

An Inquiry into the Hardness, and Hardening, of Pharaoh's Heart

by Layton Talbert¹

This article does not pretend to present a comprehensive examination of all the data pertaining to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The goal of this essay is much more modest: to evaluate and interact with one recent presentation of that topic, and to explore a biblically grounded model for understanding the divine method of providentially shaping and restraining the inclinations and choices of sinful people. Like everyone else who wades into these contested waters, I bring with me certain biblical parameters that form the theological scaffolding within which I propose to interpret the phenomenon on which this essay focuses.² (1) *Divine Sovereignty*—God is absolutely sovereign over all individual humans, collective nations, and creation itself (Deut 32:39; Pss 33:10–11; 103:19; Dan 4:35). (2) *Divine Integrity*—God is entirely holy and incapable of either tempting or compelling humans to sin (Job 34:12; Hab 1:13; Jas 1:13–16); indeed, he does not need to because of the next point. (3) *Human Depravity*—Humans are innately fallen and twisted away from God in all their natural inclinations; depravity renders us nascently and instinctively antipathetic toward God apart from his gracious intervention (Gen 6:5; Rom 1:18–32; Eph 2:1–9).

If we ask, “Who hardened Pharaoh's heart, God or Pharaoh?” the textually indisputable answer is, “Yes.” God hardened Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh hardened his heart. If we ask, “Who *first* hardened Pharaoh's heart, God or Pharaoh?,” one would think the answer should be just as textually indisputable. And yet dispute continues to smolder.

Some scholars insist that God's role here is responsive, confirming Pharaoh's decision to harden his own heart; others insist that God's role is creative, causing Pharaoh to harden his heart. The debate is heated because these passages in Exodus form the backdrop for the most famous hardening text, Romans 9:18.³

This debate was recently revisited publicly in John Piper's monumental work, *Providence*. This article will use Piper's treatment of the issue as its primary point of reference and engagement, though it will also interact with other significant treatments along the way. Because there is so much that I love and appreciate about this book (see my review in this issue of *JBTW*), this article should be

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² I am inclined to call these “presuppositions,” but not in the sense that they precede or originate outside of Scripture; they are *biblical* presuppositions grounded in the broader revelation of Scripture and brought to bear on a passage that may not necessarily mention them explicitly. In that sense, John Piper would call them not presuppositions but *biblical conclusions*. *Providence* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 411–12.

³ D. J. Moo, “Hardening,” *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Brian S. Rosner, D. A. Carson, Graeme Goldsworthy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 533.

construed not as an inimical polemic but as a friendly critique.⁴ First, however, it will be helpful to identify the major views on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (two of which are identified in Moo's statement above).

Three Views on Pharaonic Hardening

No one who takes seriously the authority of the biblical account of Exodus can deny that, as far as the text is concerned, both God and Pharaoh had a hand in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Raising the issue of *precedence* or *cause*, however, immediately raises theological hackles. Who hardened Pharaoh's heart first, God or Pharaoh himself? Why did God harden Pharaoh's heart? Was it because Pharaoh first hardened his own heart? If not, how can that be fair, or how can Pharaoh be held accountable for his refusal to release God's people from bondage?

Three basic approaches may be differentiated here with minimal elaboration. (1) *Responsive/Retributive View*.⁵ This view explains God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as God's *judicial response* to Pharaoh's prior hardening of his own heart. By virtue of his own prior self-hardening, Pharaoh was entirely culpable and therefore God is entirely just. The weakness of this explanation is that it is too narrow and does not take enough into account.⁶ (2) *Creative/Causative/Determinative View*. This view explains God's hardening of Pharaoh as exclusively God's sovereign decision and action, entirely irrespective of anything that Pharaoh did or was. By virtue of his own unconditional and sovereign determination to harden Pharaoh, God is entirely just and Pharaoh is accountable, though "how God freely hardens and yet preserves human accountability, we are not told."⁷ The weakness of this explanation, likewise, is its explanatory narrowness and its failure to adequately factor in other important doctrines. (3) *Conjunctive/Concurrent View*. This view sees God's hardening not as divine retribution *because* of Pharaoh's prior self-hardening (View 1) but nevertheless entirely *in keeping with* Pharaoh's own innate depravity and native hardness. Because he, like all of us, was born in sinful rebellion against God (Rom 1, 3), he did not need to "harden himself" or do anything to warrant

⁴ It is appropriate that I preface this article with a warm acknowledgement of my appreciation for John Piper's writings. Decades ago, reading his book *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (New York: Multnomah, 1986, 1996, 2003, 2011) was a life-changing experience for my view of and relationship to God. His book *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1998), introducing, featuring, and interacting with one of Edwards's most paradigm-shifting sermons ("The End for Which God Created the World"), is a treasure. I have the greatest respect for him as a theologian and an older brother in Christ.

⁵ I am not aware that these views have been labeled the way I am labeling them; some of these terms I have drawn from words sometimes used to describe these varying views, while others are my attempt to summarize them succinctly.

⁶ My explanation in *Not by Chance* needs some clarification: "God did, in time, add his judicial hardening to the process. But in doing so he was not forcing Pharaoh to choose contrary to his own desire or inclination. He was merely confirming Pharaoh in his hardness, in keeping with the choices and inclinations Pharaoh had himself already expressed—the 'free acts' he himself initiated" (90). The functional word (in my intention) was "confirming," suggesting View 3; however, the word "merely" seems to imply that God's hardening was *exclusively* responsive and secondary. While I believe the textual data in Exodus (see this article's Appendix), along with the additional theological argumentation developed in this article, still support the rest of the statement, I think the fuller scriptural depiction of this phenomenon goes beyond the "mere" responsive/retributive view.

⁷ Piper, *Providence*, 444.

God's hardening. If God responded this way to everyone whose heart was, from birth, already hard against him and his will, there would be no hope for any of us and no one would be saved (so thank God for Rom 9:15). All of us are altogether conceived with a predisposition contrary to God (Ps 51:5; Rom 3:10ff.). The same was true of Pharaoh.

View 3 is the position from which I will be operating in this article, and it is important to distinguish it from the other views. View 3 does not negate the emphasis of View 1 on God's justice; but a strict causal explanation (View 1) can be as misleading as a strict sovereignty explanation (View 2). God does not harden *because* we are depraved, nor does he harden only when and because we act on our depraved inclinations; if that were the case, he would harden everyone. God is, however, entirely just in hardening the depraved because whenever he chooses to do that, his hardening is always concurrent with the inclinations of their own depravity. Nor does View 3 exclude or minimize divine sovereignty.⁸ God may be said to be the ultimate cause for Pharaoh's hardening since he is (by virtue of his omniscience, omnipotence, and creation) the ultimate cause for everything.⁹ My objection to View 2 (like View 1) is its exclusivity and consequent minimizing of the relevance of depravity to the issue. At least part of the Scripture's presentation and explanation of the mystery of divine sovereignty vis-à-vis human responsibility includes the doctrine of human depravity. As pedestrian as that observation may seem, it is surprising how frequently it is left unmentioned.

To be clear, then, *I am not arguing* that God hardened Pharaoh's heart only because and/or in response to Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart. In fact, *I am not even arguing* that God necessarily hardened Pharaoh's heart only after Pharaoh actively hardened his own heart (though, in my opinion, that seems to be the natural implication of the grammatical progression of the text). Rather, on the basis particularly of the biblical doctrines I enumerated in the introduction, *I am arguing* that in hardening Pharaoh's heart, God was hardening a heart that was, from birth and by native disposition, depraved and aligned against God, and that this is part of the Bible's explanation of the hardness, and hardening, of Pharaoh's heart.¹⁰ Finally, I will also propose a biblical illustration that I believe sheds

⁸ Even the earliest reference to the entire God-Pharaoh encounter—which is not Exodus 4:21 but Exodus 3:19–20—may convey the sovereignty of God's determination: “But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go.” The Hebrew verb *know* [*yada*] may convey not merely divine prescience but also divine determination. As the encounter progresses through Exodus, God even sees to it that Pharaoh is not permitted to weasel out of the consequences of his refusal until God is done displaying to Egypt and the nations his glory over Egypt and Pharaoh (Exod 9:16; Rom 9:17). Exodus 3:19—which is surprisingly missing from Piper's treatments of this subject—is one reason I acknowledge the ultimacy of God's sovereignty, just not its exclusivity, as an explanation.

