

Human Freewill and Divine Determinism A Case-Study: Pharaoh¹

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Dr. Wally Unger's keen interest in the life of C. S. Lewis and his writings is no secret. It is well known that the question of human freewill defines, more than anything else, the theological core of C. S. Lewis' thought. It is in keeping with this critical issue for C. S. Lewis and, I suspect, for Dr. Unger as well, that I have chosen to submit a reflection on a biblical character whose dealings with God have provoked a lot of discussions about the relationship between human freewill and divine determinism: Pharaoh.

PROBLEM

If one can assume the existence of a theological centre in the Old Testament,² then it would appear that there a strong case can be made in support of human freewill particularly as it finds expression in regards to the person of God. Genesis 1-3³, the Wisdom corpus,⁴ and the use of the curse motif in the prophetic books⁵ provide ample illustration of this affirmation. The figure of Pharaoh, however, presents a radically different model of the relationship between God and human beings. In the narrative which opposes Pharaoh and Yahweh (Ex. 4-14), the cause for Pharaoh's uncompromising attitude is attributed to Yahweh in no less than ten occasions. It is Yahweh who "hardens" (9 times)⁶ or "makes heavy" (once)⁷ the heart of Pharaoh, thus ushering and insuring Egypt's downfall.

The portrayal of Pharaoh strongly suggests that God does not hesitate to suspend human freedom when this is convenient for him. The Exodus narrative does seem to lead the reader to the conclusion that, while God may generally respect human freedom, in critical situations, he does not hesitate to withdraw this privilege in order to achieve his objectives. But if human beings are free in regards to God only when it is of little importance, are we not compelled to conclude that this freedom is but an illusion?

THE FIGURE OF PHARAOH (Ex 4-14)

The Purpose of the Narrative

Pharaoh is presented in the context of a narrative. This may seem like an obvious observation, but it is nevertheless relevant, because a narrative is always written from a particular perspective. It portrays the characters in a specific light and is written with a distinct focus. To identify the purpose of a narrative represents a critical step in the interpretive process and will determine, to a great extent, the hermeneutical choices the reader will make in regards to the details of the text.

It is highly improbable that the primary purpose of the narrative attested in Ex. 4-14 is to provide a rigorous treatment of such a focused philosophical problem as the relationship between human freedom and divine sovereignty. This is not to suggest that such a problem is completely unrelated to the text. On the one hand, this question remains important, for it is *the* question that the average reader brings to the text.⁸ This question which is forced upon the text by the reader is one which, to a significant extent, rises from the text as well. It represents our starting point and cannot

therefore be discounted. On the other hand, as I intimate above, the issue of human freedom and divine sovereignty is not absent from the biblical tradition. In fact, I would suggest that the mystery of human freewill is at the very center of biblical revelation.

The curse motif, frequently used in the prophetic books, and otherwise known as the announcement of judgment, gives us an insight into an apparent paradox. On the one side of the equation, there is a God who persistently attempts to convince his people to be faithful to him. On the other side, there is a community of individuals who seem to have the absolute freedom to reject God. One cannot avoid the question which underlies the multidimensional rhetoric of the prophetic discourse and which revolves around how God can persuade a free creature to love and to serve him without constraint?⁹ This call to choose life rather than death is also strongly attested in the deuteronomic tradition¹⁰ and in the Wisdom literature.¹¹ Far from representing a secondary concern, the issue of human freewill and divine determinism is indeed one of the critical points in the biblical tradition.

Whereas one may admit the importance of human freewill in the Old Testament, it is important to realize that the text never offers a philosophical treatment of the question. The biblical text does touch on the issue of human freewill but always in an indirect or oblique manner.¹² It is, therefore, only to the extent that the redactional specificity of the narrative is identified, that we will be in a position to discern more precisely those elements of the story which will be relevant for our discussion.

