God’s Signs and Wonders (7:8–11:10)

Having left behind a speechless Moses at the end of our last session, we are today moving on to the part of the narrative that is usually known as the story of the Egyptian plagues. For reasons that I shall explain in a moment, I believe that it is better to speak of God’s signs and wonders instead. Also, by way of introduction, I need to point out that we are going to approach the text differently today, for two reasons. First of all, since we are dealing with a significantly longer passage, we don’t have the time to go through the entire story in the way we have done in the first two sessions. In addition to that, our text also raises some problems that we cannot ignore; and so I would like us to look at:

- the nature of the text: what kind of text is it and what does it talk about;
- its main themes and structure, which will help us to come to a better understanding of this more extensive narrative;
- and some of the theological issues it raises.

Plagues, Signs or Wonders

As already said, this part of the book of Exodus is traditionally known as the Egyptian plagues. However, some, like Carol Meyers, have objected to this description because of its implications of extensive loss of life, which is not fully appropriate to the story as a whole. After all, it is only in the last episode, the killing of the firstborn, where we find significant loss of human life, although some such loss also occurs in the seventh calamity, the hail that strikes Egypt. Meyers also points out that the phrase ‘ten plagues’ does not appear in the book of Exodus itself, although the noun ‘plague’ (מַגֵּפָה) occurs once in in connection with the seventh calamity (9:14) and the verb ‘to strike, smite, plague’ (נגף) is used in 8:2 in relation to the infestation of frogs (2005, pp. 76-77). It is only in connection with the killing of the Egyptian firstborn (11:1–13:16) that this kind of language becomes more common.

Generally speaking, the biblical authors prefer other terms. Biblical passages outside Exodus usually speak of ‘signs and wonders’ (Deut. 4:34; Ps. 78:43-51; 105:26-27; Jer. 32:20-21) when they refer to these events, as indeed does the book of Exodus itself. In Moses’ encounter with God at the burning bush, God speaks of the wonders he is going to do (3:20; נִפְלָאוֹת or that Moses will be enabled to do (4:21; מופֵּתִים – this is the more common term) as well as the signs that Moses is to perform (4:17; אֹתֹת). Both terms, ‘signs and wonders’, are also used in 7:3 just prior to Moses’ confrontation with Pharaoh when God says, ‘I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and … I multiply my miraculous signs and wonders in Egypt’. The term ‘wonder’ reappears at the beginning of the confrontation when
Pharaoh asks for one (7:8), and the text speaks of ‘signs’ in 8:23 in the flies episode and also in 10:1-2 where the term refers to all that God does to the Egyptians.

So we have good reasons to prefer the terms ‘signs’ and ‘wonders’, not least because they are, as Meyers points out, ‘God-focused terms’ that talk about God’s ‘intervention in human affairs’. They make the point that these events are ‘manifestations of divine power on Israel’s behalf’ (2005, p. 77).

Structure and (Creation) Theology

Having thus seen what the text is primarily about, God’s signs and wonders, performed in order to end Israel’s slavery in Egypt, we are now going to take a close look at the structure of the narrative. Old Testament scholars are not agreed on this, but I shall only offer you one outline, the one proposed by Thomas Dozeman, which this is the one that I have found the most illuminating. First though, I have to confess that my textual boundaries, 7:8–11:10, are more than a little odd in that they exclude the decisive episode, the killing of the firstborn, which is the one that ultimately leads to Israel’s freedom. My reasons for that division are entirely pragmatic, because I want us to look at the Passover story separately, of which the killing of the firstborn is an integral part. We shall come to that next time.

In fact, it could be argued that we ought to look at the whole of Exodus 7:8–15:21, which, according to Dozeman (2009, pp. 200-206), features the following parts:

- **Initial Confrontation Between God and Pharaoh (7:8–10:20)** – this includes all the signs and wonders, except for the final killing of the firstborn
- **Defeat of Pharaoh (10:21–14:31)** – this includes the Passover, the killing of the firstborn, the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the actual exodus itself and the early wilderness wanderings
- **Celebration of Victory (15:1-21)** – this has two victory songs in vv. 1-18 and v. 21

Dozeman’s division is not an arbitrary one but is based on Exodus 7:1-5, the verses that introduce our text. Here a distinction is made between ‘signs and wonders’ (v. 3), on the one hand, and ‘great acts of judgement’ (v. 4), on the other:

> But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and I will multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt. When Pharaoh does not listen to you, I will lay my hand upon Egypt and bring my people the Israelites, company by company, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment.