⁹ Such a statement (to borrow from Tolkien) “stands upon the edge of a knife.” In describing God as the ultimate cause of all things, I am not saying (1) that God “created evil”—a somewhat nonsensical assertion that betrays a fundamental misconception of what “evil” is, as I have briefly argued in a blogpost titled “The Problem of ‘Evil’: What Is It?”; accessed 12 October 2023, <https://g3min.org/the-problem-of-evil-what-is-it/>. Nor am I saying (2) that God compels people to sin in contradiction to or conflict with their own nature and native disposition. I am saying (a) that had God not “made the world and everything [and everyone] in it” (Acts 17:24) none of what we do or experience would have happened, and (b) “that in choosing whom to treat with hardening and whom to treat with mercy, God is not constrained by anything outside himself” (Piper, 440), but he is certainly constrained by what he is within himself.

¹⁰ It is also important to clarify up front that none of the views described boil down to a simplistic confrontation between Calvinism versus Arminianism, nor do they signify just *how* Calvinistic one is. We are all trying to understand

light on the methodology of God's providence in conjunction with human responsibility, and particularly in relation to divine hardening.

Engaging a Recent Presentation of the Hardness of Pharaoh's Heart

Set within the much larger context of a study of God's providence, John Piper's presentation of the hardening of Pharaoh begins by observing that God intended to harden Pharaoh's heart before Moses ever returned to Egypt. "The earliest statement to this effect is Exodus 4:21," where God expressly foretells his intention to harden Pharaoh's heart. The next reference to "hardness" is 7:3, another expression of God's intention. At least two statements explain why God intended to do this: to display and multiply his signs in Egypt (Exod 10:1–2; 11:9).¹¹ Piper then underscores the importance of this data:

The point I am making is that God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart was not a mere response to Pharaoh's self-hardening. It was a plan from the beginning. Not only that, but it can be shown that Pharaoh's being hardened, and even his self-hardening, is the effect of God's hardening, not its cause. Many people deny this and point out that the explicit statement that God hardened Pharaoh's heart occurs first in Exodus 9:12, *after* Pharaoh had already twice hardened his own heart (8:15, 32). They infer from this that God's hardening is the effect of Pharaoh's self-hardening.

But there is a serious problem with that inference. We have seen that *before* the encounters with Pharaoh begin, God said to Moses, "I will harden his heart" (4:21). But what we have not yet seen, which is absolutely crucial to see, is that Moses (the author of Exodus) refers back to this promise four times as he describes Pharaoh's hardening. In other words, four times Moses tells us that the hardening is happening "as the Lord had said." And it is all-important to remember what, in fact, the Lord had said when it says, "as the Lord had said." What he said was, "I will harden his heart." He had *not* said, "He will harden his own heart."¹²

A number of interpreters, like Piper, load an enormous amount of freight on the expression "as the Lord had said" (7:13, 22; 8:15, 19), linking it back to God's statement that he would harden Pharaoh's heart (4:21; 7:3).¹³ An exegetical elephant residing in 8:15, however, seems to receive

exactly what the text says and how it says it, and we are all doing so within the larger framework of biblical and theological ideas that we are carrying with us into the text in order to understand and explain what the text itself may not state directly.

¹¹ Piper, *Providence*, 436–37. I have already hinted at the relevance of Exodus 3:19–20 as an even earlier expression of the divine intention (note 8 above); indeed, the divine intention is hinted at, however vaguely, even as early as Genesis 15:13–14.

¹² *Ibid.*, 438 (emphasis original).

¹³ G. K. Beale states that this phrase in 7:13 "is probably the most significant in the plague narrative complex, especially as it pertains to the *cause* of the hardening." See "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4–14 and Romans 9," *TJ* 5NS (1984): 140 (emphasis original). James Hamilton makes a similar argument in *God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 92.

insufficient attention; it is the first explicit reference to Pharaoh's actively hardening his own heart ". . . as the Lord had said." But as Piper notes, God never said that Pharaoh would harden his own heart. How does he interpret this seeming conflict?

What is remarkable is that, in Exodus 8:15, Pharaoh's self-hardening is traced back to God's hardening: "He hardened his heart . . . as the Lord had said." That is, he hardened his heart, as it was said, "[the Lord] will harden his heart." The point is this: whether it says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (8:15) or that his heart "was hardened" (8:19), in each case the hardening is happening "as the Lord had said." And what he had said was, "I will harden Pharaoh's heart." This means that behind the "self-hardening" and behind the "being hardened" were the plan and purpose of God to harden. God's hardening is not described as a response to what Pharaoh does. It's the other way around. What Pharaoh does—his self-hardening—is described as the effect of what God does.¹⁴

The ellipsis in 8:15 above—omitting the phrase "and he would not listen to them"—nullifies Piper's conclusion, in my opinion. Since God never said that Pharaoh would harden his own heart, Piper regards the juxtaposition between God's saying that he would harden Pharaoh's heart (4:21; 7:3) and the statement that Pharaoh hardened his own heart "as the Lord had said" (8:15) as proof that Pharaoh's self-hardening and God's hardening of Pharaoh are one and the same phenomenon.¹⁵ That same anomalous juxtaposition compels others, however, to wonder whether such an interpretation is correctly identifying the connection to what "the Lord had said." Exodus 7:13 and 22, 8:15 and 19 *all* cite one explicit statement that God *did*, in fact, make—not in 4:21 or 7:3, but in 7:4.¹⁶

"But *I will harden Pharaoh's heart*, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, *Pharaoh will not listen to you*. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment." (Exod 7:3–4 ESV)¹⁷

. . . Pharaoh's heart was hard, and he did not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (Exod 7:13 CSB)¹⁸

¹⁴ Piper, *Providence*, 439.

¹⁵ Cf. Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical & Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 165, 168. Hamilton, 149, comes to essentially the same conclusion but without explicitly calling attention to the elephant. Because of the phrase "as the Lord had said," 8:15 "cannot refer to Pharaoh *independently* hardening his heart" even though he is the grammatical subject of the statement.

¹⁶ While Piper actually quotes 7:4 two pages earlier (436), it is otherwise missing from the book's Scripture index and is entirely absent from Piper's explanation of the relevance of the phrase, "as the Lord had said."

¹⁷ The ESV of Exodus 7:3–4 appropriately reflects the grammatical connection between the two verses.

¹⁸ The CSB (correctly, in my opinion) translates the verbs in 7:13, 22, and 8:19 as statives, not passives (see Appendix). The passive rendering "was hardened" is a translational choice that artificially privileges the assumption that those instances imply that Pharaoh's heart "was hardened" by God.

. . . Pharaoh's heart was hard, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (Exod 7:22 CSB)

. . . Pharaoh . . . hardened his heart and would not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (Exod 8:15 CSB)

. . . Pharaoh's heart was hard, and he would not listen to them, as the LORD had said. (Exod 8:19 CSB)

In every case the text directly links “as the Lord had said” not to God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart (8:15 is the exception) but to his predicted refusal to listen to them—something God has actually been saying even *before* 4:21 (see 3:19). Establishing a theological point by creating an ellipsis that omits the one thing God actually did say (“he would not listen to them”) looks too much like the theology is driving the exegesis rather than the exegesis defining and refining the theology.

Now, are God's hardening and Pharaoh's refusal linked? Of course. Could 7:13, 7:22, 8:19, and even 8:15 be understood to imply that Pharaoh's hardness and self-hardening are an evidence or manifestation of God's hardening? Yes. But that conclusion is subject to at least as much critique as the interpretation that 7:13, 22 and 8:15, 19 reflect Pharaoh's refusal to listen to God because of his inborn fallen hardness against God, already demonstrated in 5:2; indeed, his personal culpability is repeatedly underscored throughout the encounter (8:32; 9:17, 34; 10:3; 13:15; cf. 18:11). Piper is correct that God's plan from the beginning was to harden Pharaoh's heart, by virtue of his own independent sovereign determination to magnify himself in the eyes of Pharaoh, the Egyptians, the Israelites, and all the nations (Exod 3:19–20). That does not, however, necessitate the conclusion (scripturally, theologically, or logically) that the sole explanation for every single reference to Pharaoh's hardness was the direct result of nothing but divine activity in the heart of Pharaoh. Nor does it make any attempt to explain what, precisely, was the *nature* of that divine hardening. Pharaoh's depravity (like yours and mine) not only rendered him incapable of mustering in himself any desire or disposition that would please God, but also thoroughly furnished him for every evil work (to turn 2 Tim 3:17 on its head). So why *did* God “harden” him instead of just leaving him alone? We will return to that question later.

