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**The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart:
Three Sources of His Obduracy**

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I. Introduction

II. Exegesis of the Statements on the of Hardening of Pharaoh

A. The Boundaries of the General Context (Exod 2:23-14:31)

B. Exegesis of the Statements Within their Particular Contexts

1. The Call of Moses and his return to Egypt (2:23-7:7)

a. Verse 4:21

b. Verse 7:3

2. The Plagues followed by Exodus (7:8-14:31)

a. The initial sign: turning a staff into a snake (7:8-13)

b. The first plague: bloody waters (7:14-24)

c. The plague of frogs (7:25-8:15)

d. The plague of gnats (8:16-19)

e. The plague of flies (8:20-32)

f. The plague of animal pestilence (9:1-7)

g. The plague of boils over animals and humans (9:8-12)

h. The plague of hail (9:13-35)

i. The plague of locusts (10:1-20)

j. The plague of darkness (10:21-29)

k. The plague of the death of the firstborn (11:1-12:33)

3. Journey from Egypt (12:34-14:31)

III. Conclusion

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I. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to discover what light the account of Pharaoh’s obduracy sheds into the wider debate on the interplay between God’s Sovereignty and Human Free Will. Does the former override or occur apart from the latter or do the two occur in concert or in amalgamation with each other? To put it differently, our goal is to figure out what insight the story brings to the question of how free humans are to express their desires or wishes in the midst of the outworking of God’s agenda.

That the narrative would be cited in discussions related to Free Will and Divine Sovereignty should not be surprising. Its pertinence to the debate has been recognized as far back as the era of the Church Fathers. Reacting to those who suggest that Pharaoh was of an “earthly nature” and therefore possessed no propensity to obey, Origen argues that if Pharaoh was indeed of an earthly nature and thus altogether disobedient to God, “what need is there of his heart being hardened, and that not once, but frequently? Unless perhaps, since it was possible for him to obey.”³ A couple of paragraphs later he offers the illustration of the effect of the sun on wax and mud (the wax melts, while the mud hardens) to support the notion that the prior wickedness of Pharaoh made him prone to a hardened heart.⁴ Augustine cautions against taking away from Pharaoh free will simply because in several passages God says, “I have hardened Pharaoh;” or, “I have hardened or I will harden Pharaoh’s heart”:

IT DOES NOT BY ANY MEANS FOLLOW THAT PHARAOH DID NOT, ON THIS ACCOUNT, HARDEN HIS OWN HEART. FOR THIS, TOO, IS SAID OF HIM, AFTER THE REMOVAL OF THE FLY-PLAGUE FROM THE EGYPTIANS, IN THESE WORDS OF THE SCRIPTURE: “AND PHARAOH HARDENED HIS HEART AT THIS TIME ALSO; NEITHER WOULD HE LET THE PEOPLE GO.” THUS IT WAS THAT BOTH GOD HARDENED HIM BY HIS JUST JUDGMENT, AND PHARAOH BY HIS OWN FREE WILL.⁵

An understanding of what the story teaches in regards to the relationship between God’s Sovereignty, expressed in his hardening

³ Origen, *Preface of Rufinus*, 3.1.8

⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.1.11.

⁵ Augustine, *A Treatise on Grace and Free Will*, chap 45.

of Pharaoh's heart, and Free Will, expressed in Pharaoh hardening his own heart, depends a lot on how thoroughly and carefully we exegete the eighteen Pharaoh-related statements⁶ that carry a Hebrew form that our English versions translate as "harden(ed)" in particular and the contexts in which these statements are found in general. The need for a thorough analysis of these statements before drawing a conclusion was first recognized and then carried out by G. K. Beale.⁷ Since then it has now become standard practice by any serious exegete of the Pharaoh story as it pertains to the hardening to take into consideration all the statements.⁸ We are not about to become an exception.