Based on this distinction, Dozeman suggests, intriguingly and persuasively, in my view, that the ‘signs and wonders’ are to be found in the first episodes, which he calls the initial confrontation (7:8–10:20), whereas the ‘great acts of judgement’ are the events narrated in 10:21–14:31. These include the killing of the firstborn and they are the events that
eventually lead to Pharaoh’s defeat (2009, pp. 201-202). But let’s now take a close look at the structure of the text:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plague</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Central Character</th>
<th>Magicians</th>
<th>Knowledge of Yahweh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sea dragon (7:8-13)</td>
<td>† water  ↑</td>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>replicate the sign (v. 11)</td>
<td>’By this you will know that I am the LORD’ (7:17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blood (7:14-25)</td>
<td>† water  ↓</td>
<td></td>
<td>replicate the sign (v. 22)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frogs (8:1-15)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>replicate the sign (v. 7)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gnats (8:16-19)</td>
<td>† land  ↑</td>
<td>Aaron</td>
<td>fail to replicate sign (v. 18) → 'the finger of God’ (v. 19)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>flies (8:20-32)</td>
<td>† land  ↓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>’so that you will know that I, the LORD, am in this land’ (8:22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cattle (9:1-7)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boils (9:8-13)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Moses</td>
<td>could not even appear before Moses because of boils (v. 11)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hail (9:13-35)</td>
<td>† air    ↑</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>’so you may know that there is no-one like me in all the earth’ (9:14) ’so you may know the earth is the LORD’s’ (9:29)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>locusts (10:1-20)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>darkness (10:21-29)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>death of firstborn (11:1–13:16)</td>
<td>† light/dark  ↓</td>
<td>Moses</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>defeat of army (13:17–14:31)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Dozeman’s structure differs from traditional accounts by including the plague of the sea dragon at the beginning and the defeat of Pharaoh’s army at the end. This leads to twelve mighty acts of God, as these are also sometimes known, rather than the traditional ten. It also means that we arrive at four groups of three acts, which, as we shall now explore, are very intriguingly arranged.

To begin with, a word on the sea dragon episode may be in order, and in particular an explanation as to why I am talking about a sea dragon at all. This is one of the signs that God gave to Moses in their encounter at the burning bush (4:1-5). It is now performed by Aaron in front of Pharaoh (7:8-13). But there is a difference between the two stories, for, whereas in ch. 4 we are dealing with a snake (ֶשֶׁנַּ), in the confrontation with Pharaoh...
the staff turns into a תַנִין, which is the term used for the mythological creatures of the sea that also appear in Genesis 1:21 where NIV reads ‘the great creatures of the sea’ while NRSV translates ‘sea monsters’. Sadly, the NIV does not make it clear that we are not dealing with an ordinary snake here. Even more importantly, we are prevented from seeing what is an important link with the creation story. But before we explore this, I should also point out that, probably much to the surprise of Moses and Aaron, the Egyptian magicians are able to match their performance, producing lots of those mythological creatures. That said, Aaron does come up trumps in the end because his staff, we are told, swallowed theirs.

And that takes us to that all-important link with the Genesis creation account. We have already noted the appearance of the sea monsters in both texts, but a look at our table helps us to appreciate just how strong that link is. Each group of three signs has, as the table indicates, a thematic focus, which moves from water and its inhabitants to land and its creatures to air or, more precisely, airborne menaces and eventually to the primordial forces of light and darkness. The point is clear: the signs are affecting all of creation as presented in the creation account in Genesis 1, which similarly focuses on these elements. The writer of Exodus saw Pharaoh’s oppression of the Israelites and his attempt to thwart God’s blessing of his people, which, as we saw in our first session, had led to them being extraordinarily fruitful and multiply, as an assault on God’s plans for his creation. It was, as Terence Fretheim notes, an ‘anti-creational’ measure (1991, p. 106).

It is important that we understand the creation theology that is at work in the book of Exodus. Ancient Near Eastern creation accounts, of which the biblical version in Genesis 1 is one example, show no interest in the scientific questions that tend to preoccupy us today. Creation is understood, first and foremost, as the establishment of order out of chaos. That is why in Genesis God is busy separating light and darkness, water and land etc. There is, however, one key difference between the biblical text and other ancient Near Eastern creation stories, and that lies in the fact that the biblical writers believed in one supreme God. Israel’s neighbours, by contrast, had a pantheon of many gods. In that context, the establishment of order out of chaos meant that one god, who proved to be more powerful than the others, established order by holding the other gods, the powers of chaos and darkness, in check.