Theological Juxtapositions

Within the expansive horizons of his work on God's providence, Piper frequently makes really insightful observations and qualifications about our understanding of the workings of providence. Some of them would, I think, go a long way toward providing a more robust explanation of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, if they were consistently applied to that phenomenon as well. It seems to me that a view of divine sovereignty can become *so* dominating and all-inclusive that it begins marginalizing the relevance and explanatory power of other equally biblical doctrines.

Divine Providence and Divine Integrity

“That which is undefined leads astray.” One of Aristotle’s most frequently cited quotations is as applicable to theology as to any other field. Ambiguous theological writing can be a seedbed of potential error if theologians do not carefully clarify and qualify their terminology. Accordingly, Piper fences his language regarding God’s providence in order to defend God’s moral integrity amid the murky waters where the current of God’s purposeful sovereignty over human actions meets and mixes with the current of human responsibility for those actions.

Whatever verb I use to describe God’s relation to human choices, I always mean a kind of ‘seeing to it’ (providence) that never means God sins, or that man is not accountable for his choices. To be specific, God can see to it that sin happens without himself sinning or taking away the responsibility of the sinner. This is not a presupposition. It is a conclusion from biblical texts.¹⁹

For example, in dealing with passages that seem to describe God’s apparent involvement in deception, he writes that

we are led to think of God’s deception in the same way we think about his regretting [e.g., 1 Sam 15:29]. Just as his regretting seems to compromise his divine omniscience, so his sending a lying spirit (1 Kings 22:22), or his deceiving a prophet (Ezek. 14:9), or his sending delusion (2 Thess. 2:11) seems to compromise God’s truthfulness. But the point of 1 Samuel 15:29 is that what looks like sinful, human lying or regretting in God is, in fact, *not* that.²⁰

How does God do that? Piper answers: “We are not told *how* God prevents his providence in deceit from being sinful.”²¹ It just is not, and we know it is not because we know God’s character, and we can know God’s character because of his self-revelation in Scripture.²² Everyone agrees that a curtain of mystery descends at some point on our understanding of the workings of providence. Where we disagree is when that curtain drops. Granted, there are moments where revelation ends and the curtain of mystery must drop, but Piper’s curtain cue here seems both unnecessary and awkward: “With God, there is a kind of regretting and a kind of deceiving, that is not like man’s regretting and man’s deceiving.”²³ But is not “a *kind* of deceiving” still “a kind of *deceiving*”? To put an even finer point on it, we might just as well say that God *does* lie, he just doesn’t lie like men lie.²⁴ That is not just unsatisfying; it is problematic. We have no right to demand a satisfying explanation where the

¹⁹ Piper, *Providence*, 411–12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 473.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 473.

²² See Talbert, *Trustworthiness of God’s Word*, chapters 4 and 5.

²³ Piper, *Providence*, 473.

²⁴ Numbers 23:19 does not say that God does not lie like men do; it says that God is not like men (who lie) because he does not lie; in fact, he cannot lie (Titus 1:2).

Bible is silent. But we do have the right to ask whether the Bible really is silent, and whether the Bible itself might not provide a more satisfying explanation.

The focus of this article, however, is not divine deception or divine repentance,²⁵ but God's hardening of Pharaoh—a phenomenon that also compels us to acknowledge some degree of mystery. The question is, at what point do we invoke that final, silencing answer of “mystery”? Graham Cole concedes,

God is mysterious. But there are genuine problems thrown up by revelation that require clarification, and those clarifications need to be argued and therefore justified. . . . Do we simply say ‘Mystery!’ and be done with it? Or do we attempt to offer a plausible account of how such a joint action (double agency) may be possible?²⁶

Sometimes those clarifications may be of a logical nature. Scripture compels us—on the basis of clear exegetical and biblical theological data—to hold simultaneously that Jesus is fully God and genuinely human. The church has attempted to clarify and justify that revealed reality without mitigating the textual data on either side, and without resolving the tension of that mystery. Likewise, in the area of bibliology, concursive inspiration (aka dynamic inspiration²⁷) attempts to clarify and justify the simultaneous human and divine source of Scripture. In coming to such conclusions (to borrow Piper's language), “[we] have not removed a mystery; [we] have stated a mystery”—which is precisely where Piper lands on the issue of Pharaoh's hardness.²⁸ When all is said and done, Piper concludes, mystery remains.

God's hardening does not make human fault impossible; it makes it certain. Here is our familiar mystery: people who are thus hardened against²⁹ God are really guilty. They have real fault. They really deserved to be judged. There is no injustice with God. And it was God who decided who would be in that condition and who would be rescued from it in mercy. If we demand an explanation for *how* this can be . . . we will probably be disappointed in this life. I do not offer such an explanation. I say what I see in the word: God hardens whom he wills, and man is accountable.³⁰

²⁵ On the issue of divine repentance, I think the Bible provides ample material for a more satisfying answer than “God's regretting is not like man's regretting and there's an end of it.” See “Greater Is He Than Man Can Know’: Divine Repentance and a Brief Inquiry into Anthropomorphism & Anthropopathism, Impassibility & Affectability” *JBTW* 2, no. 2 (Spring 2022): 73–93.

²⁶ *He Who Gives Life: The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 56.

²⁷ Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *A Concise Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2020), 95.

²⁸ Piper, *Providence*, 443.

²⁹ Based on all he has argued, however, I would assume that Piper means not merely “hardened against God” but hardened *by* God.

³⁰ Piper, *Providence*, 440–41.

But there is much more than this to be seen in the Word. When it comes to the question of *how* “people . . . hardened against God are really guilty,” this is not where revelation dead-ends.

Elsewhere in his book, Piper justifiably faults Islam for isolating and elevating one divine attribute above all others, viz., absolute sovereignty. “So,” he concludes, “no attribute of God should ever be considered in isolation from other biblical doctrines and other attributes of God.”³¹ Quite so. It is to some of those other biblical doctrines and attributes of God that we now turn.

Divine Providence and Human Depravity

One of the most foundational doctrines of the Bible’s redemptive storyline is human depravity. That reality, I propose, goes a long way towards a biblically informed explanation of how God can harden and yet hold humans responsible. All of us are born equally twisted away from God and in on ourselves (Pss 51:5; 58:3; Eph 2:1–5; Col 2:13). Piper concedes this.

To be sure, all human beings, in themselves, are unworthy of being shown mercy and deserve judgment. One could say, then, that human sinfulness is the cause of hardening. But that is not the question. The question is not why anyone might be hardened. The question is, why this one and not that one, since both are sinful and undeserving?³²

To that question there is only one scriptural answer: the sovereign choice of God. But that is not the *only* question Piper raises in his discussion of divine providence and the hardening of Pharaoh. He raises the additional question of *how* God’s sovereign choice (specifically to harden) can be reconciled with human responsibility. And his repeated answer is that we simply do not know: “How God freely hardens and yet preserves human accountability, we are not told.”³³ That is the answer I wish to dispute here because, to some degree, we *are* told. We *do* know something of how sovereign hardening and human responsibility can both be true. The Bible’s answer is located in the doctrine of depravity; God’s hardening of Pharaoh is—not in response to, nor because of, but—entirely consistent (concurrent) with “the hardness of [his own] heart” (Eph 4:17–18).³⁴ So, while it is true that “it was not the nature of the clay that determined what God would do with it,”³⁵ it is also true that the (depraved) nature of the clay determines—that is, explains and vindicates—how God’s fashioning of one vessel for dishonor is entirely just and his fashioning of another vessel for honor is entirely merciful.

