

Parashah Forty-Eight

Exodus 4:14–6:1; Isaiah 55:12-56:7; Acts 7:35-37

notes by Tim Hegg

Preparing Moses

Our *parashah* continues from the dialog between Moses and Adonai with which the previous *parashah* ended. Though God had chosen Moses to be His spokesman, Moses had complained that he was “slow of speech and slow of tongue” (4:12). Even after God had assured Moses “I will be with your mouth,” Moses replies, “send the message by whomever You will.” This was a polite way of saying “no” to God, but actually, there’s no polite way to rebuff the Almighty! Such *chutzpah* aroused the anger of the Almighty, as the opening verse of our *parashah* states: “Then the anger of Adonai burned against Moses...” Moses’ refusal to believe that God could overcome whatever language deficiencies he had resulted in the loss of privilege. If Moses were unwilling, God would find someone else to speak for Him. That someone else was Moses’ brother, Aaron. The Sages suggest that had Moses willingly complied with Adonai’s request, he, rather than Aaron, would have occupied the privileged position as High Priest (כֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל, *cohen hagadol*).

The fact that Aaron is called “the Levite” (4:14) is curious because it seems superfluous. Surely Moses knew that he and his older brother were from the tribe of Levi! Perhaps the designation is added in order to emphasize the future office of the High Priest which would be from Aaron’s line, or the priesthood in general which would be from the tribe of Levi. It is possible to translate the Hebrew אֶהְרֹן אֶחָיִךְ הַלֵּוִי as “Aaron your Levite brother,” which would emphasize that Aaron, like Moses, qualified for the task of addressing Pharaoh in some specific way (though what these specific qualifications might have been is not mentioned).

God then outlines how Aaron will function as the mouthpiece of Moses (4:15–16): God will communicate to Moses, Moses to Aaron, and Aaron to Pharaoh. Moreover, though Aaron would receive the messages from Moses, he was to accept them as though they were directly from God. He could thus address Pharaoh by saying “Thus says Adonai” (cf. 5:1; 7:17, etc). The fact that in the subsequent narrative both Moses and Aaron address Pharaoh (e.g., 5:1, “And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said (plural) to Pharaoh...”) could just as well be understood as Aaron speaking for the both of them. This arrangement, of Moses being “as God” to Aaron, giving Aaron the words and having him address Pharaoh, was understood by the Sages as the paradigm for the office of prophet. Indeed, this is explicitly stated in 7:1, “Then Adonai said to Moses, ‘See, I make you as God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.’” The basic duty of the prophet, then, was to take the words of God, given directly to him, and faithfully proclaim them to the people.

Besides having the assurance that Aaron would be his spokesman to Pharaoh, Moses was also instructed to take the staff by which God had promised to perform confirming miracles in the sight of the Egyptians. The fact that the text repeats the notice that Moses took the staff (4:17, 20) is a portend of the fact that Pharaoh would rebuff Moses and Aaron, and thus two witnesses (Aaron’s words and the miracles performed via the staff of Moses) would confirm the reality of the message.

Moses thus makes plans to return to Egypt. He receives confirmation from Yitro, his father-in-law, as well as divine revelation that those who were seeking his life in Egypt had died. So, together with his wife and sons, he begins the journey back to the land of Egypt where his people are enslaved.

But God not only assures Moses that it is safe for him to return but He also informs him in advance that Pharaoh will not listen to his request to let the people go. The reason for Pharaoh’s recalcitrance, however, is at first confusing—Pharaoh will reject Moses’ request because God Himself will harden his heart (4:21): “... but I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go.” Here we come face to face with the age old question of God’s sovereignty and man’s will. If God hardened Pharaoh’s heart even before Moses ever approached him, how could Pharaoh be held responsible for his actions? This is the very question asked by the Apostle Paul (Rom 9:19): “You will say to me then, ‘Why does He still find fault? For who

resists His will?” In other words, if God controls the heart, then is the individual responsible for his or her responses? Paul’s answer is clear (9:20): “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?” In other words, the sovereignty of God is beyond our ability to understand and give full explanation. Even as a pot has no ability to question the will of the potter, so mankind lacks the ability to understand the mystery and greatness of God. In the end, we must affirm both sides of the equation: God is the One Who controls all things, and each individual person is held responsible for his or her choices. The fact that we cannot reconcile these two realities in no way diminishes either of them. All who are truly redeemed by God’s grace, however, have no difficulty confessing that their salvation is in every way the result of God’s grace, not something they deserved or earned.