The reasons given in Ex. 3:7-10 and Ex. 5:22-6:8 to explain the intervention of Yahweh provide important clues for determining the purpose of the narrative. According to these texts, Yahweh intervenes in order to save his people, show his majesty and overwhelming power, and to

communicate the true nature of his character. Since there appears to be a convergence between the intention attributed to Yahweh towards the Israelites and that of the narrator towards the reader, it is reasonable to assume that this narrative is also primarily written to reveal the true nature of Yahweh. The story teaches that Yahweh is a God of compassion who delivers those who suffer, and whose power and authority extend to all nations. The text should be read in the light of this redactional intent.

The Characters

In narrative criticism, a distinction is made between a “round” and a “flat” character.¹³ The “round” character is complex and unpredictable, whereas the “flat” character is one-dimensional and rather predictable. The “round” character plays a critical role in the development of the moral lesson of the narrative, but only a secondary role is attributed to the “flat” character(s).

Pharaoh is a “flat” character. He is the oppressor. He represents the villain who obstinately resists Yahweh and his project. He is the adversary whose presence is absolutely essential to the development of the plot. In this light, it is pointless to “psychoanalyze” Pharaoh. He is simply a one-dimensional character whose role is to oppose Yahweh so that the full extent of God’s power and glory might be revealed. We have here the first hint of a limitation on the kinds of questions that the reader can legitimately ask of this character.

A Military Conflict

There is a second factor which limits the range of questions the reader may ask of Pharaoh. From the very beginning, the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh is set in the context of a

military conflict. Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), a Prussian soldier and a military philosopher, defines war as “an act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfill our will.”¹⁴ In a context of a war, everything must contribute to meeting this objective. The details of the plot and the actions of the actors not only reflect this specific situation, but they must also be interpreted in this light.

A number of elements underline the basic military character of the conflict between the Hebrews and the Egyptians. In Ex. 1:8-22, the Hebrew people is portrayed as posing a danger to the Egyptian kingdom. To counter this threat, the king of Egypt adopts a series of measures aimed at annihilating the military potential of the Hebrews. The Egyptians do not limit their action to a simple strategy of oppression; the order to eliminate the male infants constitutes a veritable genocide and an act of aggression. In principle, this intervention should not represent a major difficulty; Pharaoh had, after all, the right of life and death in his kingdom. But in this case, this people is more than an eclectic group of slaves. The narrator informs the reader that this people belongs to a specific God (Ex. 2:23-24). The reader knows that the emerging conflict is no longer simply between an ethnic group and the Egyptian people, but more precisely between the Israelites and Yahweh, on the one hand, and Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt,¹⁵ on the other hand.

According to Clausewitz, military doctrine prescribes that the State which initiates a military campaign must do so in the perspective of obtaining a total and absolute victory over the enemy. The victory must be so extensive as to crush the will to resist and any possibility of reprisal in the future. This requirement excludes, by definition, any principle of moderation whatsoever. It is this kind of military discourse which is reflected in various passages where Yahweh predicts the defeat of Pharaoh (Ex. 3:19-20; 4:21-23; 6:1,6-8; 7:3-5). In chapters 3 and 4, Yahweh responds to the doubts expressed by Moses, whereas in chapters 6 and 7, God reiterates his promise of victory to calm the

apprehensions of the people following the escalation of the punitive measures initiated by Pharaoh (Ex. 5:6-23).

The Gods of Israel versus the Gods of Egypt

The purpose of the confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh extends far beyond gaining a military victory over Pharaoh and the kingdom of Egypt. The significance of this conflict is primarily theological; it will reveal the true divine conqueror. Yahweh acts in order to demonstrate his absolute superiority.

One condition is necessary to ensure a meaningful and overwhelming victory for Yahweh: Pharaoh must either publically and unconditionally recognize Yahweh's sovereignty or he must resist to the bitter end. There cannot be any compromise. If Pharaoh accepts to let the people go under some pretext of magnanimity, the reader will be left with the impression that Yahweh needs the permission of Pharaoh to lead his people out of Egypt. Such a scenario, far from demonstrating the sovereignty of Yahweh, would on the contrary confirm the supremacy of Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. Of course, in such a case, the narrative would lose its *raison-d'être*... except perhaps for an Egyptian audience!