Perhaps Piper does not intend to dichotomize so radically between divine providence and human depravity when it comes to explaining human responsibility. There is no questioning of his adherence to the doctrine of depravity. He appeals to it elsewhere as well, in justifying Jesus’ concealment of truth from some hearers: “Jesus is not dealing with neutral people, but with sinful people who deserve

³¹ Piper, *Providence*, 403.

³² *Ibid.*, 440.

³³ *Ibid.*, Cf. 417–18, 441.

³⁴ Paul uses the same Greek term in Romans 11:7, 25 to describe Israel’s hardening.

³⁵ Piper, *Providence*, 443.

judgment. But keep in mind that there are *no* neutral people.”³⁶ That includes Pharaoh. What seems confusing, however, is the appeal to mystery when it comes to coordinating divine providence (and specifically hardening) and human responsibility. Repeatedly, the mystery curtain is cued to drop just as the doctrine of depravity is brushing up its lines and preparing to make its entrance on the stage of this discussion.³⁷

Piper commends “a biblical mindset that seems to have a built-in presupposition that God, with perfect justice, holiness, goodness, and wisdom, guides the good and evil human choices of all humans. This mindset is, by and large, foreign to our modern world.” Instead, the world fixates on the apparent contradiction of this proposition. “Many insist that humans (not God) must provide the final and decisive cause in the instant of decision, or else the decision cannot be justly praised or blamed. That is, they insist on ultimate human *self*-determination in the act of choosing, if there is to be moral accountability. The Bible does not share this assumption.”³⁸

Granted. But this is precisely where the doctrine of depravity provides a robust and scripturally grounded clarification of the relationship between divine determination and moral accountability, particularly with respect to blameworthy decisions such as Pharaoh's.³⁹ For example, Piper rejects the following syllogism as invalid:

Premise 1: God holds all human beings accountable for their moral choices.

Premise 2: John is a human being.

Conclusion: Therefore, John has ultimate self-determination.⁴⁰

³⁶ Piper, *Providence*, 466.

³⁷ Why does Piper seem to give so little attention to the biblical doctrine of depravity as at least part of the Bible's explanation of how God can harden an individual such as Pharaoh and yet hold him accountable? I suspect there are a couple of reasons. (1) He is convinced that such an argument forms no part of Paul's explanation in Romans 9:19–24, which he sees as emphasizing God's sovereignty to the exclusion (it seems) of any other consideration; as I will argue below, I am convinced that Paul wrote Romans 9 in the full light of Romans 1–3 and expected his readers to do the same. (2) The establishment of divine sovereignty as the bottom line explanation for everything (including double predestination) can result in making divine sovereignty the *only* explanation for anything, to the minimizing of other equally biblical doctrinal factors and explanations; those, like Piper, who hold to double predestination seem to hold a similar view of Pharaoh's hardness in which divine actions deemed hard to reconcile with the divine character or with human responsibility are left at the door of mystery. In terms of explanation, divine sovereignty not only trumps but (it seems) replaces all other (even equally biblical) explanations; it is an approach that sets apart such theological explanations even from those of other equally Reformed/Calvinistic theologians. I had not appreciated that connection before writing this article. Cf. Richard Monserrat Blaylock, “Vessels of Wrath: A Biblical Theological Study of Divine Reprobating Activity” (PhD diss., The Southern Theological Seminary, 2021).

³⁸ Piper, *Providence*, 414.

³⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright highlights Pharaoh's culpability: “This is the man who intensified his predecessor's unjust oppression of an immigrant ethnic minority to unbearably cruel extremes in chapter 5. Nobody made him do that. This is the man who persists in rejecting every request and every warning that he receives from Moses and God, even after his own magicians recognize the finger of God, and his whole government pleads with him to see sense and halt the destruction of his country and suffering of his people. Nobody made him do that. This the man who admits he is in the wrong, confesses his sin, and then chooses the same devastating path time and time again. Nobody made him do that.” *Exodus*, *The Story of God Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic), 225, Kindle.

⁴⁰ Piper, *Providence*, 415.

The syllogism is, indeed, flawed (both formally and theologically). The overlooked doctrine of depravity, however, could reframe the syllogism to reach a conclusion that is not only helpful but biblical.

Premise 1: God holds all humans accountable for their moral choices.

Premise 2: Left to himself, John neither makes nor desires righteous moral choices.

Conclusion: Therefore, God is just in holding John accountable for his moral choices.

Premise 2 provides a more full-bodied biblical expression of the interface between these doctrines and incorporates not only the principles of human depravity and divine justice but also divine sovereignty per Romans 9:15, 18. And the syllogism holds explanatory power whether the name is John, Layton, or Pharaoh.

The Bible explains our natural-born condition of alienation from God (Rom 5:10; Col 1:21), our innate predilection to evil and our preference for darkness (John 3:19), and our instinctual suppression of truth (Rom 1:18ff).⁴¹ This biblical doctrine impacts how we can explain Pharaoh's responsibility and how we understand Pharaoh's hardness and hardening.

First, it explains other references that display Pharaoh's own predisposition prior to any textual reference to the actual hardening of Pharaoh's heart. I will not here belabor the data of hardening in Exodus. I have tried to provide a thorough and accurate listing of that data in an Appendix at the end of this article. Here is the bottom line, however. It seems grammatically indisputable that the first *direct* and *explicit statement* (subject + verb + object) that God (subject) hardened (verb) Pharaoh's heart (object) appears in Exodus 9:12, after two equally direct and explicit statements that Pharaoh (subject) hardened (verb) his heart (object) in 8:15, 32. One is, of course, perfectly free to interpret all the statements prior to 9:12 as implicit references to divine hardening (7:13, 14, 22; 8:19; 9:7); but in view of the indirectness of the grammar, one is compelled to a theologically guided decision. According to Piper, such a decision rests on one of only two opposing theological positions: ultimate divine sovereignty or ultimate human self-determination.⁴² I am proposing that human depravity be factored into the discussion as well. Douglas Moo distinguishes the hardening of Romans 9 from "the 'handing over' of sinners to the sin that they had already chosen for themselves" in Romans 1 (vv. 24, 26, 28) and thinks it unlikely that Paul would expect his readers to make any connection between the two passages. "The 'hardening' Paul portrays here," rather, "is a sovereign act of God that is not *caused* by anything in those individuals who are hardened."⁴³ But that begs the question, because the fact remains that the divine hardening Paul portrays in Romans 9 is nevertheless entirely consistent and concurrent with the fallen condition of humanity that Paul portrays in Romans 1–3.

⁴¹ At least part of the Bible's explanation for our inherited depravity is our moral and biological connection to Adam as our representative, federal head (Rom 5), but that far exceeds the scope of this essay.

⁴² Piper, *Providence*, 414, 416.

⁴³ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 597–98. It is hard to imagine that Paul would expect his readers to interpret what he says in chapter 9 in isolation from what he said in chapters 1–3 (more on that below).

Second, the text includes other statements that confirm and corroborate the depravity factor by laying the blame on Pharaoh's arrogant and stubborn refusal. God explicitly blames Pharaoh for *exalting himself* against God's people (9:17), *sinning yet again* (9:34),⁴⁴ and *refusing to humble himself* before God (10:3); moreover, Moses instructs the Israelites to explain to their future generations that it was Pharaoh's *own stubborn refusal* that led to God's destruction of Egypt's firstborn (13:15). One need not capitulate to the ultimacy of human self-determination in order to acknowledge that God's sovereignty in hardening Pharaoh—whatever the precise interplay between divine hardening and self-hardening—was entirely conjunctive and concurrent with the hardness of Pharaoh's own depraved heart and that he, therefore, remains entirely responsible and accountable for his actions.⁴⁵ Why should we ignore the Scripture's own express explanation for this otherwise befuddling juxtaposition of divine activity and human culpability? Commenting on God's censure of Pharaoh's self-exaltation in Exodus 9:17, Douglas Stuart writes:

The irony of God's upbraiding of Pharaoh in v. 17 is that Pharaoh could not help himself (any longer) and yet well deserved the criticism he received. It was both his natural inclination to keep the Israelites suppressed and localized (cf. 1:9–10) and the attitude subsequently fixed in him by God as a humiliation and punishment. Pharaoh's behavior mirrors the phenomenon described by Paul in Rom. 1:18–32, that of people being fixed by God in the sinful behavior patterns that would eventually bring about their destruction as a punishment for those very behavior patterns. In other words, one of the ways God punishes sin is to allow the sin to continue and therefore to allow it to take its natural, destructive course. Behind this is the biblical truth that people cannot rescue themselves from their own sin; they always need help to break the patterns of sin in their lives. If God withholds that help, they become fixed in those patterns, will see the harmful effects increasingly during their lives, and will die in those sins. Pharaoh had long ago "set [him]self against [God's] people and [would] not let them go," and he was still doing the same. God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart—making him remain stubborn—serves as a punishment although the action itself is also a sin.⁴⁶

The Argument of Romans 9

Some may object that this explanation—that the Bible coordinates how God can sovereignly choose to harden Pharaoh and yet still hold him accountable in terms of innate human depravity—does not match Paul's justification of God exclusively on the grounds of divine sovereignty in Romans 9:19–20ff. Piper protests against those who say,

⁴⁴ "The text explicitly marks the action stemming from Pharaoh's hard heart as sin (9:34)." Michael P. V. Barrett, *The Gospel of Exodus: Misery, Deliverance, Gratitude* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2020), 95.