In general, the debates that have ensued over the issue of God’s hardening Pharaoh’s heart have taken two different perspectives. On the one hand, some have found the whole idea that God would harden a person’s heart against Himself so repugnant that they cannot accept this as true. As such, they either reject the Bible’s revelation of God (“I can’t accept a God Who would diminish a person’s free will”), or they seek to find ways to reinterpret those passages that affirm God’s sovereign control in the affairs of men. One such approach for our specific text is to say that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, and those verses that say God hardened it should be understood to mean not that God was *active* in hardening Pharaoh’s heart, but that He simply *allowed* Pharaoh to harden his own heart.

Both of these perspectives, however, begin with a view of God that is clearly unbiblical. The Bible does not present God as someone who must answer to anyone other than Himself. God is not required to submit Himself to any law or standard which resides above Him. He is, by nature, fully consistent with His own character, but does not “play second fiddle” to any other sovereign or law. As such, all that is righteous is determined by God Himself. It is therefore both unbiblical and illogical to subject God and His actions to the scrutiny of some supposed standard of “fairness.” God, and all He does, is the standard of righteousness and fairness.

The idea that God only confirmed what Pharaoh had already decided is not satisfying either, for the simple reason that salvation is only possible where God breaks in and overrides man’s decisions. That is to say, for God to allow man to go his own way is in every case to condemn that person to damnation, for only when God breaks into one’s life and over-powers the will does that person turn from wickedness to serve God with a pure heart. But even from the perspective of a humanist, a God who has the power to save from damnation but does not, is as guilty as if He had condemned the person outright.

The Exodus texts make the following amply clear:

1. God hardened Pharaoh’s heart so that he would reject the pleas of Moses and Aaron, so that God’s power in bringing Israel out of Egypt would be manifested (7:3-5, cf. Rom 9:17–18).
2. God promised Moses that He would harden Pharaoh’s heart before Moses ever stood before Pharaoh (4:21).
3. Pharaoh participated in the hardening of his own heart (8:15, 32; 9:34)
4. The story makes it clear that a “hardened heart” manifests itself in rejecting God’s commands.

There are three different words used in the texts relating to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart: חזק (*chazaq*), קשה (*qashah*) and כבד (*kabad*). The three words have various shades of meaning. חזק (*chazaq*), the most often used word, simply means “to be or make strong.” It can be in a good or evil sense; in this case Pharaoh’s heart was strengthened against God. קשה (*qashah*) means “to be difficult or heavy” and is used of “oppression, hard labor” and even of “labor in birth.” This term might be best used to describe Pharaoh’s heart as “obstinate.” כבד (*kabad*) generally means “to encourage or honor” or “to be heavy.” From a Hebrew perspective, to make someone or something “heavy” is to laden that thing or person with praise.

It should be noted that the only word used in connection with Pharaoh “hardening” his own heart is

כבד (*kabad*), “to honor or encourage.” Pharaoh’s actions precede from his pride and desire to establish his own greatness. The word most often used of HaShem’s part is חזק (*chazaq*), “to strengthen or make strong.” In other words, God strengthened Pharaoh’s heart to remain rebellious against His command. The one time HaShem “encourages” Pharaoh in his pride (10:1) makes it clear that God acts sovereignly to accomplish His purposes and plans. While it may seem that God “dirty” His hands by encouraging Pharaoh’s pride, the reality is simply that God encourages Pharaoh to be what he in fact is: selfish and prideful. In this regard we may have an illustration of what the Apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 1:28, “And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind . . .” In other words, apart from God’s gracious intervention in the life of an individual, drawing that person to Himself, no one would ever come to Him (cf. Jn 6:44; Rom 3:9–18).

