the people go are not surprising given the great economic loss of slaves. God's claim to be involved at all in his hardness of heart is surprising, since it does not seem necessary to the story. It is included because the prolongation of the plagues *demonstrated God's control over the elements of nature*. The Lord is God over life and death, even in a country where the pharaoh, emissary of the gods of Egypt, believed that he controlled life and death. God lengthened the cycle of plagues to demonstrate the range of life under the Lord's own control, from cattle to insects and from water to the light of day.

Throughout the plague cycles Pharaoh expresses his hardness of heart in three different ways: *Pharaoh hardened his own heart* (8:15, 32; 9:34), *Pharaoh's heart was hardened or became hard* (7:13-14, 22-23; 8:19; 9:7, 35) and *God hardened it* (9:12; 11:10; 14:8). God had also *promised* to harden it (4:21; 7:3; 14:4, 17). There are no special distinctions between these expressions. It may be concluded that God calcified Pharaoh's own stubbornness and cruelty to accomplish divine purposes. (For in-depth discussion see the comments on Exod. 10:1-2.)

God also told Moses that the pharaoh "will not listen to you." This is what Moses was afraid of, because of his faltering lips (6:12, 30). The Lord reminded him that his speaking ability was not a problem, since it was not Moses or his words that would accomplish the deliverance. Here we see the first instance of the refrain that occurs throughout these chapters: Pharaoh **would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said** (7:13, 22; 8:15, 19; 9:12, 35; 11:9). The pharaoh's hard heart creates a pause during which the Lord demonstrates who is the Creator of the earth and redeemer of the people. It was the Lord's strategy so that the Egyptians would see and know Yahweh (9:14-16) and Israel would trust and fear their God (10:1-2; 14:31).

The plagues demonstrate the Lord's identity to the world in a specific way (to the Egyptians and Israelites in the text as well as to readers of the text). It is important to understand the function of the plagues in the text since our common response to plagues and

Verse 20 mentions the family together for the first time. **So Moses took his wife and sons . . . and started back to Egypt.** It was a vulnerable beginning. Zipporah, Gershom, and their second son, Eliezer (18:4), and a donkey were walking with Moses through the wilderness. It is no wonder that we are told that **he took the staff of God in his hand** as God had reminded him to do (4:17). By taking the staff, Moses had accepted his commission.

**4:21–23** / Moses' *second* encounter in Midian was with the Lord, who gave him additional instructions for his imminent meeting with Pharaoh. This short conversation gives a preview of conversations and important themes to come. It anticipates this meeting and the **wonders** to come, the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart (7:3, 13, 22), as well as the threat (11:4–8) and killing of the firstborn sons of Egypt (12:29–30). In these words God claims control of the whole sequence of events about to unfold.

Here for the first time we hear the Lord say, "**I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.**" (See the discussion of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart at the commentary on 7:1–7; 10:1–2.) Here the word for "harden" means "toughen" or "strengthen" (*khazaq*). The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is sometimes a red herring for interpreters. Pharaoh's heart was already "hard" enough—he had harshly enslaved a whole people. The theological problem is not that Pharaoh was compassionate and the Lord made him "hard." The more difficult issues arise from the fact that the hardening prolongs the enslavement of the children of Israel and eventually requires that the Lord kill the firstborn of Egypt.

These verses also mention the Lord's killing of the **firstborn** for the first time (4:22–23; 6:14; 11:5; 12:12, 29; 13:2, 12–15; 22:29; 34:19–20). Verse 23 is set apart and highlighted in the narrative by its verb change in the words, "**I told you.**" This introduction to the importance of the firstborn son makes several important claims. The text itself illustrates this by its structure:

I told you,

A "Israel is my **firstborn son**,

B **Let my son go**, so he may worship me.

B' But *you refused to let him go*;

A' So I will kill your **firstborn son.**"

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## *§16 Crossing the Sea (Exod. 14:1–31)*

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The Lord set a strategic trap for Pharaoh in the exit from Egypt. God sent the people of Israel to a vulnerable location next to the sea and “hemmed in by the desert.” This was part of the Lord’s plan to draw the pharaoh out. Moses, the people, and Pharaoh all play their roles. The narrative is packed with action: the people obey the Lord’s directions; the king pursues them with chariots; the people cry out in terror; Moses steadies them; the Lord directs them toward the water; the pillar of cloud/fire protects them; the Lord drives the sea apart; the people walk; Pharaoh pursues; the Lord fights; the charioteers panic; Moses raises his staff; the Lord sweeps the Egyptians away; and the people fear and trust the Lord.