⁴⁵ Wright points out the same dynamic at the other end of Israel's history in the exile: "At a human level, it was the imperial policy of Babylon and the personal decisions of Nebuchadnezzar that destroyed Jerusalem and carried the people into exile. But in prophetic discernment, it was Yahweh himself who had brought it about through his 'servant Nebuchadnezzar.'" *Exodus*, 223–24.

⁴⁶ Douglas Stuart, *Exodus*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2006), 232–33.

“God finds fault because human beings have ultimate self-determination and use it to rebel against God.” So God’s hardening, they say, is not free and unconditional but is caused by man’s self-determined hardness. If Paul agreed with that way of thinking, he could so easily have answered the objection of verse 19 that way. . . . How easily Paul could have answered the objection with an appeal to ultimate human self-determination! But he didn’t. Because it is the wrong answer. It turns Paul’s teaching on its head. Paul’s point is that nothing in man explains why one is hardened and another is shown mercy. That distinction lies wholly in God, not man.⁴⁷

I am entirely in agreement on this point; “nothing in man explains why one is hardened and another is shown mercy.” On the one hand, nothing in man explains why *anyone* is shown mercy. On the other hand, everything in man explains why *anyone* is hardened, why God is entirely justified in hardening, and why the one thus hardened is nevertheless entirely responsible and accountable.⁴⁸ God’s hardening is entirely consistent and concurrent with man’s depravity. I am not taking issue with the divine discrimination factor; I am asserting that human accountability is explained by human depravity and questioning the premature call for mystery in that regard, as though we do not know how divine hardening and human accountability can coexist.

One might object to the relevance of human depravity, since Paul does not include it in his answer to the objection of Romans 9:19. If the solution to divine justice in hardening is as simple as universal innate human sinfulness, then why does Paul not offer that as part of his justification of God in Romans 9:20–24? Because he already spent the first three chapters of the letter developing a detailed doctrinal justification for the wrath of God on humanity. Insisting on Romans 1–3 as the intentional and indispensable background to one’s reading of Romans 9 is not turning Paul’s teaching on its head. Why does he not mention human depravity again in Romans 9? In view of Romans 1–3, why should he have to? But in fact, he does allude to it.

Affirming God’s sovereign choice in Romans 9:18, Paul entertains the objection, “Why does he still find fault?” (9:20). His response to that objection begins with a direct appeal not to human responsibility but to God’s absolute, incontestable sovereignty: “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?” (9:18–24).⁴⁹ But that is not *all* he says. Besides opening the letter with three chapters underscoring the massive ramifications of universal human depravity, Paul proceeds to apply his discussion and Pharaonic illustration of divine sovereignty to the major point under discussion in chapters 9–11: how do we explain Israel’s widescale rejection of their Messiah? In 9:30–32 he asks,

⁴⁷ Piper, *Providence*, 442–43. Cf. 440, 441.

⁴⁸ I am indebted to my friend and colleague David Saxon for suggesting this clarifying juxtaposition of statements.

⁴⁹ Some have asserted, “If you read Paul’s answer to the objection in 9:19 and say, ‘Ah, now I see, that’s fair; that makes sense to me,’ then you have not correctly understood Paul’s argument.” I find this disconcerting on two points: (1) it implies that divine justice is, in the end, irrelevant, but more importantly, (2) it ignores the rest of Paul’s answer, not only back in Romans 1–3 but also in the remainder of the context of chapter 9, notably 9:30–33.

What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why?

That is the same question Paul entertained back in 9:19 (though the Greek construction is slightly different). His answer here is significant because (a) it corrects the tunnel vision of looking at 9:19–24 in isolation and assuming that divine sovereignty is the whole explanation for Israel's (or Pharaoh's) hardness; and (b) it provides a fuller, more robust answer grounded in the doctrinal reality of Romans 1–3. In answering this “Why?” Paul does not reiterate the argument of divine sovereignty from 9:20ff. (though he could have). Instead, he emphasizes the component of human fallenness and responsibility:

Because *they did not pursue it by faith*, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” (Rom 9:30–33)

One may well observe that the Gentiles' attainment of righteousness and Israel's failure in that regard is to be explained in terms of the principle of 9:18 and God's sovereign decision regarding showing mercy and hardening. Nevertheless, Paul's *full* answer involves at least two major complementary doctrinal components, neither of which negates, invalidates, trumps, or replaces the other: divine sovereignty and human depravity. Moo recognizes the two-pronged nature of Paul's argument in Romans 9.

In 9:6–29, Paul explains this turn of events in terms of God's sovereign choosing. In this second stage of his argument [9:30ff.], he puts the responsibility for Israel's failure on their own shoulders, faulting their stubborn failure to respond appropriately to God's revelation in Christ.⁵⁰

It would be wrong-headed to read Romans 9:30–33 in isolation, assume it is the entirety of Paul's answer, and conclude that God's sovereign choice has nothing to do with who is saved. It is equally wrong-headed to read 9:18–23 in isolation, assume it is Paul's whole answer, and conclude that human fallenness, culpability, and responsibility have nothing to do with who is not saved. While he does not shine the doctrinally relevant light of Romans 1–3 as directly on his discussion of Romans 9 as I think it deserves, Moo (elsewhere) nevertheless captures the necessity of this doctrinal complementarity between divine sovereignty and human depravity:

Without pretending that it solves all our problems, we must recognize that God's hardening is an act directed against human beings who are already in rebellion against God's righteous rule. God's hardening does not, then, *cause* spiritual insensitivity to the things of God; it maintains people in the state of sin that already characterizes them. This does not mean . . . that God's decision about whom to harden is based on a particular degree of sinfulness within certain human beings; he hardens “whomever he chooses.” But it is imperative that we maintain side-by-side the

⁵⁰ Douglas J. Moo, *A Theology of Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 232.

complementary truths that (1) God hardens whomever he chooses; (2) human beings, because of sin, are responsible for their ultimate condemnation. Thus God's bestowing of mercy and his hardening are not equivalent acts. God's mercy is given to those who do not deserve it; his hardening affects those who have already by their sin deserved condemnation.⁵¹

Divine Providence and Human Comprehension

Piper rightly insists that biblical doctrines may not be held hostage by human understanding. The *fact* of divine providence is unambiguous and nonnegotiable; the *means* of God's providence, however, is not always apparent or explained.

We do not need to know how God's providence preserves human accountability. Nor should we come to the text demanding that we be told *how* God can govern sin and not be a sinner. Or *how* God can govern sinful human behavior and not turn man into a robot. We do not need to know *how*. God may or may not give us insight into the mysteries of how he does this.⁵²

If God does not give us insight, Piper argues, that should be enough for us. But if he does give us insight, it is incumbent on us to factor those insights into our theological explanation and presentation of passages such as Exodus 3–14. God does, in fact, provide both doctrinal explanation and illustrative images that may inform how we understand (among other things) the hardness and hardening of Pharaoh's heart. I think we can, with biblical warrant, do better here than simply default to the concept of mystery. I will try to explain and apply those insights below.