“I will harden the heart of Pharaoh”: A Little Help for a Dispirited King?

While it may be conceded that the role attributed to Pharaoh is contingent on the primary redactional agenda of a narrative written to highlight the power and the authority of Yahweh, we must nevertheless acknowledge the difficulty inherent to the description of Yahweh's handling of Pharaoh. The passages which announce that Yahweh will “harden” (Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 14:4,17) and that

he has “hardened” (Ex. 9:12; 10:20,27; 11:10; 14:8) the heart of Pharaoh and/or the Egyptians create the impression that the king of Egypt had no choice but to reject Moses’ request.

First, it is doubtful, as it is often suggested, that the relative balance between the attribution of responsibility to Pharaoh (“Pharaoh hardened his heart”) and these passages where the uncompromising attitude of the king of Egypt is attributed to Yahweh (“Yahweh hardened the heart of Pharaoh”)¹⁶ represents a teaching on the dangers of hardening one’s heart before God.¹⁷ A reexamination of this expression in the light of the observations we have made regarding the rhetorical specificity of chapters 4-14 might shed some new light on the issue.

The verb *hzq* (“to harden”) is generally attested in a military context. As such, it is most often translated by “to grow strong,” “to make strong,” “to give strength,” “to encourage,” “to strengthen,” “to sustain,” “to stand firm,” “to fortify,” “to prevail,” “to hold one’s own against”, etc.¹⁸ This verb does not usually denote some sort of emotional insensitivity which the English expression “to harden” suggests. In fact, with the exception of Joshua 11:20, scholars translate the verb *hzq* by “harden” only when the verb is used in connection with Pharaoh.

There are no compelling reasons here to translate *hzq* by the verb “to harden.” Since the usage of this verb in the Exodus narrative is unambiguously set in the context of a military conflict, it is preferable to retain its usual meaning, i.e., “to make strong,” “to strengthen,” “to fortify,” or “to resist.” If this translation is correct, it would imply that the author does not wish to communicate that Pharaoh “hardened” his heart after each of the first five plagues, but that he remained firm in the face of Yahweh’s threats and actions. Pharaoh takes courage! He remains strong in the face of this formidable enemy.

It is important to note that the narrator attributes the responsibility of “hardening” Pharaoh’s

heart to Yahweh only after the sixth plague (Ex. 9:12). If we translate *hzq* by “to make strong” or “to strengthen,” in continuity with our suggestion in regards to Pharaoh’s attitude in the first part of the narrative, then we can postulate that if Yahweh strengthens Pharaoh, it is to enable him to remain firm.

One can only presume that after the six disastrous manifestations of Yahweh’s power, Pharaoh would have been disheartened to the point of being tempted, if not compelled, to give in to Moses’ demands. Such a course of action would be unacceptable. A hesitating and wavering Pharaoh cannot be tolerated at this stage. To concede victory to Moses, is, for Pharaoh, to lose face before his subjects and to admit the impotence of the Egyptian gods. Moreover, from a narrative standpoint, it is imperative that Pharaoh be fiercely opposed to the liberation of the Hebrews, so that Yahweh may have the opportunity to demonstrate the full extent of his power. Following the terrible consequences of the first six plagues, the “poor” Pharaoh needs help... and it is Yahweh who gives him the courage to continue to resist.

The narrator does not evoke the “hardening” of Pharaoh to suggest that the Egyptian king is the victim of some divine determinism. Yahweh’s intervention is portrayed in this manner to maintain the integrity of the characterization of the Pharaoh’s character, i.e., the adversary who opposes God’s project to the end.

PHARAOH: FREE AGENT!