II. Exegesis of the Statements on the of Hardening of Pharaoh Within Their Context

A. The Boundaries of the General Context (Exod 2:23-14:31)

Considering that Pharaoh is a central part of the story, it makes sense that his entry into and exit out of the scene should mark the beginning and end of the narrative respectively. If that be the case Exod 2:23 ought to serve as the beginning point of the narrative since it announces the passing away of the Pharaoh from whom Moses fled and presumably signals the succession of the obdurate Pharaoh. The end of the fourteenth chapter of Exodus serves as the tail end of the

⁶ (1) "... but I will harden his heart..." (4:21) (2) "But I will harden Pharaoh's heart..." (7:3) (3) "Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened..." (7:13) (4) "... Pharaoh's heart is hardened..." (7:14) (5) "... so Pharaoh's heart remained hardened..." (7:22) (6) "...he hardened his heart..." [8:15, (8:11 in MT)] (7) "...But Pharaoh's heart was hardened..." (8:19) [8:15 in MT] (8) "But Pharaoh hardened his heart..." (8:32) [8:28 in MT] (9) "...But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened..." (9:7) (10) "But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh..." (9:12) (11) "...Pharaoh...hardened his heart..." (9:34) (12) "So the heart of Pharaoh was hardened..." (9:35) (13) "...for I have hardened his heart..." (10:1) (14) "But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart..." (10:20) (15) "But the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart..." (10:27) (16) "...but the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart..." (11:10) (17) "I will harden Pharaoh's heart..." (14:4) (18) "The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh..." (14:8) [Unless otherwise stated all citations are based on the NRSV translation]

⁷ G. K. Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9," *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984)

⁸ Cf. John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), Robert B. Chisholm, "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament," in *ETS* (Philadelphia: 1995), Gerry Breshears, "Who hardened Pharaoh's heart?," in *ETS* (Western Conservative Baptist Seminary: 1988), Harold R. Holmyard, "How did God harden Pharaoh's heart," in *ETS* (2000), Joe Fleener, "Paul and Divine Foreknowledge: Did God Determine Pharaoh's Heart?," in *ETS* (Lancaster, PA: 2003), David M. Gunn, "The "Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart": Plot, Character and Theology in Exodus 1-14," in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, ed. David M. Gunn and Alan J. Hauser David J. A. Clines, JSOTSup, vol. 19 (Sheffield: 1982).

narrative in light of its reporting of the drowning death of Pharaoh's army which would have marked the fading away of Pharaoh militarily.

B Exegesis of the Statements Within their Particular Contexts

1. The Call of Moses and his return to Egypt (2:23-7:7)

a. Verse 4:21

The verse consists of an instruction⁹ by the Lord to Moses while the latter was en route to Egypt from whence he had fled to escape punishment for murdering an Egyptian (cf. 2:11-15). The instruction itself comes on the heels of an epiphany (2:23-4:17) during which the “the God of the fathers” revealed his plan to activate a covenantal promise of liberation made to Abraham some four hundred years prior (Gen 15:13-15, cf. Exod 3:6-9) and assigned Moses the role of an emancipator (Exod 3:10). Initially Moses was unwilling for one reason or another to step into this God-assigned role. But after a series of measures by the Lord that included assuring him of a warm reception by the elders of Israel (v18), foretelling for his benefit Pharaoh's switch from refusal¹⁰ of to wonders-driven ultimate submission to the demand to free Israel (vv19-20, cf. 6:1), endowing him with the ability to perform signs (תִּשְׁמַר) that would engender belief among the people (4:1-9), providing him with a spokesman in light of his excuse that he was not eloquent (4:10-17), Moses was on his way to Egypt.

The instruction to Moses was that he would see to it that he performs before Pharaoh all the wonders that the Lord had placed at his disposal. The “wonders” (מִפְתֵּי) in view here are different from are the three signs (4:2-9; cf. 29-31)¹¹ that had been placed at Moses' disposal during the epiphany in the sense that the signs were geared towards eliciting belief among the elders of Israel while the wonders were to be displayed before Pharaoh.

⁹ The imperative תִּשְׁמַר has the force of a command.

¹⁰ The first record of Pharaoh's refusal to let Israel go occurs in chapter 5 where not only does Pharaoh turn down the request for Israel to go and celebrate a festival to the Lord, he embitters the life of the Israelites by suspending the provision of straw while as the same time demanding the same level of productivity (5:1-13).