Divine Providence as Divine Permission

Piper acknowledges that one of the avenues through which divine providence functions is permission. With respect to the Fall, for example, what God knew in his omniscience would happen ("that Adam and Eve would sin and bring ruin on his creation") he "chose to permit."⁵³ God neither tempted nor compelled them to sin, but neither did he prevent either their temptation or their sinning (as he could have; cf. Gen 20:6). In biblically coordinating divine sovereignty and human responsibility, then, Piper says that "we may speak of God's *planning* or *ordaining* the fall in this sense. By *planning* and *ordaining* I mean simply that God could have chosen not to permit the fall, but in choosing to permit it for wise purposes, he thus planned and ordained it."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Moo, *Epistle to the Romans*, 599–600 (emphasis original).

⁵² Piper, *Providence*, 417–18 (emphasis original).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* (emphasis original). Any objection that God's foreknowledge cancels the possibility of choosing not to permit what he already foreknows is specious (i.e., "how can God foreknow any event that he chooses not to permit, for if he chooses not to permit it then its happening cannot be foreknown?"). One passage that informs our understanding of God's foreknowledge in relation to eventualities is 1 Samuel 23; God tells David that the men of Keilah would surrender him to Saul, which they never did since David uses that information to leave before Saul arrives.

Piper extends the idea of providentially “planned permissions” beyond the Fall to include all the acts of Satan.⁵⁵ This explanation may furnish insight into a biblically informed explanation of the nature and means of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. What, exactly, is the meaning, and means, of divine hardening? Michael Barrett underscores the significance of that question:

Notwithstanding Paul’s admonition not to question God’s actions or motives (Rom. 9:14, 19–23), the whole doctrine of election, as well as this particular reference to Pharaoh, has resulted in a perceived tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. . . . Although Scripture does not put the two in tension, there are legitimate questions as to what hardening the heart means and what God does to harden the heart. Since Paul cites Exodus in his exposition of the issue, Exodus should provide the answer to the theological question that is so vital to understanding the grace of the gospel.⁵⁶

Piper defines hardening as “a condition of heart which renders it insensible to promptings and inflexible to will, and thus, in Pharaoh’s case, adamantly opposed to God’s demands.”⁵⁷ What is striking about this description of hardening is its remarkable similarity to Paul’s depiction of our native enmity against God from birth (what Paul calls the *flesh*): “The mind-set of the flesh is hostile to God because it does not submit to God’s law. Indeed, it is unable to do so” (Rom 8:7 CSB). Richard Blaylock asserts that “divine hardening in Romans 9:18 involves a form of influence that leads to unrighteous behavior.”⁵⁸ But what is the *nature* of that “influence”? Is it invasive or noninvasive, internal or external (circumstantial), active or passive? This, it seems, goes right to the heart of all our arguments about the precise chemistry between divine hardening and human hardening. Here, indeed, is a mystery. But it is not a mystery without some scriptural guidelines and guardrails.

One of those guardrails is James 1:13–15. James reminds us that God cannot tempt to evil and, what is more, he does not need to. We are equipped from birth with everything we need in this regard: “each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire.” What astonishes about James’s explanation of the process of sin and temptation is the complete omission of Satan in the process. Not only do we not need God to tempt us, we do not even need Satan to tempt us; we are entirely capable of manufacturing internally our own temptations and sins.⁵⁹ The depraved human heart is like a moral garbage can capable of overflowing with all manner of sin; it is God who is in

⁵⁵ Piper, *Providence*, 276. Piper (260–76) outlines ten spheres of Satanic activity in which his actions amount to divinely planned permissions: Satan’s delegated world rule, his activities through demons, his delegated life-taking power, his hand in persecution, in natural disasters, in sickness, in the natural world, in blinding unbelievers, and in spiritual bondage.

⁵⁶ *Gospel of Exodus*, 93.

⁵⁷ Piper, *Justification of God*, 161–62. That is as close as I could find to a definition of hardening in twenty pages of discussion of Pharaoh’s hardening, including several pages expressly addressing “The meaning of ‘hardening’” (175–78), which predominantly focuses on the soteriological ramifications of the term.

⁵⁸ Blaylock, 325.

⁵⁹ That is not, of course, to say that Satan is never involved in our temptations, only that we sin not because of what is outside of us but because of what is already inside of us (cf. Matt 15:16–20).

control of the lid, permitting or restraining what emerges. The traditional translation of Psalm 76:10 (which should not be too hastily dismissed)⁶⁰ suggests a similar divine posture toward human wrath and evil: “Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee: the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain” (KJV; cf. Geneva Bible).

Romans 9, on the other hand, offers a positive biblical image designed to point us toward an answer to the question of the nature of God’s providential influence, including when it comes to hardening. The potter imagery in Romans 9:20–23 suggests at least a metaphorical illustration of the nature of that “influence.” If, as Piper argues, God “plans to permit sin” and “plan[s] to permit the fall”⁶¹ without actively compelling Adam and Eve to do so, may not this be an equally valid explanation of the divine means of hardening Pharaoh’s heart?

How Does God Providentially Harden?

Psalm 33 is a magisterial hymn of praise for God’s providence over every area of life, including his sovereignty not only over all nations (33:10–12) but even over all the inhabitants of all those nations (vv. 13–15).

The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of man;
from where he sits enthroned he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth,
he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds.

Two words in verse 15 are particularly worth exploring. The first is the small but significant term *yachad* (translated above as “the hearts of them *all* [*yachad*]”). The same word appears in Psalm 141:10, traditionally translated, “Let the wicked fall into their own nets while I pass by *safely*.” But the image is even more striking and ironic. The term *yachad* signifies “all together,” “all at once,” or “at the same

⁶⁰ While virtually all modern translations depart from this traditional rendering, all acknowledge that the Hebrew is difficult and the meaning obscure. Marvin Tate laments, “No interpretation of this verse inspires much confidence.” *Psalms 51–100*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1990), 262. Nevertheless, support for the traditional rendering still surfaces in the literature. More than one interpreter notes the significance of J. A. Emerton, “A Neglected Solution of a Problem in Psalm LXXXVI 11,” *VT* 24, no. 2 (Apr 1974): 136–146. For example, Daniel J. Estes remarks, “After a meticulous analysis of the text, Emerton concludes that it is best translated, ‘Surely Thou dost crush the wrath of man: Thou dost restrain the remnant of wrath.’” *Psalms 73–150*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2019), 60. Tate notes that Emerton’s reading of the consonantal text “as ‘restrain’ rather than ‘gird’” rests on “nuances of the word in MT rather than a different reading, arguing that the translation fits well into the context of the psalm,” adding that “J. Day (*VT* 31 [1981] 76–78) agrees with Emerton.” Cf. also Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: 42–89* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2016), 611. C. Hassell Bullock comments on the NIV rendering, “the survivors of your wrath are restrained”: “The text gives us something like ‘You gird yourself with the rest of wrath(s),’ perhaps suggesting that when the wrath of humankind praises God, there are still remnants of human wrath, which God then restrains. That is, in general the wrath of humankind praises God, but the remnants that do not God restrains so that they cause him no harm, even though that is the purpose of human wrath.” *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 73–150*, Teach the Text Commentary Series (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017), 27. In any case, the traditional rendering would merely be icing on a collection of texts verifying that God’s providential dealing with human evil involves permitting what serves his purposes and praise, and restraining whatever does not (cf. Gen 20:6; 31:7, 24, 29; 1 Sam 25:26, 34, 39).

⁶¹ Piper, *Providence*, 177.

time.”⁶² J. A. Motyer translates, “Let them fall, each in his own nets, *at the same time* as I myself continually pass by.”⁶³ David prays that the wicked would be snared in the same nets they have laid for him (v. 9) *at the very time* he is passing by their trap.

When Psalm 33 describes God’s providence over “all the inhabitants of the earth” (v. 14), he narrows the image to a point of astonishing specificity: God not only “fashions the hearts of them *all*” (ESV), but “he fashions their hearts *individually*” (NKJV)—that is, God fashions *all* the hearts of *all* the inhabitants of the earth *all at the same time, simultaneously*. What is the implication of the word *fashion*? *Yatzar* means to *shape* or *form*. The word occurs sixty-two times in the OT, but the term surfaces most frequently in Isaiah (27x) and Jeremiah (14x).⁶⁴ Most of these passages describe God as the Fashioner or Potter. He knows our frame (Ps 103:14), because he is the Potter that fashioned us out of clay (Gen 2:7, 8, 19). The participial form of this verb gives us the noun *potter*.

