



Biblical Literature

Egyptian Period: The Question of God Hardening the Heart of Pharaoh

“And the LORD hardened Pharaoh's heart, and he did not listen to them, just as the LORD had spoken to Moses.” (Ex 9:12)

I don't understand how we can believe that God is “just” while He seems to do so much injustice. He calls Moses at the burning bush, and then, three chapters later, wants to “kill” him for not being circumcised! (Ex 4:24) He purposefully “hardens” pharaoh's heart to the point of killing the first born in Egypt. How can God hold pharaoh responsible? Hasn't He forced the situation to turn out this way?

While reading Exodus, these questions naturally come to the surface. Others like it will follow when we get to the period of the Judges, with the destruction of whole cities “put to the ban.” How can we believe in the utter and complete goodness of God in the face of these situations?

THE BIBLICAL MINDSET:

As we progress through the Bible, we see different cultures impact the way the stories are being presented. After all, the traditions and cultures behind the Bible span some two thousand years. Think of how different our own country's culture was just two hundred years ago: slavery was widely accepted, most people worked, lived and died on farms, the way we dressed, and the customs regarding dancing, marriage and dating were vastly different. Think of the contrasts between the cultural background of the stories of Mark Twain and those of novelist Tom Clancey.

The key to understanding these passages is often found in discovering the way that particular biblical culture expressed itself at the time of the writing. Here, we need to focus on how it understood what God wanted, or, to put it in theological terms, his “will.”

The Will of God:

When you want something to happen, you must first “will” it to happen. Your “will power” is your ability to commit to an activity- to take an idea and turn it into action. When you directly want something to happen, like learning to ride a skateboard, we call this your “primary” will. That is the result of your directly willing the activity. When you first stepped onto the board, however, you realized there was a risk involved. You could get hurt. You might have put on some protective gear, but you allow for the risk in order to enjoy the benefits.

This “allowing” is something you *indirectly will* and something you accept “secondarily.” In fact, you may have tried your best to avoid it. Nevertheless, we call this your “secondary” will - what you allow. When we talk about what you want or will, we make a nice distinction between your directly willing something (primary will, *skating*) and your indirectly willing something (secondary will, *falling*). I am a diver; I want to explore reefs and wrecks (primary will). There is a slight chance I will get bit by a shark or get the bends (secondary will). I am willing to allow for this, given the rewards of diving.

The writers of Exodus do not make these neat philosophical distinctions. It isn't important to them to distinguish between God's primary will (what he directly wills) and his secondary will (what he allows). For the language and culture of Exodus, what God allows he does, because the ultimate point of the story is that it is God who is control of nature, not pharaoh or his gods.

We have to remember that our use of philosophic distinctions is different and our concerns are different. If we would rewrite this and send it back to them with the insertion that God “allowed” pharaoh's heart to become hard, they might see this as an indication that pharaoh and God are nearly equal. The Scriptures avoid this pitfall by saying simply, “God made pharaoh obstinate.”

The same principle can be applied to God desiring to “kill” Moses. To “kill” means to directly take a life in our language. But, for the biblical writer, God allowing Moses to suffer serious illness is the same thing as God “killing” Moses. (In our culture we might similarly say to someone, “You're killing me.”) The important thing is that God is in control, not Moses. Since God will ultimately allow all of us to die, we might say he will

eventually take our lives from us. Zipporah believes that it is a result of Moses not being circumcised, and makes a desperate attempt to make the situation right. God answers her prayers and the sickness left him. (Ex 4:25)

If we don't understand this mindset, we could get the idea that God directly interferes with free will. The scriptures tell us that God does not tempt us, let alone "harden" us, nor does he delight in death. Both of these are a direct result of sin that God allows as the necessary risk of giving us free will.

It is the same sun that melts ice and hardens mud into bricks. Some of us have hearts prepared to melt before the light of His truth, others (God forbid) have engaged in so much sin that our muddy hearts will become stone hard when His Light shines on us. Herod Antipas hoped Jesus would perform a miracle for him - but no miracle would be performed for the man who cut off the head of John the Baptist. Jesus allowed his heart to remain the mud it was, should he have preached to Herod, we can safely assume his muddy heart would have only hardened. Just a short time before, Herod's response to John's preaching was a brutal beheading. Jesus shows God's merciful judgment on Herod by remaining silent before him. (Luke 23:7-9)

In the *Our Father*, we pray "God's will be done," as if it isn't being done. Yet, we believe that what happens on earth is a result of his will. Why pray for something that is already true? Isn't God in control? Yes. What happens to us, good or bad, falls under His will, since he "allows" what happens to happen. But, God might have directly willed something much better for us, if we were more open to Him. We pray that his **primary will** might occur in our lives and in the lives of others.

The point of Exodus might be that a lot of the "killing" and "hardening" that God allows in this world would vanish, if we were a little more like Zipporah, whose heart melted before Him and a little less like pharaoh whose muddy heart hardened.

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