Up to this point, I have suggested that the Exodus narrative is not primarily written to offer a complex psychological profile of Pharaoh, but to demonstrate the power and the sovereignty of Yahweh. Having stated this, there are nevertheless a number of elements in this narrative which can

contribute to the question of freewill and divine determinism as it pertains to the figure of Pharaoh.

Yahweh's Command

It is important to distinguish between the first confrontation between Moses and Pharaoh (Ex. 5:1-5) from the series of encounters found in 7:8-12:50. The objective of Moses's first encounter with Pharaoh is to demand that the Israelites be allowed to leave Egypt. Moses' tone is categorical. The narrator presents Yahweh, not as some lower divinity begging a favor from the Egyptian king, but as sovereign Lord of both the Hebrew people and the Egyptian nation (Ex. 5:1).¹⁹

The verb "let ...go" is in the *piel* imperative. Moses does not request Pharaoh's permission; he demands that the Egyptian king let the people go. This imperative reveals the issue which is really at stake here, i.e., the identity of the true Sovereign. The use of the imperative suggests that Pharaoh has the choice to obey or to disobey. But Pharaoh chooses to disregard Yahweh's command. This categorical "no", which is consistent with the freely-adopted policies of oppression that are already in place, evoke Pharaoh's autonomy.²⁰

The Curse Motif

In the course of the confrontations attested in 7:8-12:50, Moses announces a series of judgments which will strike the Egyptian kingdom. These declarations of disaster represent actually a series of imprecatory warnings which follow Pharaoh's refusal to obey Yahweh's command.

In the course of the second meeting between Moses and Pharaoh (Ex. 7:8-13), no request is explicitly stated. What we have here is a test of strength between the two characters. For Pharaoh, this encounter is a preliminary warning which goes unheeded: "Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened,

and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said” (Ex. 7:13).²¹

In 7:14-25, Pharaoh now faces a second warning which will usher the first of the ten plagues. This time, the command to let the people go is clearly stated (v. 16). Pharaoh refuses and the water is changed into “blood”. The magicians can somehow reduplicate this sign, but they are unable to reverse the curse. There is every indication that Pharaoh could have recognized the true significance of this event and confess the superiority of Yahweh, but such is not the case. The text states that “Pharaoh turned and went into his house, and he did not take even this to heart” (v. 23).

The imprecatory nature of the warnings becomes particularly clear in the context of the third confrontation (Ex. 8:1-8:15). Each plague episode reflects the basic elements of the curse motif: the injunction,²² the violation, and finally the implementation of the curse.

In the Old Testament, the function of the curse motif is very stable. In this respect, it is similar to its usage in Ancient Near East literature.²³ There is nothing arbitrary about this form. Precise parameters control the use of the curse formula. The prohibitions and the threats are always clearly and explicitly defined. It is assumed that the recipient has the ability to obey or disobey the injunction. In this respect, the use of the curse formula in the Exodus narrative is an important clue as the nature of Pharaoh’s ability to act freely in regards to God.

CONCLUSION

Is Pharaoh a mere puppet in the hands of a manipulative deity or is he the master of his own fate?

I have argued throughout this article that this is not a completely fair question. The figure of Pharaoh is presented in the context of a narrative whose primary purpose is not to propose a

reflection on human freewill but to demonstrate the power and sovereignty of Yahweh. In the logic of the narrative, Pharaoh is a secondary character. Using the categories of narrative criticism, Pharaoh is described as a “flat” character whose role is to serve the narrator’s agenda. Pharaoh is introduced in the story as the villain, the adversary, the enemy of God and his people.

Does this characterization of the Egyptian king as God’s opponent necessarily preclude the reader from coming to any conclusion regarding Pharaoh’s freedom of choice? I do not think so. This study has highlighted a number of elements which suggest that Pharaoh is portrayed, not as the powerless victim of the divine will, but as the architect of his own destiny.