The following chart lists each occurrence in Exodus of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Where the subject of the verb is clearly known, it is indicated. Blanks indicate the subject of the verb is ambiguous.

חזק (<i>chazaq</i>)	קשה (<i>qashah</i>)	כבד (<i>kabad</i>)
4:21 HaShem	7:3 HaShem	8:15 Pharaoh
7:13	13:15	8:32 Pharaoh
7:14		9:7
7:22		9:34
8:19		10:1 HaShem
9:12 HaShem		
9:35		
10:20 HaShem		
10:27 HaShem		
11:10 HaShem		
14:4 HaShem		
14:8 HaShem		
14:17 HaShem		

In 4:22 we find the first clear use of the name “Israel” to designate the nation formed from the sons of Jacob. Moreover, Israel is designated as the firstborn son of Adonai: “Israel is My son, My firstborn.” This statement is foundational for the subsequent exodus story, for Adonai saves His “firstborn” but takes the life of each firstborn of the Egyptians. This important use of “firstborn” may also help us understand another difficult passage in our *parashah*, namely, the encounter between God and Moses as they lodged on their way to Egypt.

As Moses and his family stopped for the night, the text states that “Adonai met him and sought to put him to death.” The pronouns are ambiguous. Was God angry with Moses or with his son? Whom was He about to put to death? It would seem that the divine anger was directed toward Moses, not his son, but was HaShem about to take the life of the son because of Moses? But why would God be angry with Moses when He had clearly sent him to Egypt and Moses had complied with Adonai’s directions? This reminds us of the Balaam Oracles where Balaam is instructed by God to travel with the men who are about to arrive, and then the text says that God was angry with Balaam because he was going and the Angel of Adonai stood in his way to stop him (Num 22:20–22).

Even more puzzling is the manner in which the anger of God against Moses is assuaged. The issue revolves around the fact that one of the sons of Moses was not yet circumcised. The Sages are divided as to which son this was. Some (cf. b.*Ned* 32a; Mid. Rab. *Exodus* 5.8) taught that Eliezar, the second-born, was born on the way to Egypt, and since (like the Israelites who did not perform circumcision in the wilderness) circumcising an infant while traveling presented possible life-threatening dangers, Moses had put off the circumcision until later. But this would not explain God’s wrath over the whole matter. Others of the Sages

(Saadia, Ramban) believe it was Gershom, the firstborn, who remained uncircumcised, and a number of factors could have contributed to this neglect on Moses' part. In some of the Ancient Near Eastern cultures, circumcision was ridiculed, and this may have contributed to Moses' hesitation to circumcise Gershom on the eighth day as God had commanded. Or it is possible that Gershom was very weak as a newborn, and the circumcision was put off for health reasons but then neglected. Whatever the case, it may be the bold statement regarding Israel as God's firstborn son (v. 22) that informs this perplexing story. Here is Moses, on his way to lead God's firstborn son out of Egypt, His covenant people who would soon stand at Sinai and receive the Torah, and Moses himself had neglected to circumcise his own firstborn son—had, in this sense, diminished the importance of the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the very covenant that would form the basis for God's decisive action on behalf of Israel. If Moses were to lead the people in strength, then he would have to show himself to be faithful to God's commandments. Neglecting to circumcise his own firstborn son would severely draw into question his own allegiance to the God he confessed to serve. Indeed, the exodus itself is centered in the covenant faithfulness of God toward His people, and thus it was incumbent upon His chosen leader, Moses, that the covenant also be held in highest regard.