¹¹ The sign of turning a staff into a snake and vice versa, turning a healthy hand leprous and vice versa, and turning water into blood respectively.

Besides the instruction, the verse also consists of a prediction as indicated by the imperfect¹² verb **קָמַח**. The verb itself, when associated with the noun **לֵב** (heart), is best translated as stubborn or heard-hearted. That the stubbornness will defy reality is deducible from the observation that the syntax of the prediction is a disjunctive clause.¹³ The expected normal reaction towards the sign would be surrender. But that was not to be so in the case of Pharaoh. He was to react to the contrary--stubbornly. Furthermore, the stubbornness would not only manifest itself in him refusing to let Israel go (4:21), but would characterize his reaction throughout his encounter with the divinely engendered wonders.¹⁴ Thus the order of the cyclical occurrence would be a display of a sign, followed by a God-engendered obstinacy, which will manifest itself in Pharaoh's refusal to permit Israel to leave.¹⁵

On the question of the relationship between God's role and human involvement, this verse emphasizes the former in its assignment of God as the subject of the verb and the human (Pharaoh) as the object.¹⁶ Nevertheless the suppression of Pharaoh's role in the hardening process in terms of his own desires or intent must be

¹² The use of the imperfect here is to express an action that is about to take place (GKC, §107i).

¹³ The word order is non-verb (**לֵב**), verb (**קָמַח**), and then object (**אֵל**).

¹⁴ The mention of the plague of the death of Pharaoh's first-born son in 4:22-23 implies that all the other ten signs would have already been set in motion since this was the last sign to be activated. The contextual observation that Pharaoh's stubbornness would characterize his reaction throughout his encounter with the divinely engendered wonders lends credence to Beale's assertion that the sense of the piel stem be considered as iterative (Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9," 134). At the same time such rendering may be considered superfluous since the context already supports the understanding of a prolonged obstinacy or, according to Chisholm, may be dismissed as altogether invalid on linguistic grounds (Chisholm, "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament," 22)

¹⁵ Even though 5:1-13 marks the first record of Pharaoh's refusal to permit Israel to leave, the absence of a sign and the failure to characterize the refusal as God-engendered obstinacy makes it unlikely that this episode is a fulfillment of the 4:21 prediction (cf. Breshears, "Who hardened Pharaoh's heart?," 1988], 15; Chisholm, "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament," 5; *contra* Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9," 135-136, Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, 142).

¹⁶ Cf. Beale's statement: "The specific lexical idea of the verb is that Yahweh will give Pharaoh the psychological power which would cause the accomplishment of a refusing action" (Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9," 134)

regarded for now as only apparent until the outworking on the prediction is fully analyzed.

b. Verse 7:3

The disjunctive clause with which the verse commences contrasts the preceding and succeeding actions. The preceding action constitutes a command directed to Moses and Aaron to require Pharaoh to let the Israelites leave (v2). The succeeding action centers around the verb קשה, which when it occurs in conjunction with לב and is in the hiphil stem carries the causative meaning of “to cause to be hard” or “to harden.”¹⁷ The subject of the verb is the Lord and the hardening that he predicts he will cause will afford him the opportunity to unleash more signs and wonders.¹⁸ The predicted outcome of the unleashing of the signs and wonders is two-fold: (i) Pharaoh will yield to the demand to free Israel and (ii) the Egyptians will recognize who God is (vv 4-5).

As was the case with 4:21, the order of events here is also cyclical but unlike 4:21 the order here is reversed: hardening of heart, which here takes the form of Pharaoh refusing to listen to Moses and Aaron (7:4), will be followed by a sign. Much like 4:21, this verse highlights God’s role in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Nevertheless it would be premature to rule out the human aspect until the various fulfillments of the prophecy are analyzed.

2. The Plagues followed by the Exodus (7:8-14:31)

a. The initial sign: turning a staff into a snake (7:8-13)

Noteworthy is the phrase באשר דבר יהוה at the end of verse 13. In its occurrences, whether as a mark of a heeded divine instruction¹⁹ or a fulfillment of a divine prediction,²⁰ the phrase is customarily coupled by a succinct rehearsal of the original prediction or instruction.