If Pharaoh is the enemy of God and his people, it is not as a result of some devious divine plot, as though Yahweh himself would have coerced Pharaoh into persecuting the Hebrew people. The negotiations between Pharaoh and Moses take place in the context of a declaration of war by the Egyptians towards the Israelites. Yahweh, as the protector of the Hebrew people, responds to an act of aggression.

The statements to the effect that Yahweh will “harden” or that he has “hardened” the heart of Pharaoh do not reflect some kind of emotional “hardening”. First, it is important to note that in Hebrew the “heart” is not the seat of the emotions, but the center of rational thought (Pr. 19:8; 1 Kings 5:9; Job 8:10; Hos. 4:11; etc.).²⁴ Second, when the text declares that Pharaoh “hardened” his heart, it refers to the fact that Pharaoh remains firm before Yahweh. He holds his own in the face of his enemy! Similarly, Yahweh “hardens” the heart of Pharaoh in order to enable the king to remain firm in the face of increasing pressure. This intervention is necessary to spare Pharaoh the humiliation of defeat and to demonstrate fully the power of Yahweh.

Finally, the judgments pronounced against Pharaoh and the Egyptian people represent

examples of the curse motif. The presence of this literary device strongly suggests that Pharaoh had the ability to respond freely to God.

On closer examination, it does not appear that the narrator presents Pharaoh as the helpless victim of an overpowering deity; the Egyptian king is portrayed rather as the one who, freely, opposed God and his project. Pharaoh was free to choose God and to live, but he chose to reject Yahweh; a decision which in time led to his death and the destruction of his kingdom.

From a theological and pastoral perspective, the story of the encounter between Pharaoh and Yahweh symbolizes the choices which are constantly before every human being. The theme of the choice is also extensively attested in the Wisdom tradition. The Wisdom books consistently remind the reader that life is not neutral; human beings must face a multitude of decisions which will determine their ultimate destiny. According to the Wise, there are only two types of choices: those which lead to life and those that lead to death. In this respect, the story of Pharaoh's misadventures intersects with the Wisdom discourse. To choose God then is to choose life and the promise to experience prosperity, peace, and justice. To reject God, in contrast, is to choose death and the inexorable slide towards chaos, exploitation, and, ultimately, destruction.

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1. This article is an abbreviated version of a conference originally presented during the annual convention of the Association des études bibliques au Canada (ACEBAC) held on May 28 to 31, 2000 in Richelieu, Québec.
 2. The possibility of a theology of the Old Testament is not unanimously accepted by

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- biblical scholars. For a survey of the issues, see, amongst others, W. Lemke, "Theology: Old Testament," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 448-473; Ben C. Ollenburger, Elmer A. Martens and Gerhard Hasel, *The Flowering of Old Testament Theology. A Reader in Twentieth-Century Old Testament Theology, 1930-1990* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992); H. G. Reventlow, *Problems of Old Testament Theology in the 20th Century* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); H. H. Scobie, "The challenge of Biblical Theology," *TynBul* 42 (1991):163-193.
3. See W. Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press), 11-54; B. W. Anderson, "Biblical Perspectives on the Doctrine of Creation," in *From Creation to New Creation, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 19-41.
 4. See particularly W. Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust. The Neglected Side of Biblical Faith* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972).
 5. See P. Gilbert, "L'appel à la conversion chez les prophètes de l'Ancien Testament. Une lecture actualisante du motif imprécatoire dans la littérature prophétique du VIII^e siècle A.C.," *Science et Esprit* 51 (1999):81-94.
 6. See Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8,17.
 7. See Ex. 10:1.
 8. On the importance of the *question* in the hermeneutical process, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York : Seabury Press, 1975), 325-341.
 9. See P. Gilbert, "L'appel à la conversion..."
 10. See, for example, Deut. 30:15-20.
 11. See, for example, Prov. 2:1-9 and W. Brueggemann, *In Man We Trust*, 48-63.
 12. It should be noted, however, that there is the beginning of a theoretical discussion on human freedom in the deuterocanonical books (see, for example, Sir. 15:11-20).
 13. For more details on narrative criticism, see R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981); A. Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield, 1983); M. Dumais, "La critique narrative," in *Entendre la voix du Dieu vivant* (Montréal: Mediaspaul, 1994), 189-197; M. A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis, 1990); M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington, 1985).
 14. See C. von Clausewitz, *On War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968), 101.
 15. A reference to the gods of Egypt may seem somewhat out of place, since the text makes no mention of them. In spite of this apparent omission, it is nevertheless likely that the