Why did the Lord do this, when Israel was already out of Egypt and on the way? What was the purpose of drawing the Egyptian army into this trap? The Lord states a brief reason: “**I will gain glory** (or “be honored”) . . . **through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.**” We find similar words in 12:17–18. This episode may seem like a superfluous show of strength after the plagues, but the persistence of the pharaoh is shown to be unrelenting. God’s final demonstration of counterforce brought an end to all negotiations and clearly established the Lord’s reputation for the world. In the ancient world, the name of Yahweh was not known. The witness of the text is that the Lord came down at this point in history to reveal who God is in a unique and unequivocal way. God’s identity was greater than simply being the “God of the Hebrews, who wanted the people freed.” God’s purpose was not limited to manipulating a specific Pharaoh for one specific purpose. The scope of the Lord’s action and self-revelation is, at once, historical and cosmic.

The drowning of the pharaoh’s chariots and horsemen is unequalled in the history of OT revelation. It demonstrates that the Lord is God over all chaotic and oppressive forces that rule in the created world (see the discussion of these themes in Exod. 15).



The lordship of Yahweh means more than release for slaves; it means the coming end of the principalities that twist the world. The luring of Pharaoh into the heart of the sea revealed the Creator's move to redeem creation and restore it to the Creator. Escaping the pharaoh was not enough. His power had to be broken in such a way that the entire world would know who the Lord is and what God's sovereignty can mean.

**14:1-9** / The Lord's baiting and Pharaoh's pursuit begins when God instructs Moses to turn back toward Egypt and encamp in a specific place by "the sea" (13:18; 15:4). The text is very precise about the location, giving a triangulation point, but the three places named have been lost in the sands of time: **near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea . . . directly opposite Baal Zephon**. This place could have been by any of the four lakes that once stood to the east of Rameses (see additional note at 13:18). Verse 9 describes again the exact (presently unknown) location.

The plan was to entice the pharaoh to display his arrogance once more. He would think the people were confused and wandering about, **hemmed in by the desert**. This meant, literally, that he would believe "the wilderness had closed them in," as if the Lord was not also God of the wilderness.

Here in Exodus 14 the Lord hardened ("strengthened") Pharaoh's heart for the last time (vv. 4, 8, 17). The hardening occurs after Pharaoh began preparations for his pursuit, intensifying his resolve, but not "creating" his intent. The translation "I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army" is, more accurately, "I will be honored because of Pharaoh and all his army." The Egyptians and the wider ancient world would hear of this display of Yahweh's power. The end of the chapter reports the immediate honoring that occurred:

And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant. (v. 31)

The people honored the Lord because they were saved from Pharaoh's attack. Pharaoh came after them with his entire war arsenal and the Lord defeated him. Israel came to fear and trust Yahweh through this traumatic experience of danger and rescue.

Pharaoh receives the report that **the people had fled**, which contrasts with the narrator's report in verse 8 that **the Israelites**

... were marching out boldly. "Boldly" is a good translation of the Hebraism "with uplifted hand." In this context it does not mean "defiantly" (Knight, *Theology as Narration*, p. 101; quoted in Durham, *Exodus*, p. 190) or "confident of their safety" (Durham, *Exodus*, p. 190). They marched out in orderly divisions of fifty (12:17, 41, 51; see also 13:18).

Powerful Pharaoh decided with his "servants" (*ʿebed* NIV officials) that they had made a mistake in losing the Israelite's services (*ʿabad* "serving us"). He pursued them with his entire army, including six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt. Each of the chariots had officers (*shalishim*) or, more specifically, "commanders of three," perhaps meaning that the large chariots carried three men. Pharaoh took his elite corps and everyone else: chariots, cavalry, and infantry. The Hebrew word translated **troops** means simply "fighting force." Exodus 14 describes this fighting force frequently (vv. 7, 9, 17, 18, 23, 28). They pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea.

**14:10–18** / The narrative comes to a crisis. An immovable object was pursued by an apparently irresistible force. The ironies of this crisis point are rich. The Lord had not wanted them to face war (13:17). Instead, they were now facing the unleashed power of Egypt's army. Although the Israelites were trapped between the sea and the army, in fact, a trap had been set for the Egyptians. Pharaoh was riding forth in all his might, but he had never been so vulnerable. The chaos about to ensue would engulf and transform everyone. It was the Lord's greatest self-revelation to humanity up to that historical moment.

When the people **looked up** they saw the force of the chariots, riders, and infantry **marching after them**. The children of Israel **were terrified and cried out to the LORD**. Their next response was against Moses. The complaints came rapid-fire in three sarcastic questions. **"Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'?"** They had indeed communicated such things in Egypt in their worst moments (5:20–21; 6:9). The reference to "graves in Egypt" is ironic, considering the proliferation of ancient pyramid tombs.

This would not be the last time that their situation was "too much to bear." They would speak of preferring to serve and die in