In the case of the verse 13 occurrence, the rehearsal constitutes of two related responses: the hardening of pharaoh’s heart and his refusal to listen to Moses and Aaron. No one doubts that the original

¹⁷ Cf. Prov 28:14

¹⁸ The signs and wonders are relabeled as שפטים גדלים (“acts of judgments”) at the end of 7:4.

¹⁹ See Num 5:4; 16:40; 27:23; Deut 2:1; Josh 4:8

²⁰ Cf. 2 Kings 24:13

prediction of these two responses is traceable to either 4:21 or 7:3. For sure the record of the lopsided outcome of the contest involving staffs turning into snakes in favor of Aaron (vv9-12) and the mention of Pharaoh's unwillingness to listen to Moses' request to let the people go in verse 13²¹ recalls the prediction in 4:21 where the performance of a sign is followed by an unbelievable stubbornness that manifests itself Pharaoh's unwillingness to let the people go. At the same time the mention of Pharaoh's unwillingness to listen recalls the language of 7:3-4 in particular.

The difficulty is the “exact correspondence”²² that elsewhere characterizes the phrase *כִּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה* fails to materialize when it comes to the subject of *חִזַּק* in 7:13 and 4:21. Whereas God is the subject of the verb in 4:21, he is not the subject of the intransitive verb (*חִזַּק*) (v 13). What are we to make of this incongruity? Should we, as suggested by Fleener, associate the phrase *כִּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה* more tightly with Pharaoh's refusal to listen and the fact that his heart was hardened and *de-link* the phrase from the idea that God is the agent of the hardening?²³ Or should we, as Chisholm does, link the phrase with “Yahweh's hardening activity”?²⁴

Our suggestion is that we acknowledge the incongruity, as Fleener does, but, unlike him, link the phrase, not with the idea that God is the agent of hardening, as Chisholm does, but only with the idea of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart and then let the context identify for us the agent of the hardening. In the case of v 13, the author is less interested in highlighting the agent of the hardening and more interested in describing the condition of Pharaoh's heart following the sign of the staffs turning into snakes.²⁵

²¹ Even though 7: 8-13 merely speak of Pharaoh not listening to Moses and Aaron and do not explicitly state what Moses and Aaron actually asked of Pharaoh, we have to assume, on the basis of 7:2, that their request pertained to Israel's dismissal from Egypt.

²² We borrow this phrase from Beale without necessarily agreeing with his conclusion. According to Beale, the predominant “exact correspondence” character of *כִּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה* should lead to the conclusion that Yahweh is the ultimate cause of the hardening (Beale, 141).

²³ Joe Fleener, “Paul and Divine Foreknowledge: Did God Determine Pharaoh's Heart?,” 12-13.

²⁴ Chisholm, “Divine Hardening in the Old Testament,” 7.

²⁵ Both Chisholm (Chisholm, “Divine Hardening in the Old Testament,” 24-25) and Beale point out that the thrust of the perfect form of the verb *חִזַּק*, whose subject is not God, is to describe the condition of Pharaoh's heart. According to the latter, the perfect here [Footnote continued on next page ...]

b. The first plague: bloody waters (7:14-24)

The opening statement (v 14) of this section coupled by the refrain “as the Lord had said (כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה),” which appears alongside the dual response of a hardened heart, indicated by the intransitive verb (כָּבַד) in verse 14 and חָזַק in verse 22, and unwillingness to listen (v 22) render this section a fulfillment of 7:3 where defiance attracts more signs. The duplication of the sign of bloody waters by the magicians serves as catalyst for Pharaoh’s dismissal of Moses and Aaron assuming that the waw consecutive in the waw consecutive plus preterite, וַיִּחְזַק, carries a causal nuance. As in the case of 7:13, the author is not necessarily interested in explicitly identifying the agent of the hardening. Not to belabor the point, the presence of the refrain should not automatically be interpreted to mean that God is the agent of the hardening whether directly or ultimately. The context must be the basis of such a determination.