Importantly, in the ancient Near East, the order of society corresponded to the order in the cosmic realm. This meant that a breach of the laws that held society together were regarded as a breach of the order of creation. Breaking the law affected the world order, including the sphere of nature, and threatened life with chaos. This is what lies behind the story of the plagues. While Yahweh, the God of Israel, had no rival deities to contend with, Pharaoh and the Egyptian empire are understood by the author of Exodus as the embodiment of the forces of chaos, which threatened God’s creation.
Two other intriguing observations made by Dozeman concern the roles played by Aaron, Moses and the Egyptian magicians, again illustrated in the table. While Aaron is the central character in the opening episodes of the first two groups, Moses performs that role in the initial episodes of the remaining two cycles. The magicians, for their part, play an active role over against Aaron but not Moses. Initially, in the first three cases, they are able to replicate the signs performed by Aaron. In the opening sign of the second cycle, they try again but fail, which, rather wisely, they interpret as a sign from God. But Pharaoh won’t listen (8:19). The magicians are also briefly mentioned in the introductory episode of the third group but only to say that they cannot even make an appearance before Moses because of the boils with which they have become afflicted. After this, they fade from the story (Dozeman, 2009, p. 203).

The Jewish commentator Nahum Sarna offers an interesting perspective on this. He interprets Aaron’s role as Moses’ assistant in connection with Pharaoh and his magicians, suggesting that Moses ‘tacitly asserts his equality of status with the Egyptian king. He comes to negotiate with the pharaoh as the dignified representative of … Israel. Just as the pharaoh has his magicians, so Moses has his assistant’ (1986, p. 67). This also explains why Aaron is involved in the events only as long as the Egyptian magicians are present. When they fade from view, it is Moses who takes over.

But there is another important conclusion that the text invites us to draw from the involvement of Moses and Aaron in these events. While the plagues are clearly God’s signs and wonders, they equally clearly involve the activity of Moses and Aaron. Fretheim sums it up well when he says that ‘Moses and Aaron would not be effective without God’s power working in and through them’, while God similarly depends on Moses and Aaron for his strategy to succeed (1991, p. 106).

This then leads me to some observations regarding the final group of God’s mighty acts, which involves events that happen in a single night. The plague of darkness (10:21-29) sets the stage for the killing of the firstborn at midnight (12:29-36), which in turn leads to the Israelites being driven away by the Egyptians. But the conflict continues through the night when Pharaoh decides to pursue the Israelites (14:1-18). The text marks the timing of events very carefully and notes that throughout the night the angel of God and the pillar of cloud separate the Egyptian army from the Israelites while Yahweh dries up the Red Sea (14:19-23), that God attacks the Egyptian army at the final watch of the night (14:24-25), and that he finally destroys them at dawn (14:27). Dozeman rather interestingly compares this to the traditional Christian Easter liturgy, which similarly progresses through a night vigil to the celebration of salvation at dawn (2009, p. 204).

Another important observation, highlighted by Meyers, concerns God’s central aim for these signs, which is for the Egyptians to come to an increasing knowledge of Yahweh, Israel’s God. This comes up in the second episode of the first three groups, and there is an
intensification of this theme as the story progresses. First, general knowledge of Yahweh is the aim: know that I am the LORD’ (7:17). This clearly cannot be assumed since Yahweh had to be introduced to Pharaoh as the ‘God of the Hebrews’ (3:18). Then the desired knowledge extends to the fact that Yahweh is present in Egypt – ‘that I the LORD am in this land’ (8:22) – and thus is involved in what’s going on. Finally, Pharaoh and his people are to know that there is no one like Yahweh, not just in the land of Egypt but in all the earth (9:14) and also that the entire earth belongs to God (9:29). As Meyers points out, Pharaoh’s recognition of the universal sovereignty of Israel’s god is the ultimate goal of these signs and wonders (2005, p. 71).