How does all this inform our understanding of Psalm 33:15 specifically, and God’s sovereign, providential, and yet concurrent governing of all humans generally? God superintendingly and purposefully shapes the hearts of all people—their thoughts and decisions, choices and desires, simultaneously in order to accomplish His sovereign purposes. How does God do this? He himself provides an illustration of what might be termed the “mechanics” of both mercy and hardening in Romans 9:21–24 (cf. Isa 29:16): that of a potter. It is an inspired illustration most detailed in Jeremiah 18, when God sends the prophet to the potter’s studio to observe the process firsthand.

Clay figures may be shaped free-form by hand, but vessels are crafted on a turning wheel. Left to itself, the clay would be thrown off in all directions by the centrifugal force of the wheel. The potter does not fight that centrifugal force; he harnesses it and controls it to shape the clay. He may allow (or permit) that force to have its natural effect on the clay, periodically relaxing his control and permitting it here and there to throw out a bulge. In other places, he uses the pressure of his hands to restrain the natural effects of that centrifugal force.

The centrifugal force that drives human nature and that would, if permitted, throw it off the wheel and destroy it is depravity.⁶⁵ Left to ourselves, apart from the restraining and guiding intervention of divine mercy, we naturally follow the desires of our fallen nature (Eph 2:3). I suggest that the mechanism behind Psalm 33:15 and God’s providential interaction with all humans in their sin is something akin to the centrifugal force of our depravity versus the potter’s controlling hands—

⁶² William L. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 132; Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Brill, 2001), I:405. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *Hebrew-English Lexicon* (1906; reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 403. Another usage of note is Psalm 19:9 (“The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous *altogether*”); “altogether,” however, signified *entirely, completely*. While it is true that God’s decisions are *entirely* true and righteous, the psalmist seems to be affirming that they are true and righteous *all together, all at the same time, simultaneously*; that is, they never conflict or contradict each other.

⁶³ *Psalms by the Day* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2017), 403. Derek Kidner also acknowledges the potential that *yachad* “may mean ‘at the same time.’” *Psalms 73–150, TOTC* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 472.

⁶⁴ See especially Isaiah 27:11; 29:16; 30:14; 43:1, 7; 45:9; 49:5; 64:8.

⁶⁵ The analogy, like all metaphors, is not perfect; the centrifugal force of depravity is not outside but within us. The analogy holds, nevertheless, inasmuch as the clay becomes one with and is energized by the wheel.

alternately pressuring and relaxing, restraining and permitting, creating vessels of his choosing for his purposes.⁶⁶

How can God's use of the potter illustration shape our understanding of him and his ways? First, it is a divinely chosen illustration of how God may simultaneously fashion human hearts providentially—whether concurrently and in keeping with the inclinations of our own depravity, or mercifully restraining manifestations and outworkings of our depravity that do not lend themselves to his glory and purposes. Second, the potter illustration displays not only divine sovereignty but also human responsibility, since it frequently surfaces in passages that rebuke people for their own hard-headed, hard-hearted choices (cf. Isa 29:13–16; Jer 18:9–12). Likewise, in Romans 9, both illustrations (Pharaoh and the divine Potter) display God's sovereignty within a context of human blameworthiness and accountability.⁶⁷ Third, the potter illustration also suggests a biblical metaphor for explaining the hardening process. To harden a vessel shaped by the divinely controlled centrifugal force of its own fallen nature, all the potter needs to do is leave it alone. It will harden on its own. Barrett, who earlier raised the question of “what hardening the heart means and what God does to harden the heart,” makes this very point in connection with Pharaoh.

Time after time Pharaoh said no, persisting in his stubbornness and obstinacy as he acted according to his rock-hard heart. . . . The narrative of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart helps to resolve the apparent tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. *The obvious question is, What did God do to make Pharaoh's heart obstinately stubborn? The simple answer is nothing.* The narrative gives no hint that Pharaoh was forced to do anything against his will. There is no evidence that in his heart he wanted to liberate the people, but God would not let him. In hardening his heart, God simply let Pharaoh be Pharaoh. The Lord did not interrupt the inclinations of his naturally hard and stubborn heart (Jer. 17:9). On the contrary, the Lord provided opportunity after opportunity for Pharaoh to surrender his will to the Lord's. . . . But notwithstanding the multiple offers to “comply with God's demands, Pharaoh refused, and each refusal hardened his heart a little more. His heart remained insensitive because he did what he wanted to do, and God did not stop him from doing it. Paul speaks of this in terms of God's judicial abandonment of sinners to their own desires (Rom. 1:26).⁶⁸

⁶⁶ That is not to say that God does not also employ providential circumstantial pressures that he knows will impact human decisions. Matthew 26:5 presents a potential conflict between divine and human timing. The Jews were dead set on destroying Christ, “but not during the feast, lest there be an uproar among the people.” Through various means (including, e.g., their fear of the people, Matt 21:46) God had been restraining them from their longtime plot to destroy Jesus, but now God's time had arrived; the Passover Lamb must be slain on the Passover. See Talbert, *Not by Chance*, 168–71.

⁶⁷ I am indebted to David Saxon for this helpful observation.

⁶⁸ *Gospel of Exodus*, 97–98 (emphasis added). Robert V. McCabe argues similarly that “God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart means that God, in his sovereignty, withholds mercy (or, as it is often called, common grace) from Pharaoh. God's hardening removes the restraining forces used in common grace so that Pharaoh gets exactly what he wants, along with the inevitable (and undesirable) consequences of his choices. God in his sovereign justice withheld his mercy, allowing the

God's hardening (Rom 9:18b) is the opposite of God's showing mercy (v. 18a) by withholding his merciful, restraining intervention. If one protests that divine hardening *must* be some kind of active, negative, internal intervention, the natural counterquestion is, why? We know God cannot *compel* sin (Jas 1:13) and resisting God's will is surely sin; and we know that man does not *need* to be compelled to sin (vv. 14–15). God's sovereign and providential hardening is always exercised in keeping with his own sinless nature and unsullied character, and always concurrent and consistent with the fallen condition of those hardened. With this Piper is clearly in agreement:

The nature of this providence is such that the preferences and choices of Satan and man are really their own preferences and their own choices. . . . God's providence is decisive in what Satan and man decide and do. But it is not coercive. That is, its ordinary way of working is to see to it that Satan and man decide and act in a way that is their own preference, while fulfilling God's plan at every moment. *How* God does this may remain a mystery . . . but *that* he does it is what the Bible teaches.⁶⁹

To argue that the divine hardening of Pharaoh was consistent, concurrent, or in conjunction with—and even to argue that it was subsequent to—Pharaoh's own native hardness (1) does not require that it was *because* of Pharaoh's self-hardening, (2) does not undermine the ultimacy of God's sovereignty, and (3) does not imply libertarian autonomy or the ultimacy of self-determination. Rather, it defends the doctrine of human depravity and its ramifications for the concurrence of God's hardening of Pharaoh, and the text's repeated demonstration of Pharaoh's inherent condition and inclinations even before (3:19–20; 5:2; 7:4, 13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7) and after (9:17, 35; 10:3; 13:15; 14:5) God sealed that native, fallen inclination with judicial hardness (9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17).⁷⁰

God's judicial hardening is not presented as the capricious manipulation of an arbitrary potentate cursing morally neutral or even morally pure beings, but as a holy condemnation of a guilty people who are condemned to do and be what they themselves have chosen.⁷¹

The sovereignty of God is displayed not in compelling Pharaoh to act sinfully contrary to his will; that would be impossible (because of God's character), not to mention unnecessary (because of Pharaoh's depravity). The sovereignty of God is displayed in choosing not to show mercy to Pharaoh (Rom 9:15, 18) and, instead, allowing him to pursue his own native and willful rebellion, and confirming him in

wickedness already resident in Pharaoh's heart to have free reign. Pharaoh and his people then reaped the consequences of Pharaoh's evil actions." See "An Old Testament Sanctifying Influence: The Sovereignty of God," *DBSJ* 15 (2010): 14–15.