c. The plague of frogs (7:25-8:15)

As was the case with the sign of the bloody waters, the magicians replicated the plague of frogs which we should assume was set in motion following Pharaoh’s refusal to yield to Yahweh’s ultimatum²⁶ (8:1-4). The difference is this time around Pharaoh did not sit back while his subjects fended for themselves and the plague continued on unabated. At the commencement of the plague, Pharaoh requested Moses and Aaron to entreat the Lord for relief. Moses honored the request and the Lord terminated the plague. This termination certainly propelled Pharaoh to harden his heart. But once again the appearance of the refrain “as the Lord had said” ought not to be the basis of the conclusion that God did or did not play a part in the hardening process. Unlike the narrative of the initial sign (7:8-13) and the first plague (14-24), the context provides a clue or two that

denotes perfective as opposed to aoristic action. Such an interpretation, he continues, would conceive of the subject (Pharaoh's heart) as in a given condition resulting from a preceding action ("was hard," "had become hard") [Beale, p 139]

²⁶ We are indebted to Chisholm’s take on the structure of the plot development of the narrative which for him consists of an interplay between Pharaoh’s autonomous rejections of God’s ultimatums (5:1-2; 8:2-7, 20-24; 9:1-6, 13-26; 10:4-11) and Yahweh’s sovereign intervention [Chisholm, “Divine Hardening in the Old Testament,” 12-15]

suggest that God played a role in the hardening as much as he is not the subject of the hiphil infinitive absolute **הִכְבֵּד** ²⁷(8:15, 8:11 in MT). For instance, one could argue that God offered the respite in order to give Pharaoh a reason to renege on his promise to Israel leave.

d. The plague of gnats (8:16-19)

Until now the contest between the agents of Pharaoh (the magicians) and the agents of Yahweh (Moses and Aaron) had ended in a draw more or less. Sure, the contest involving staffs turning into snakes ended as more than a draw. But until now the outcome had not been a clear, hands-down win for God. Not only were the magicians unable to replicate the plague of gnats, they attributed it unequivocally to God. The expectation would have been for Pharaoh to buckle. He did not. His heart hardened. Once again the presence of the refrain (8:19, 8:15 in MT) ought not to be regarded as indicating that the hardening is attributable to God.

e. The plague of flies (8:20-32)

As was the case with the sign of bloody waters, Pharaoh begs Moses to offer an intercessory prayer and then reneges by hardening (**וַיִּכְבֵּד**) his heart (8:32, 8:28 in MT) when the plague of flies, limited only to the space occupied by the Egyptians, dies down. Those who rely on the presence of the refrain alone as intimation that God was involved in the hardening would be at a loss here since the refrain is absent. Looking to the context reveals that Pharaoh indeed hardened his heart. At the same time God played a role in the sense that it is he who answered Moses' intercessory prayer.

f. The plague of animal pestilence (9:1-7)

Like the sign of flies, the livestock pestilence was directed only at the animals that belonged to the Egyptians. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart (9:7) despite this plague fits the prediction uttered by the Lord in 4:21 and 7:3. Unlike the sign of the flies, the author is less concerned with the agent of the hardening and more interested in stating the condition of Pharaoh's heart.

²⁷ Pharaoh is the subject of the hiphil IA and "his heart" is the object.

g. The plague of boils over animals and humans (9:8-12)

Herein we find a perfect match between the antecedent of the refrain (“just as the Lord has spoken”) and the rehash of the antecedent. The antecedent normally takes the form of a prediction, which in this case is spelt out in 4:21 and 7:3. The rehash coupled with the refrain mark the fulfillment of the prediction. We consider the antecedent and the rehash a perfect match in the sense that Pharaoh’s heart is hardened and that God is the agent of the hardening as is evidenced by the fact that he is the subject of the piel form of חזק.

h. The plague of hail (9:13-35)

The plague of hail resembles the plague of flies in terms of target and Pharaoh’s response. The plague does not affect Goshen. Pharaoh pleads for Moses’ interposition and when the prayer is positively answered, goes back on his word by hardening (ויכבד) his heart (9:34). Once again God’s role in the hardening is evident not so much in the refrain (9:35) as it is in the fact that he answered Moses’ prayer on behalf of Pharaoh for relief from the plague.

i. The plague of locusts (10:1-20)

More than recalling 7:3 by tying the God-engendered hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (הכבדתי את־לְבוֹ) and the signs, verse 1 explicitly presents the latter as the reason for the former through the use of the particle לְכִי־נֵאֻמָּה. Furthermore, the statement offers two other reasons as to why God unleashed the plagues.

