

YAHWEH'S SUSPENSION OF FREE WILL  
IN THE OLD TESTAMENT:  
DIVINE IMMORALITY OR SIGN-ACT?

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**Summary**

*Several passages in the Old Testament portray Yahweh as behaving in ways that seem unfair or immoral. Two such narratives are the episodes describing the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the spirit dispatched to deceive Ahab. In each of these two cases, careful attention to the literary context and the final form of the MT shows that Yahweh's behaviour is best understood as a sign-act directed toward a specific end.*

In an article published in 1996, R.N. Whybray<sup>1</sup> evaluates several narratives in which Yahweh might be accused of 'immorality'. To these passages he might easily have added two further narratives that have long troubled scholars—Exodus 4–14 with its references to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and 1 Kings 22 with its vision of the lying spirit sent to deceive Ahab. At the heart of both passages lies the difficulty in understanding how a moral God can force an individual to disobey.<sup>2</sup> Since the story of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart has been the more troublesome of these two passages, it will be discussed first.

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<sup>1</sup> R.N. Whybray, 'The Immorality of God: Reflections on Some Passages in Genesis, Job, Exodus and Numbers', *JSOT* 72 (1996) 89–120.

<sup>2</sup> The problem of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart has been felt most acutely by conservative interpreters. See, for example, A. Clarke, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments with a Commentary and Critical Notes*, vol. 1: Genesis to Deuteronomy (Repr., New York; Nashville, TN: Abingdon-Cokesbury, n.d.), 313; A.W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 54; U.D. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 55; R.F. Youngblood, *Exodus* (Everyman's Bible Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1983), 45; M.D. Dunnam, *Exodus* (Communicator's Commentary 2; Dallas: Word, 1987), 81; G. Ashby, *Go Out and Meet Thy God: A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (ITC; Grand Rapids, MI; Edinburgh: Eerdmans; Handsel, 1998), 40–41. See also, however, R.R. Wilson, 'The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart', *CBQ* 41 (1979) 18–19.

Interpreters have attempted to resolve the difficulty of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in at least six ways. (1) Hyatt attempts to solve the problem by adopting a tradition-history approach, arguing that over time, repeated telling of the exodus story resulted in the view that the will of Yahweh could in no way be resisted.<sup>3</sup> (2) Wilson employs the source-critical method and attempts to show how in J, E, and P, the hardness motif is used to connect originally independent plague stories and provide structure to an extended narrative block. Wilson concludes that while the J source records that Pharaoh's heart was hardened, the E and P sources make Yahweh the direct cause of the hardening.<sup>4</sup> However, even if one can confidently separate J from E in the plague narrative, the source-critical approach does not address the moral-theological problem that emerges only with the final form of the text. (3) Some scholars have maintained that since God is the ultimate cause of all things, no moral problem exists.<sup>5</sup> (4) A common approach has been to observe that, while God announces in 4:21 that he is going to harden Pharaoh's heart, he does not actually do so until the 6th plague (boils, 9:12). Prior to this, the text simply reports that Pharaoh's heart was hard. Adherents to this view often emphasise God's foreknowledge and maintain that, 'God hardens only those who harden themselves.'<sup>6</sup> (5) According to Childs and others,<sup>7</sup> the hardening

<sup>3</sup> See, J.P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (NCB; Grand Rapids, MI; London: Eerdmans; Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1980), 102.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, 'Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart', 28–30.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. R.E. Clements, *Exodus* (CBC; Cambridge: CUP, 1972), 30 and R.A. Cole, *Exodus: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC 2; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 77. Cassuto (*Book of Exodus*, 56–57) argues that according to the Hebrew mindset, Yahweh was the cause of all things and that for this reason there is no difference between the statements, 'Yahweh hardened' and 'Pharaoh hardened'. He continues with the additional argument that the plagues brought on by Pharaoh's intransigence were well-deserved punishment for the slaughter of the Hebrew infants.

<sup>6</sup> Cole, *Exodus*, 97. This view has been common among older and theologically conservative interpreters. It often sees Pharaoh's intransigence as something that begins with himself and becomes progressively worse. God's involvement is limited to sealing the hardness adopted by Pharaoh himself. Variations of this view are expressed by A. Clarke, *Commentary*, 312–13; M. Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, vol. 1: Genesis to Deuteronomy (Repr. New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), 289, 307; J. Gill, *The Exposition of the Old Testament*, vol. 1: Genesis to Joshua (London: William Hill, 1852–54, repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), 267; C.F. Keil, *The Pentateuch* (Commentary on the Old Testament by C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch 1; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1868, repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 453–57; George Bush, *Notes, Critical and Practical, on the Book of Exodus* (New York: Newman & Ivison, 1852, repr. Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981), 114; G.H. Davies, *Exodus* (TBC; London: SCM, 1967), 97; Youngblood, *Exodus*, 45–46; Dunnam, *Exodus*, 81; W.C. Kaiser Jr., 'Exodus', in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F.E. Gaebelin, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1990), 331, 59; N.M. Sarna,