⁶⁹ Piper, *Providence*, 692.

⁷⁰ For the grammatical data on the progression of Pharaoh's hardening in Exodus, see the Appendix.

⁷¹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 448–49.

that condition while he displays his glory and power over Pharaoh himself and all the false gods of Egypt.⁷²

Scripture suggests this image and reinforces this explanation with the language of abandonment in Romans 1. Paul describes the historical, native fallenness of humanity with a series of willful choices (vv. 18–23) followed by a thrice-repeated divine action: “God gave them up” or “delivered them over” to the impurity of the lusts of their own hearts (v. 24), to the vile passions they had cultivated in their rejection of God’s order (v. 26), and to the debased mind resulting from their rejection of the very notion of God (v. 28).⁷³ Moreover, Romans 2 lays the blame for one’s condemnation to divine wrath at the door of one’s own hardness and impenitence (v. 5), self-seeking, and disobedience (v. 8). Finally, Romans 3 explains that this condition is so universal (vv. 9–12), so deeply ingrained (vv. 13–18), and so inescapable (vv. 19–20) that only the intervention of a radical act of divine self-sacrifice provides deliverance for anyone (vv. 21–31; cf. Gen 3:15).

Conclusion

Divine abandonment to sin and self and depravity (and all its consequences) is a most fearful and most deserved kind of hardening. Divine hardening may be more than that, but it need not be. And if the nature of this hardening is, indeed, permission or abandonment, then it seems difficult to avoid the conclusion that (1) Pharaoh’s hardness, Pharaoh’s hardening, and God’s hardening were all simultaneous,⁷⁴ and (2) God’s hardening of Pharaoh was an entirely free and sovereign choice (View 2; cf. Rom 9:18) and an entirely just response (View 1; cf. Rom 2:4–8) because it was entirely consistent and concurrent with Pharaoh’s own endemic nature and choices (View 3; cf. Rom. 1:18–32).

⁷² For a helpful summary of the gods over whose presumed prerogatives God displayed his own inimitable authority, see Barrett, 100–102.

⁷³ Reformed commentator Dale Ralph Davis applies this language and procedure to the Canaanites: “The Canaanites’ day of grace has passed (Gen. 15:16); their iniquity is now full; there has been no turning away from but persistence in their idolatrous and sex-perverting worship; and so Yahweh ‘gives them up,’ confirms them in that resistance, and leads them by it to destruction (compare Pharaoh in Exod. 4–14, and Paul’s repeated ‘God gave them up’ in Romans 1:24, 26, 28).” *Joshua: No Falling Words* (Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus, 2000), 99.

⁷⁴ Acknowledging simultaneity stops short of identifying all of these aspects of hardening as one and the selfsame phenomenon, as Piper does (*Justification of God*, 168; cf. *Providence*, 439). Pharaoh was not only “really guilty” (*Providence*, 440) but really hardened by nature, and really hardened himself.

Appendix

The following table summarizes all the Exodus passages I am aware of that are relevant to the hardness and hardening of Pharaoh. Such charts are standard fare in virtually any discussion of this topic, though they vary in level of specificity of detail.⁷⁵ Contributing to the grammatical, and therefore interpretational and theological, confusion is the translation of those verses in which Pharaoh's heart is, itself, the grammatical subject—leaving the personal actor (whether God or Pharaoh) unstated and, indeed, raising the additional question as to whether there is in those instances *any* personal actor at all or whether they are describing an endemic state or condition, viz., depravity (7:13, 14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35).⁷⁶

Table 1. Exegetical Map of the Hardness and Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart


Ref	Subject	Verb	Object	Comments
3:19–20	“But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go . . . so I will stretch out my hand . . . after that he will let you go.”			Suggests ultimacy of divine sovereignty
4:21	I (Yahweh)	will harden	Pharaoh's heart	Predictive; <i>chazaq</i> Piel
5:2	“Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, nor will I let Israel go.”			Pharaoh's initial response
7:3	I (Yahweh)	will harden	Pharaoh's heart	Predictive; <i>qashah</i> Hiphil
7:4	“... but Pharaoh will not heed you...”			Important for interpreting 8:15, 19
7:13	(Pharaoh's) heart	hardened/was hard	(none)	<i>chazaq</i> Qal (not Piel), his heart was strong/hard
7:14	(Pharaoh's) heart	(is)	hard (pred. adj.)	<i>kabēd</i> adj., “heavy”
7:22	(Pharaoh's) heart	hardened/was hard	(none)	<i>chazaq</i> Qal (not Piel), his heart was strong/hard
8:15 [11]	Pharaoh	hardened	(his) heart	<i>kabad</i> Hiph., he made his heart heavy; “he did not heed, as Yahweh said” (7:4)
8:19 [15]	(Pharaoh's) heart	hardened/was hard	(none)	<i>chazaq</i> Qal (not Piel), his heart was hard; “he did not heed, as Yahweh said” (7:4)
8:32 [28]	Pharaoh	hardened	(his) heart	<i>kabad</i> Hiph., he made his heart heavy
9:7	(Pharaoh's) heart	hardened	(none)	<i>kabad</i> Qal., his heart was heavy


⁷⁵ E.g., Robert D. Bell, *The Theological Messages of the Old Testament Books* (Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2010), 42–44; Barrett, 95–96; Hamilton, 92; Piper, *Providence*, 436.


⁷⁶ Exodus 7:13 (et al.) “should really be translated ‘hard,’ for this is the first of six references to Pharaoh's heart that are ‘theologically neutral.’ That is, there is no indication whether the Lord caused his heart to be hard or whether he hardened it himself. So one may translate ‘The king's heart, however, still remained hard’ or ‘The king, however, remained stubborn’ (7:13 TEV). (Similar are 7:14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35.) Unless the context demands otherwise, the translator should try to preserve the neutrality in these verses.” Noel D. Osborn and Howard A. Hatton, *A Handbook on Exodus*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1999), 161. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. notes on 7:13 that “there is no reflexive or passive idea to the verb *yeh̄zaq*, as so many translations render it.” “Exodus,” *EBCRev*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 1:401. Cf. John I. Durham, *Exodus*, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1987), 90.


Ref	Subject	Verb	Object	Comments
9:12	Yahweh	hardened	(Pharaoh's) heart	First direct ref to divine hardening; <i>chazaq</i> Piel
9:17	<i>"You are still exalting yourself against my people and will not let them go"</i>			God explicitly faults Pharaoh for his own stubbornness ("acting arrogantly," HCSB)
9:34	Pharaoh	hardened	(his) heart	<i>kabad</i> Hiph., he made his heart heavy
9:35	(Pharaoh's) heart	hardened	(none)	<i>kabad</i> Qal., his heart was heavy
10:1	Yahweh	hardened	(Pharaoh's) heart	<i>kabad</i> Hiphil
10:3	<i>"Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, 'How long will you refuse to humble yourself before me?'"</i>			God still faults Pharaoh for his own arrogant refusal before God
10:20	Yahweh	hardened	(Pharaoh's) heart	<i>chazaq</i> Piel
10:27	Yahweh	hardened	(Pharaoh's) heart	<i>chazaq</i> Piel
11:10	Yahweh	hardened	(Pharaoh's) heart	<i>chazaq</i> Piel
13:15	Pharaoh	hardened	(none)	Retrospective; <i>qashab</i> Hiphil (lays blame on Pharaoh's own hardness)
14:4	Yahweh	will harden	(Pharaoh's) heart	<i>chazaq</i> Piel
14:5	(Pharaoh's) heart	turned	against Israel	<i>baphak</i> Niph., turn oneself
14:8	Yahweh	hardened	(Pharaoh's) heart	<i>chazaq</i> Piel
14:17	Yahweh	will harden	(Egyptians') hearts	<i>chazaq</i> Piel

Key

 = relevant assertions of Pharaoh's disposition

 = references in which Pharaoh's heart is the grammatical subject

 = references in which Pharaoh is the grammatical subject of the hardening

 = references in which God is the grammatical subject of the hardening

Brackets [] denote verse references in the Hebrew Bible