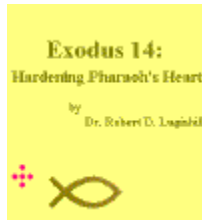


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Exodus 14: Hardening Pharaoh's Heart

Verses 3-4

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Verse 3:

Then Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, 'The desert has shut them off, and so they are still in the land - demoralized.'

The desert: In the context of the Book of Exodus, the Hebrew word for desert (*midhbar*) is used in a special sense in contrast to the "the land" (*ha-`arets*). Note that here in verse three, Pharaoh employs both terms. The Israelites have been shut out of the "desert" and are consequently still in "the land". The same contrast can be seen at Ex.8:25-27 (Hebrew: 8:21-23). The clear meaning is that "the land" is Egyptian territory (inhabited, cultivated and guarded), while the desert is an uninhabited, uncultivated no man's land.

has shut them off: The perfect tense of the Hebrew verb *sagar* shows that this action happened first and they are now demoralized (*buch* in participle form - see above) as a result. This is a natural assumption for Pharaoh. As an organizer of military campaigns that required detailed logistical preparations, he can have had no illusions about the possibility of a multitude of nearly two million people surviving a desert trek without sufficient provisions. From the atheistic viewpoint, this was clearly an impossible task. As it turned out, the Israelites did only survive by means of direct divine provision of both food and water. It likewise would only have been logical for Pharaoh to conclude that the frustration which caused them to turn aside from the desert on realizing their inadequate preparation would have resulted in a tremendous demoralization. James Murphy comments:

They have been afraid to face the wilderness, which does not naturally afford the means of supporting so vast a host of men, in addition to the concourse of flocks and

herds, for which it might yield a scanty subsistence. Pharaoh will conjecture that the fear of perishing by famine has been the cause of their turning back.(1)

Pharaoh would have seen in the victory of geography over Israel a weakness and limitation in Israel's God. The net result of this false though understandable reasoning is to give Pharaoh the hope of gaining the upper hand once more, allowing him the psychological room to ignore the memory of the awesome miracles which had caused him to allow the Israelites to depart in the first place.

demoralized: The meaning of the passive stem of the Hebrew verb *buch* is much disputed. The four principal senses in which it is generally taken here are:

- (1) *to be disturbed or demoralized* (psychological)
- (2) *to be confused* (psychological)
- (3) *to wander in a confused state* (psychological and geographical)
- (4) *to be hemmed in* (geographical).

The idea of acute psychological disruption - agitation, alarm, dejection - seems to best fit the context, and so the first possibility listed above has been adopted here. The Israelites have been trapped (in Pharaoh's thinking). It is not that they are confused or without a purpose, it is rather that their plan has been frustrated (ostensibly) by the events - they ran into a barrier they could not cross, and now are aware of their perilous position. Other evidence supporting this position includes:

- a. The testimony of Targum Onkelos (an ancient Aramaic translation of the Hebrew text), which translates the verb by means of a passive participle meaning "disturbed or confounded."
- b. The usage of *buch* elsewhere in the Old Testament in sense similar to the one here of psychological pain (Est. 3:15; Joel 1:18 [in the Vulgate]).
- c. The usage of *mebuchah*, a derivative of *buch* elsewhere in the Old Testament in a similar sense (Is. 22:5; Mich.7:4).
- d. The translation "disturbed" or better "demoralized" makes the most sense because Pharaoh will have actually spoken the words prophesied in verse three later, specifically during the events described in verses seven and eight of chapter fourteen. In that context, Pharaoh's heart is said to be hardened, and it is as a consequence of this that he decides to pursue the Israelites. Since the Israelites are actually in good spirits (verse eight: "going out bodily"), an incorrect assumption of poor morale, is the best way to take Pharaoh's comment in verse three, for this gives the starkest contrast between Pharaoh's secular viewpoint and the true state of affairs: Pharaoh assumes that the Israelites have a defeated attitude, but they really have a victorious one according to verse eight.
- e. Finally, none of the other alternative translations listed above quite match the context. For Pharaoh to evaluate the Israelite action as "confused" (2), is illogical, for as he says immediately hereafter, "the desert has shut them off", depriving them of their

intended route. From his point of view, then, a change of course is quite understandable and certainly not "confused". "To wander in a confused state" (3), is unsatisfactory both for the above reasons and because the purposeful march of the Israelites from Etham directly to the Red Sea can hardly be called wandering. Indeed, if, as is likely (see verse eight below), the second report was carried to Pharaoh by observers from the area around the Red Sea camp, he would have known that far from "wandering", the Israelites had already made camp in that location. Lastly, "hemmed in" (4), besides being the least well supported of the four alternatives from the linguistic point of view, doesn't really explain why Pharaoh should be especially encouraged to pursue the Israelites for this reason. An assumption of poor morale on the part of the vast Israelite host is clearly the most plausible reason for encouraging Pharaoh's pursuit and attack.