creates an intransigence in Pharaoh that allows Yahweh to be glorified through ever-greater acts of judgement. (6) Closely related to the foregoing is the view of those commentators who suggest that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is simply a demonstration of Yahweh's power or presence.<sup>8</sup> It is this avenue of interpretation that provides the greatest potential for understanding the passage as a whole.

Key to solving the problem of the text is the related question of why God sends the plagues against Egypt. Exodus itself offers three reasons for this. First and most directly, the plagues are intended to compel the Egyptians to let Israel leave (3:18–20). Second, the misfortunes visited upon the Egyptians emphasise the character of Israel as a separated people—an end achieved by the fact that the plague of flies, as well as the death of livestock and of the firstborn sons, affects only the Egyptians (8:23; 9:4; 11:7). Third, the plagues function as a demonstration of divine self-identification. Speaking of the plagues, Yahweh declares to Moses that, 'the Egyptians shall know that I am Yahweh, when I extend my hand against Egypt' (7:5).

Of the three reasons for the plagues, it is the first and third that are the most important. In the first instance, Yahweh presents Pharaoh with the ancient equivalent of aversion therapy. As the divinely sent afflictions unfold, it becomes evident even to the casual observer that Pharaoh's wisest course of action is to release the people of Israel. Thus, while the plagues do have a punitive function, their more targeted purpose is to establish what for Pharaoh is the prudent course of action. As noted above, the third reason for the plagues is to

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*Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia, PA; New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 23. Cf. M. Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM, 1962), 68.

<sup>7</sup> B.S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1974), 118, 51, 53–54. Also, Clarke, *Commentary*, 322; Noth, *Exodus*, 68; W.H. Gispen, *Exodus* (BSC; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 80, 104, 41, 43; G.V. Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987), 39.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. II (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1965), 153; J.I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 56, 87, 97; Gispen, *Exodus*, 62; B. Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1992), 244, 90; J.H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Library of Biblical Interpretation; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 253; Ashby, *Go Out and Meet Thy God*, 40–41.

establish Yahweh's identity before the Egyptians (7:5). This determination, however, does not have the Egyptians alone as the object. The plagues that lead to Israel's liberation will also demonstrate the deity of Yahweh to Israel. This is made clear in 6:7 — 'I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am Yahweh your God, who released you from the burdens of the Egyptians.'

The determination expressed in 6:7 and 7:5 is best understood as a response to an earlier development in the narrative. In 5:1–2, Moses and Aaron bring a message to Pharaoh—Yahweh, the God of Israel, commands the Egyptian monarch to let Yahweh's people go. In response, Pharaoh declares, 'Who is Yahweh that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh and I will not let Israel go' (5:2). Bound up in this brief exchange is a clue to Pharaoh's sense of self and the partial impetus for the later plagues. The declaration by the Egyptian monarch, 'Who is Yahweh...I do not know Yahweh!' (5:2) is not a profession of ignorance but a refusal to grant recognition.<sup>9</sup> As the incarnation of the divine Horus, Pharaoh is affronted that Yahweh through his emissaries should lay claim to both the Israelites ('let *my* people go') and divine status ('that they may hold a festival *to me*'). By his rejection of Yahweh's command, the Egyptian god-king throws down the gauntlet and provokes the god of Israel to demonstrate that it is in fact he, and not Pharaoh, that is divine.<sup>10</sup>

Yahweh's intention to demonstrate his own deity and Pharaoh's humanity is introduced in 6:1 with the words, 'Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh' and gives rise to the intention to be recognised by Israel as 'Yahweh' or 'your God'. Issuing from this conflict is the

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<sup>9</sup> Rabbinic Judaism also seems to have understood this verse in this way. In *m. Yad.* 4:8, for example, the rabbis use Ex. 5:2 as a proof-text to condemn those who esteem men above God.