Zipporah apparently understood this. Taking a flint knife, she circumcises her son. It should not go unnoticed that the normal word for "circumcising" (מול) is not used here but rather the common word "to cut" (כרת). Perhaps this is to parallel the common Hebrew expression for making a covenant, i.e., כרת ברית, *karat b'rit*, "to cut a covenant." Then, in some kind of ceremonial act, Zipporah touches the severed foreskin of her son to "his feet (or legs)" (4:25), but once again we are not sure to whom the pronoun refers. The NASB inserts "feet of Moses" and the NIV puts "Moses" in brackets, while the ESV includes "Moses" but adds a marginal note. But the Hebrew has only "his feet," and it may well be that this refers to the feet of the son, not of Moses. If so, this may have been done in order to show that the circumcision had been completed. Does this putting of the blood upon the feet parallel the putting of the blood upon the doorposts in the exodus from Egypt? In both cases, the blood acts as a sign which preserves life.

Then Zipporah proclaims (apparently to Moses): "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood for me" (כִּי לִי הַחַתָּן־דָּמִים אַתָּה לִי). All of this seems very strange, and no clear explanation can be given for the meaning of Zipporah's words. It may be that by "bridegroom of blood" she implies that Moses' life was spared through her having accomplished the circumcision of her son. Though some commentators have tried to link this with the custom in other semitic peoples who circumcised a male just prior to his marriage, there is nothing in the context to warrant such a connection. Though perplexing, this story most likely is included here to emphasize the fact that obedience to maintain the covenant was all-important as the exodus event drew near, and particularly important for Moses who would be acting as God's direct agent in leading the exodus of Israel from Egypt. He could not rightly be God's covenant agent to His firstborn if he had neglected to administer the sign of the covenant to his own firstborn son.

The story continues by alerting us to the fact that God also instructed Aaron to go to the desert to meet Moses. Their meeting takes place at "the mountain of God" which is Sinai, the very region where Moses encountered the burning bush and received his instructions to return to Egypt. After meeting Aaron, they inform the "elders" as well as the people about God's plan. Performing the miracles in their sight confirmed that God was active on their behalf, and thus "the people believed" and bowed and worshipped God Who had shown His faithfulness to help them in accordance with the promises He had made (4:31).

Chapter 5 gives us the account of Moses and Aaron's first approach to Pharaoh. We already know that he will refuse their request to send the people forth to worship Adonai. Pharaoh makes it clear that he has no allegiance to Adonai ("I do not know Adonai," 5:2) and thus is not required to obey His commands. Instead, he accuses Moses and Aaron of subversion and makes the servitude of the people more harsh. Instead of supplying them with the necessary materials for making sun-hardened brick, he requires them to gather their own materials, but keeps the daily quota the same. The people were therefore required to do far more work than before. Moreover, those foremen who had been appointed to oversee the work were beaten when the quota was not met. Clearly, rather than bringing hope to the people, the meeting which Moses and Aaron had with Pharaoh had resulted in a much, much worse situation.

From the posture of worship, the people turned upon Moses and Aaron: “They said to them, “May Adonai look upon you and judge you, for you have made us odious in Pharaoh’s sight and in the sight of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to kill us” (5:21). Such dire straits brought Moses to address the Almighty: “Why have You brought harm to this people? Why did you ever send me? ... You have not delivered Your people at all!” (5:23). It is easy for us to shake our heads at the apparent unbelief, both of the people as well as of Moses. Had not God promised to deliver them? Had not God promised to be with Moses and Aaron and to make their mission successful? Yet if we can, for a moment, put ourselves in their situation, we might wonder how we would have fared in our own belief and the stamina of our faith. How often do we, in far less difficult situations, fail to exercise a persevering faith in God and succumb rather to complaint and discouragement?

But note well God’s response to Moses. He does not rebuke Moses, nor chastise him for his apparent lack of understanding and faith. Rather, He reaffirms His own plan to deal sovereignly with Pharaoh and with Egypt as a whole. “Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh...” (5:23). Often God must bring us to the end of ourselves before we will acknowledge and trust His greatness. The exodus would not be effected by Moses or Aaron, even if they were valiant leaders. The redemption from Egypt would be by the sovereign, omnipotent hand of God Himself. And this could have only been the case, for the exodus was forever to stand as an historical drama revealing God’s way of redemption. God, and God alone, is the One Who saves, and the exodus, in every detail, will emphasize this over and over again.