Fretheim draws some important conclusions from this, pointing out that, contrary to what we might think, the liberation of Israel is not the ultimate focus of God’s activity. In fact, ‘the deliverance of Israel is ultimately for the sake of the entire creation’ (1991, p. 108). The aim is that God’s name be ‘proclaimed in all the earth’ (9:16). And that takes us back to Exodus’s creation theology. The problem is that Pharaoh’s death-dealing policies threaten God’s purposes in life, i.e. for people to be fruitful and multiply. They have unleashed chaotic powers that threaten the very order of creation. And so in the signs and wonders and in the final acts of judgement, the forces of creation are now unleashed against Pharaoh. Fretheim (1991, p. 109) describes this well, noting that the elements of the nonhuman order

are all out of kilter with their created way of being. They all appear in distorted form. Water is no longer water; light and darkness are no longer separated; diseases of people and animals run amok; insects and amphibians swarm out of control. What must the numbers have been when every speck of dust in the land became a gnat (8:18)! What size must the hail have been to ‘shatter every tree’ (9:25)! And the signs come to a climax in the darkness, which in effect returns the creation to the first day of Genesis 1, a precreation state of [chaos].

I hope that our study of the structure of the text and its creation theology has helped you to see not only that this is a very carefully crafted narrative, but also that paying close attention to its arrangement can lead to some valuable insights that we might otherwise miss. According to Meyers, the careful structuring is also significant in itself, suggesting that nothing is happening randomly here. The signs and wonders are not meant to be seen as random natural occurrences, as has sometimes been argued. The narrative structure rather indicates that God controls the natural world in order to effect his own divine purposes (see also Sarna, 1986, p. 78).

**Interpreting the Signs and Wonders**

It has often been attempted to place the occurrences of the signs-and-wonders account in the context of the ecology of the Nile basin and delta. As Meyers notes, ‘examining the narratives in the light of geographical, microbiological, climactic, and medical data leaves
little doubt that the biblical descriptions represent [striking] aspects of well-known occurrences of pestilence and disease in eastern North Africa’ (2005, p. 79). Sarna similarly comments that ‘there is nothing inherently mythological or supernatural about the first nine plagues. They can all be explained within the context of the familiar vicissitudes of nature that imperil the Nile Valley and elsewhere from time to time’ (1986, pp. 68-69). As again Meyers observes, ‘documents of the late fourteenth century BCE, in particular, refer to epidemics so devastating that they remained in Egyptian memory for centuries’ (2005, p. 80).

That said, Meyers rightly cautions against naturalistic interpretations that find nothing miraculous in the narrative. Such an approach is illustrated by Greta Hort’s article ‘The Plagues of Egypt’ (1957–58), in which she seeks to show that the majority of the calamities can be explained by an unusually high rainfall in the East African Plateau, the highlands of Ethiopia and the southern parts of the Nile Valley, which caused an excessive amount of red sediment to be discharged into the Nile by abnormally high floods, thus giving the appearance of the water being blood red and causing all sorts of other problems in its wake. Most of the subsequent plagues Hort explains as a chain of causal connections related to this first incident (see the summary in Sarna, 1986, pp. 70-73).

Sarna, writing about thirty years later, notes that Hort’s geological and microbiological conclusions had remained unchallenged (1986, p. 73). Yet he is critical of her approach because the biblical narrative says nothing about an abnormal inundation of the Nile and presents the events as God’s intervention on behalf of his people. For Sarna, the divine origin of the calamities is detectable not so much in their nature as in ‘their terrifying intensity, their timing, their concentrative force, and above all, in the shielding of the Israelites from their effects’ (1986, p. 75).

Fretheim calls the plagues ‘hyernatural’ (1991, p. 109), pointing to their timing, scope and intensity as well as to the biblical text’s repeated insistence that such had never been seen before and never would happen again (9:18, 24; 10:6, 14; 11:6). In order to make this point, the author of Exodus resorts to what Fretheim calls an extravagant use of language (p. 107). For instance, the Hebrew word כֹּל, which means ‘all’ or, when it is negated, ‘none’, is used over fifty times in order to stress that nothing escapes the effects of the calamities. Every plant and every tree are affected by the hail; boils are found on every animal and every human being; not a single green thing remains after the locusts have struck; no-one can see during the darkness, etc. On the other hand, none of these effects are experienced in Goshen, the part of Egypt where the Israelites lived: not a single cow died from plague, there wasn’t a single swarm of flies, not a single hailstone fell, and the pitch-black darkness stopped dead in the air exactly at the border.
This, as Fretheim rightly concludes, is not the description of natural occurrences. Indeed, that’s just the point, and it takes us back to Exodus’s creation theology again. Because of Pharaoh’s anti-creation policies, creation is now unleashed against him, which means that ‘the elements of the natural order are not what they were created to be and to do. Their “behaviors” break the bounds of their createdness. It is a picture of creation gone berserk. The world is reverting to a state of chaos’ (Fretheim, 1991, p. 110). There is nothing ‘natural’ about this.