<sup>10</sup> A similar understanding of the purpose of the plagues is proposed and then discounted by Sailhamer (*Pentateuch as Narrative*, 252–53). Sailhamer initially suggests that the plagues, 'unmask Pharaoh's claims to deity' by showing that he is unable to maintain universal harmony (*ma'at*). He continues, however, by observing that *ma'at* is unmentioned in the text and that nothing suggests that the Israelite readers would have been aware of such a feature of Egyptian theology. Even so, while the Israelite audience may not have been aware of the role of the pharaoh as upholder of *ma'at* ('truth'), they would certainly have been aware of the widely held concept of divine kingship. Having abandoned this line of inquiry, Sailhamer concludes that, 'the plagues need not intend any more than the general but all-important point that the God of the covenant, the Creator of the universe, is superior to the powers of the nations' (Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 253). What is argued here is that it is not the plagues, but the very act of hardening Pharaoh's heart that shows Yahweh to be divine and Pharaoh human.

challenge of how to demonstrate Yahweh's deity and Pharaoh's mortality. While the task of demonstrating divinity to a human audience might require only a supernatural act, the task of proving the same point to one who claims to be divine requires a far greater burden of proof. It is in this context that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart functions as divine demonstration. The only way for Yahweh to demonstrate his own deity, and to establish Pharaoh's mortality, is to remove his opponent's free will. As noted above, one function of the plagues is to establish that releasing Israel is the course of action that is in Pharaoh's best interest. By making Pharaoh a puppet forced into self-destructive choices,<sup>11</sup> Yahweh shows himself to be God and Pharaoh to be merely human. He is not a god, after all, whose very thoughts and actions are controlled by another. Understood in this way, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart stands as a case of divine demonstration which renders the question of fairness moot.

A second case of supernatural action that functions as divine demonstration is found in 1 Kings 22 and 2 Chronicles 18. Here too, interpreters have wrestled with the difficulty of Yahweh acting in a manner that seems unfair.<sup>12</sup> In this passage, Ahab attempts to convince his Judaeen counterpart Jehoshaphat to join him in a campaign to retake Ramoth-gilead for Israel. Sceptical of the favourable opinion offered by the northern court prophets, Jehoshaphat asks for the word of a genuine prophet of Yahweh. Ahab obliges with Micaiah, a prophet with a reputation for irritating the king. After a testy exchange with the northern monarch, this prophet relates a vision in which Yahweh consults members of his court for advice on how to act toward Ahab. At last, one voice offers to go out as a lying spirit (רִיחַ שָׁקֶר) to act through Ahab's prophets and lure him to his death at Ramoth-gilead (1 Ki. 22:22). As in the case of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, this incident is best understood by reference to its literary context and the canonical shape of the book.

The events of 1 Kings 22 fit into a larger narrative block that begins with chapter 20 and deals with the conflict between Israel and Aram.

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<sup>11</sup> While releasing the Israelites would have brought immediate relief from the plagues, Pharaoh five times refuses to listen to Moses and Aaron (7:13, 22; 8:15, 19; 9:12), five times refuses to free Yahweh's people (9:7, 35; 10:20, 27; 11:10) and once pursues the Israelites (14:8). In each case, text notes that it is the hardening of Pharaoh's heart that prompts these self-destructive actions.

<sup>12</sup> For a survey of the various approaches to this passage, see P.R. House, *I, 2 Kings* (NAC 8; Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 237.

That this material is to be read together is indicated by the common subject matter<sup>13</sup> of the struggle against Aram and by literary features that unite the material. One such literary connection is made through the use of *inclusio*. In 20:1, in the first attack against Israel, the king of Aram musters 32 kings to attack Ahab at Samaria. In the final battle, the same Aramaean monarch directs 32 chariot commanders to attack Ahab on the battlefield (22:31). A second example of *inclusio* is found in 20:30 and 22:25. In 20:30, the narrator notes that following the battle, the defeated Ben-Hadad cowers in an ‘inner room’ (בְּחֶדֶר בְּחֶדֶר). In 22:25, the prophet Micaiah uses this same phrase to describe the fate of the royal prophet Zedekiah. Another unifying feature is the use of the repeated motif of prophetic endorsement of military activity in 20:13 and 22:6.

Into this large narrative block dealing with the Israelite–Aramaean conflict there intrudes the incident of Naboth and his vineyard (21:1–28). The disruptive nature of this arrangement is made especially apparent by comparison with the LXX, which places this material between chapters 19 and 20. Whatever the derivation of this material, in the MT, it has been intentionally embedded in the account of the conflict with Aram.

That this is the case is indicated by several literary features that join the Naboth material to the surrounding context. The most obvious of these points of contact comes in the introduction to the Naboth incident where a temporal link (וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, 21:1a) ties the new material to what immediately precedes. A further link to the preceding chapter is found in 21:4, where Naboth’s rebuff of Ahab leaves the king סָר וְזָעַף (‘sullen and resentful’). Just a few verses earlier in chapter 20, this same phrase is used describe Ahab’s reaction to the word of the anonymous prophet. It is significant to note that this same phrase occurs nowhere else in the MT and that a parallel is lacking in the LXX.<sup>14</sup> Literary features also connect the Naboth story to the Aram narrative that makes up chapter 23. The most obvious of these is the

<sup>13</sup> The LXX keeps the narratives of the conflict with Aram as an uninterrupted whole by placing the Naboth incident between chapters 19 and 20.