To sum up, it will be helpful here to examine the sequence of events involving the Israelites' journey from Egypt, their turnaround, and the subsequent activities of Pharaoh and his army. Since comparing God's prophecy here regarding Pharaoh's future reaction to the news with Pharaoh's actual words in verse five (in company with the comments of his advisors) has often been the source of difficulties relating to a correct interpretation of the passage, this rundown of the exact sequence of events as described in our context is necessary to clarify matters:

- a. First, Moses and the Israelites reach the desert fringe at Etham (see Ex.13:18,20).
- b. Next, Pharaoh's spies observe this movement and head north to report to Pharaoh (see comments on verse five below).
- c. The Lord commands Moses and the Israelites to "turn back" and camp by the Red Sea (see verse one above).
- d. The spies reach Pharaoh and report that the Israelites have fled (i.e., have left "the land" [sc. of Egypt] and entered "the desert" (see verse five below).
- e. Being distressed at this report and the prospect of losing his Israelite slaves, Pharaoh then organizes a military expedition to retrieve them (Ex.14:6-7).
- f. Pharaoh next receives a second report relating that the Israelites have not entered the desert after all, but have instead changed direction, staying within the boundaries of his kingdom (see verse eight below).
- g. Pharaoh, contemplating this new information, fulfills the Lord's prophecy of verse three in concluding that the Israelites must be demoralized, having been precluded from escaping by the impenetrable barrier of the southern desert. Since the Israelites are now known to be still within "the land," Pharaoh is, however, lacking any grounds to pursue them militarily, for the Israelites are well within the bounds of his last expressed restriction on the extent of their progress at Ex.8:25-29 (Hebrew: Ex. 8:21-24).
- h. Finally, God hardens Pharaoh's heart, thus fulfilling the second prophecy of verse three, and Pharaoh's purpose now becomes one not merely of recapturing the Israelites (verse five), but of utterly destroying them (Ex.15:9; and see verse eight below).
- i. So Pharaoh pursues the Israelites (verse eight).

j. And overtakes them (verse nine), leading to his final confrontation with the power of God.

Verse 4:

"And I will harden Pharaoh's heart and he will pursue after them so that I may gain glory through Pharaoh and through his force and so that the Egyptians may know that I am the Lord." And they did so.

I will harden: While divine intervention is present in this hardening, the meaning of the idiom should not be construed as eradicating either Pharaoh's volition or responsibility for his actions. Since the Hebrew word for heart, *lebh*, is used in the Old Testament for the entire inner person, including specifically the judgment and understanding, "to harden" the *lebh* must imply some impairment of the object's ability to reason or understand in the normal fashion. (2) The question then becomes, just what is the nature of this hardening?

Two facts should be noted in regard to the problem. First of all, this idiom is immediately followed by the statement that Pharaoh will pursue the Israelites, apparently as a result of the hardening. The same sequence of events occurs in the historical fulfillment of this prophecy in verse eight. Secondly, in the previous instances in the Book of Exodus (see Ex. 7:13,22; 8:15,19,32; 9:7,12,34,35; 10:1,20,27; 11:10), the result of the hardening process has always been a particularly bad decision on Pharaoh's part. Specifically, Pharaoh chose to defy the Lord on each of these occasions. In the instances chronicled in chapters seven and eight, the hardening is described as entirely Pharaoh's doing, whereas in the chapters nine and ten, the Lord is said to participate in the hardening process (9:12; 10:20,27; 11:10). In our context, God prophesies that He will "harden Pharaoh's heart" once again, and the bad decision which results is Pharaoh's pursuit of the Israelites. It is well within the experience of everyone that there is a natural tendency to overlook or to blind oneself to possibly adverse consequences of actions we are intent on taking, and instead to persevere on an ill-considered course. To the extent that one overrides his faculty of understanding in so doing, paying heed rather to his desires, such a person can also be said to be "hardening his heart" to the unpleasant reality of possible negative consequences. But why is God mentioned as the agent of hardening here and elsewhere?

I believe that the question is really one of degrees. For example, a person may be able to ignore rather easily the social and spiritual consequences of maligning someone else when they are absent. When the target of their venom is present, however, the consequences are likely to be much more immediate; hence it is all the more difficult for the would-be maligner to carry through on his course and "harden his heart" to such immediate consequences. Of course it is not absolutely impossible to do so, and human nature being what it is, it is doubtful if there is anything in the natural realm which might act as an ultimate restrainer, effective for all and in all circumstances.

It must be remembered, however, that Pharaoh's experience was different in that it did not deal entirely with the natural realm. Pharaoh had been confronted directly with the awesome supernatural power of the Lord Himself. There seems then to be a point at which even the most stubborn and implacable person can no longer ignore such an overwhelming reality, especially when the source is clearly of a divine sort, and manifest in an undeniable fashion. Just as we in our state of unbelief finally came to the point of no longer being able to deny the awe and glory of God and so came to believe in His Son (though we had hardened our hearts against the truth throughout all our previous lives: Matt. 25:41-46), so Pharaoh came to an analogous crossroads: the point of being unable to further deny the awesome consequences of defying God.

By the time of the Israelites' departure, Pharaoh has reached the point of inertia in the face divine power. He is no longer able to ignore the dire consequences of further opposition to the Lord as his land lies devastated and his people's firstborn lie dead - not, that is, without a direct enablement from God to allow him to overlook these harshest of realities. So the meaning of our problematic idiom of God hardening Pharaoh's heart is that *God merely enabled Pharaoh to act in accordance with his original predisposition, rendering him insensitive to the consequences of further defiance, which consequences no man with Pharaoh's experiences could possibly ignore without such hardening.* Pharaoh ought to be too terrified to pursue. God hardens him, he pursues anyhow and terrible destruction results.

Notes:

1. James Murphy, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Minneapolis 1979) 150.
2. R. Harris, G. Archer, Jr., and B. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago 1980) v.1, 466. The idiom here is definitely not emotional in application. Pharaoh has been antagonistic from the start.

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