In verse 20 God’s role in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is explicitly laid out (ויחזק יהוה את־לֵב פַּרְוֹ). At the same time, the positive answer to Pharaoh’s pleading that the locust plague be terminated would have contributed to the hardening.

j. The plague of darkness (10:21-29)

Once again the hardening (10:27) is attributed directly to God though the use of the piel verb and God as the subject (ויחזק יהוה). Could the mildness of the plague (darkness in the whole of Egypt except Goshen) also have contributed to the hardening?

k. The plague of the death of the firstborn (11:1-12:33)

If 11:9 recalls 7:3 through a shared verbal form (רבה) that has God as the subject, 11:10 echoes 4:21 by its use of both the piel form of חזק and its rehearsal of Pharaoh’s refusal to let Israel go.

1. Journey from Egypt (12:34-14:31)

Pharaoh's pursuit of Israel even after he permitted them to leave is attributed to a God-engendered hardening of the heart (פָּרֹחַ־לֵב הָאֱלֹהִים). (14:4, cf v8) God's role in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is clearly spelt out in his re-routing of Israel (v2). At the same time the hardening is described in terms of human motivation and desires. In this case, Pharaoh is motivated by the sight of a people seemingly trapped in the wilderness (v 3) and driven by the desire not to lose a source of labor (v5).

III. Conclusion

The eighteen statements that carry a Hebrew form that our English versions translate as “harden(ed)” and the context in which these statements are housed reveal the following in regards to the relationship between God's Sovereignty, expressed in his hardening of Pharaoh's heart, and Human Free Will, expressed in Pharaoh hardening his own heart. Pharaoh's obduracy is one among several biblical examples²⁸ where the unfolding of God's purpose occurs, not apart from, but in amalgamation or in concert with, human desire, inclinations, or reasoning. In other words, as much as God's superintendence is irrefutable, the outworking of his purpose incorporates or more precisely, *fans* human motivation, desires or wishes. For instance, Pharaoh's pursuit of Israel even after he permitted them to leave is attributed to a God-engendered hardening of the heart (14:4, cf v8). God's role in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is clearly spelt out in his re-routing of Israel (v2). The sigh of a people seemingly trapped in the wilderness (v3) surely fanned Pharaoh's effort to acts in order not to lose a source of labor (v5). Another example would be the instances where divinely engendered hardening is coupled with God's termination a plague following Moses intercessory prayer on behalf of Pharaoh. The termination most assuredly served as a catalyst for Pharaoh's reluctance to let Israel go (cf. 8:15, 31-32; 9:34;10:19-20).

²⁸ Other examples are: (a) Samson's liking (טָרַף) for his bride-to-be vis-à-vis the Lord's intent to break the domination of the Philistines (Judges 14:3-4), (b) Rehoboam's gravitation and eventual embracement of his age-mates' harsh advice vis-à-vis the fulfillment of the Lord's prophecy concerning the breakup of Israel into the Northern and Southern kingdoms (1 Kings 12:15).

Granted, there are instances within the eighteen statements where the hardening is attributed exclusively to God or to Pharaoh. An example of the former is the plague of boils over animals and humans (9:8-12). Examples of the latter are the numerous God-given ultimatums that Pharaoh simply ignored (5:1-2; 8:2-7, 20-24; 9:1-6, 13-26; 10:4-11). Better still we have instances where it is explicitly stated of Pharaoh that he hardened his heart (9:34). In the final analysis, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is traceable to three sources: Pharaoh himself, God, and divinely directed outcomes that propelled Pharaoh towards the direction of obduracy.

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