<sup>14</sup> Intentionality in the arrangement of the MT is confirmed by the fact that the LXX has no parallel for the transitional phrase סָר וְזָעַף (‘sullen and resentful’, 20:43; 21:4). Where this phrase appears in the MT, the LXX has two distinct phrases—συγκεχυμένος καὶ ἐκλελυμένος (‘confounded and depressed’, 21:43) and *tetaragmevnon* (‘troubled’, 20:4)—suggesting that the Hebrew editor has worked to create a literary bridge between chapters 20 and 21. Further confirmation of such intention is found in the presence of the transitional introductory formula in the MT (21:1)—a feature missing in the LXX.

fact that the judgement pronounced by Elijah for Ahab's juridical murder of Naboth (21:18–19) finds its precise fulfilment in Ahab's death at the end of the Ramoth-gilead story (22:37–38). These literary features and the location of the Naboth incident in the final form of the MT, suggests that the editor intended the story to be read in juxtaposition to the surrounding material.

In light of this, what is the purpose of the Naboth incident? On one level, the tenacity of Naboth in holding onto his ancestral grant stands in marked contrast to the behaviour of Ahab, who in 20:32–34 readily cedes the advantage that Yahweh had granted him by his victory over Ben-Hadad. In the final form of the text, however, this self-contained narrative about an otherwise obscure event functions to provide additional evidence that the death sentence pronounced on Ahab in 20:42 was entirely deserved. In so doing it offers a context for understanding the vision of Micaiah in 23:19–23 in which the lying spirit<sup>15</sup> is dispatched to lure Ahab to his doom. Just as Ahab had earlier been complicit in using lying witnesses to kill Naboth, so now Yahweh would use a lying spirit to bring about the death of the king. This fate exploits the same character flaw that allowed Ahab to kill Naboth in the first place. While Ahab knew Micaiah to be speaking a genuine word from Yahweh, he was unwilling to obey it. In the case of Naboth, Ahab understood that tradition and Torah did not allow him to take the vineyard, but he ignored both and seized the property anyway. In light of the foregoing, it might also be argued that one of the purposes of Jehoshapat's declaration, 'my people are as your people, my horses are as your horses' (1 Ki. 22:4), may be to set Ahab's selfish behaviour of chapter 21 into higher relief. Far from being a malicious or immoral act then, the work of the lying spirit constitutes a case of poetic justice in

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<sup>15</sup> The use of the definite article in רוח רגל (22:21) shows that this spirit is not one of many, but a distinct functionary within the heavenly court. J.A. Montgomery and H.S. Gehman, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Books of Kings*, Revised ed. (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1951), 339, as well as J. Gray, *I and II Kings: A Commentary* (2nd ed.; OTL; Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1970), 452, and others are likely correct in identifying this figure as the personified spirit of prophecy that regularly went out to inspire prophets. See also, however, G.H. Jones, *I and 2 Kings*, vol. II (1 Kings 17:1–2 Kings 25:30) (NCB; Grand Rapids, MI; London: Eerdmans; Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), 368, who translates generically. Nothing in the context suggests any association with רוח רגל.

which Ahab is treated as he has treated others. It is in this way that the moral problem noted above finds its resolution.<sup>16</sup>

Reading the narratives of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and the lying spirit against their broader literary context helps the reader to identify each as sign-acts undertaken in the service of divine self-identification or justice. By approaching these passages in this way, they fall alongside the problem of the rejection of Cain's offering, which has recently been resolved in a similar manner.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> As House (*1, 2 Kings*, 238) notes, the moral problem of the text is also lessened by the fact that through Micaiah's activity, Ahab is fully informed of Yahweh's plans and proceeds regardless.

<sup>17</sup> See F.A. Spina, 'The "Ground" for Cain's Rejection (Gen 4): 'adamah in the Context of Gen 1-11', *ZAW* 104 (1992) 319-32 and G.A. Herion, 'Why God Rejected Cain's Offering: The Obvious Answer', in *Fortunate the Eyes That See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. A.B. Beck et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 52-65 who both examine an incident seen by many as morally problematic. Both Spina and Herion pay close attention to the literary context of the narrative and argue that Cain's offering is rejected because it was drawn from the ground cursed in Gn. 3:17.