**Power, War and the Forces of Nature**

Since our story talks about a confrontation between Pharaoh, on the one hand, and Moses and Aaron, on the other, or, more precisely, between Pharaoh and God, one of its key themes concerns the issue of power, especially the power of Yahweh. The opposition between Pharaoh and God, which was already implied in Exodus 1–2, where Pharaoh sought to thwart God’s creational purposes, now intensifies from an indirect to a direct confrontation. Dozeman calls this a ‘war between kings’ (2009, p. 176).

Some Old Testament scholars have looked at the confrontation between Pharaoh and God in the light of Israel’s so-called holy war tradition. Warfare was a common experience for any community in the ancient Near East, and each community of faith believed that their god was with them when they engaged (or were engaged) in warfare. Like other deities in the ancient Near East, Israel’s God was therefore perceived as a warrior god. Later on in Exodus, after their successful flight from Egypt, the people celebrate God’s power in a victory song (Exod. 15) that makes use of war imagery (see Dozeman, 2009, p. 177). God’s triumph over horse and rider (v. 1), to mention only one example, is a characteristic war action, and God is explicitly called a warrior in v. 3. As is typical for the holy war tradition, God’s actions are closely linked with worship practices, in this case the celebration of the Passover (Exod. 12).

Having said that, it is important to note that the Exodus story departs from the holy war tradition in crucial ways. Most significantly, it does not actually depict a war between the Egyptians and the Israelites. The conflict rather is between Israel’s God and Pharaoh. Once again, Exodus’s creation theology provides the key for understanding God’s actions. The plagues are not primarily weapons of war, as it were, but signs of God’s power over the forces of nature, which are now unleashed against Pharaoh in divine acts of judgement. As Fretheim points out, these judgements have an intrinsic relationship to Pharaoh’s sinful acts. They are portrayed as punishments that fit the crime. Thus, the oppression of the Israelites leads to an oppression of the Egyptians by means of the plagues. Israel’s losses of well-being, property, land and life are now similarly experienced by the Egyptians. The indiscriminate death inflicted on Israelite baby boys by Pharaoh is
matched by the deaths of the Egyptian firstborn. And the cry of the Israelites out of their slavery is echoed in the Egyptians’ cry (see Fretheim, 1991, p. 110).

The plagues are therefore ‘not an arbitrarily chosen response to Pharaoh’s sins’, as again Fretheim notes (1991, p. 111). Pharaoh reaps, as it were, the ‘natural’ consequences of his acts against creation. And in punishing Pharaoh, God acts in order to re-establish the created order. In addition, we should note that these consequences are not presented as inevitable. Pharaoh was repeatedly given the opportunity to avoid further harm and devastation by releasing the Israelites into a life of freedom and self-determination.

The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart

To conclude, I would like us to consider the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, an issue that has caused readers all kinds of headaches. It is because of the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart that he will not let the Israelites go free. It is also because of Pharaoh’s hardness of heart that God sends the plagues over Egypt, which ultimately culminate in the killing of the firstborn. Part of the problem is that some passages affirm that it was God who hardened Pharaoh’s heart (e.g. 9:8: ‘the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart and he would not listen to Moses and Aaron, just as the LORD had said to Moses’), while others say that Pharaoh did this himself (see 7:13: ‘Pharaoh’s heart became hard and he would not listen to them, just as the LORD had said’). Moreover, if God indeed overruled human will in hardening Pharaoh’s heart, then Pharaoh would be no more than an innocent pawn in God’s plan and could not be blamed for what happened. And in that case, it would be unethical for him to be punished for something that was beyond his control.

The Jewish commentator Umberto Cassuto seeks to avoid the problem by maintaining that questions about God’s foreknowledge of events and human will stem from Greek philosophical thinking, whereas ‘the Torah does not seek to teach us philosophy’ (1967, pp. 55-56). He argues that there is no difference between God hardening Pharaoh’s heart and Pharaoh doing this himself (p. 56), and he believes that Pharaoh was punished not because of his hardness of heart but due to the hard bondage he imposed on the Israelites and the destruction of the Israelite children. Indeed, Cassuto claims: ‘nowhere does the Bible say that his intransigence was accounted to him an iniquity’, and he concludes that ‘in the final analysis there is no problem or difficulty here’ (p. 57).