narrative does refer to them, even if only implicitly. During the New Kingdom period (1552-1060 B.C.E.), there is a close link between the pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. Although the evolutive character of the relationship between the pharaoh and the gods of Egypt is generally held (see K. Kitchen, "Pharaoh," in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 4 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975-1976], 742), the fact remains that the pharaoh is considered to be a god. "He was their representative on earth, and among the Egyptians a man who moved in the world of the gods," (K. Kitchen, "Egypt, Land of," in *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 2 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975-1976], 254). It is also important to note that the religion of Egypt, like all the religions of the Ancient Near East, is a nature religion. The judgments inflicted on the Egyptians extend beyond the frontiers of their physical environment; these judgments represent a challenge thrown to the face of the divinities who supposedly control all aspects of the Egyptian cosmos (see, for example, W. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, The Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 1998], 339-340). This surprising absence of any overt allusion to the gods may be due also to rhetorical considerations. It is possible that the narrator omits any direct reference to these gods to underline their utter powerlessness.

16. Pharaoh is presented as the subject of the action on three occasions (Ex. 8:15 [Heb. 11], 32 [Heb. 28]; and 9:34. In no less than six instances, the subject is not explicit, but the context suggests that this condition is the result of the action of Pharaoh himself (Ex. 7:13,14,22; 8:19 [Heb. 15]; 9:7,35). The narrator names Yahweh as the agent on ten occasions (Ex. 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1,20,27; 11:10; 14:4,8,17).
17. For a survey of interpretations in regards to the issue of the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart, see R. B. Chisholm Jr., "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996):410-434.
18. See L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1958), 286-288. The narrator uses this verb on nine occasions to state that Yahweh hardens the heart of Pharaoh. The verb *kbd* ("to make heavy") is only used once (Ex. 10:1). In this context, it is as a synonym of *hzq* (1 Sam. 6:6; Is. 6:10; Zach. 7:11).
19. See W. Brueggemann, "Pharaoh as Vassal," *CBQ* 57 (1995):27-51.
20. It can be objected that Yahweh had predicted that Pharaoh would resist the injunction to free the Hebrew people (see Ex. 3:19-20; 4:21-33). There is nothing in this prediction, however, which suggests that Pharaoh's freedom of choice was neutralized. We should not be surprised by the observation that Pharaoh would not defer to Moses. First, from a political perspective, it was *a priori* impossible for Pharaoh to accept Moses' demands. Such a course of action would have confirmed the undeniable superiority of the Hebrew God. Second, it is important to note the rhetorical nature of Yahweh's predictions. These affirmations are important promises of victory to a doubtful leader and his people. In this text, the narrator provides the reader with a telescopic perspective: he reveals, without providing the tactical details, the ultimate outcome of this military conflict.

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21. All Bible citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.
 22. The injunction is normally comprised of two parts: a protasis introduced by the conjunction “if” (the prohibition), and the apodosis which spells out the threat.
 23. For a more detailed discussion of the structure and the usage of the imprecatory motif, see P. Gilbert, *Le motif imprécatoire chez les prophètes bibliques du 8^e siècle A.C. à la lumière du Proche-Orient ancien*, doctoral thesis (Université de Montréal, 1993), 400-438.
 24. For more details, see F. Baumgärtel, “*lb, lbb* in the OT,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 606-607.