However, others have rightly pointed out that the biblical writers appear to make a distinction between God hardening Pharaoh’s heart and the latter doing this himself (see Steinmann, 2003, p. 382-383). There is even, as we shall see in a moment, a clear pattern in the distribution of these two ideas. And as for Cassuto’s claim that the Bible does not say that Pharaoh’s intransigence ‘was accounted to him an iniquity’, this is manifestly false. Exodus 9:34 says: ‘But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder
had ceased, he *sinned* once more and hardened his heart, he and his officials’. Pharaoh’s hardening of his heart is clearly regarded as sinful here.

So where then does that leave us? Walter Kaiser, in his book *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, notes that the motif of hardening occurs twenty times in Exodus 4–14 (1983, p. 253). The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is first announced by God in his encounter with Moses at the burning bush in 4:21, where it is God who is going to harden Pharaoh’s heart: ‘The LORD said to Moses, “When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go”’. Something similar is said immediately prior to the confrontation between Pharaoh and Moses in 7:3. Both these statements are predictions of what is going to happen.

In the actual signs-and-wonders narrative itself, we then find that in the first six episodes it is always Pharaoh who hardens his heart. It is only when we get to the seventh sign, that of the boils, that God hardens Pharaoh’s heart, which is what happens from that point on, although there is one more occasion, the plague of hail (9:34-35), where Pharaoh is presented as adopting that attitude himself.

So what are we to make of that? Many commentators have concluded, correctly, I think, that God in the end, in the words of Kaiser, ‘confirmed the notions of the monarch’s heart’. Kaiser adds that ‘there is no suggestion in Exodus 4–14 that [God] secretly influenced Pharaoh’s will or forced a stubborn resolution which otherwise was incompatible with Pharaoh’s basic nature and disposition’ (1983, pp. 255-256). Meyers similarly comments that ‘we see a pattern indicating that what may begin as the pharaoh’s resistance’ to the demands made by Moses and Aaron later on ‘becomes an act produced by God’ (2005, p. 70). And Andrew Steinmann (2003, p. 383) concludes that

> God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was a reaction to Pharaoh’s continual stubbornness and not God’s immutable will for Pharaoh. Though God had foreknowledge of what would happen to Pharaoh [thus Steinmann’s reading of Exod. 4:21; 7:3] and ultimately chose to confirm Pharaoh’s heartedness by continuing to make Pharaoh stubborn, God did not condemn Pharaoh unjustly. … God never forced Pharaoh to be anything he was not, and the punishment Pharaoh received was justice for his intransigence and his mistreatment of the Israelites.

To understand the significance of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, we need to be aware that in Hebrew thinking the heart was not so much the seat of a person’s emotions as of their thinking and deliberation. As Sarna points out, the heart was ‘the controlling center of human actions’; and ‘the state of the heart defines … the essential character of a person’ (1986, p. 64). Pharaoh’s response therefore is not an emotional one but conscious and deliberate resistance to Moses and Aaron’s demands (Meyers, 2005, p. 71). Sarna captures this well when he notes that the hardening of the heart ‘connotes the willful suppression of the capacity for reflection, for self-examination, for unbiased judgments about good and evil’ (1986, p. 64).
Some suppose that the concept of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart reflects an Egyptian background. The Egyptians believed in a divinely established order, called ma'at, which pervaded the entire universe and in accordance with which everyone was supposed to live. A papyrus drawing shows that at the end of one's life the heart would be weighed against ma'at. The idea is that a life lived according to ma'at weighed only a feather, an Egyptian symbol of truth, whereas a wicked life pulled the scale the other way, thus preventing the deceased from entering eternal life. It has been suggested (Currid, 1993) that when Exodus talks about God bringing about Pharaoh's 'heaviness of heart' (כָּבֵּד לֵּב), which is the actual phrase used in 10:1 (the translation of the NIV does not reflect the fact that a different term is used in this case), Pharaoh is thereby judged to be unworthy of eternal life. Having said that, however, in the majority of cases the text talks about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart rather than its heaviness.

It is with Pharaoh's heart hardened by God (11:10) that we finish today. Next week, we shall see how Pharaoh's resistance is finally overcome. If you would like to read ahead in preparation for our session, then I suggest that you have a good look at Exodus 12:1–13:16.

**Sources**


Hort, G. (1957–58) 'The Plagues of Egypt', *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 69, pp. 84-103; and 70, pp. 48-59.


