

## THE PHARAOH INITIATIVE: GOD’S MIDDLE KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION THROUGH A PAULINE PERSPECTIVE

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**Abstract:** *This paper explores the thread of God’s middle knowledge concerning Pharaoh throughout the context of the plagues narrative. Using germane Scripture primarily from Romans and Exodus, the paper presents grammatical, scriptural, and theological support for the thesis that God raised Pharaoh to such preeminence because of his foreknowledge that Pharaoh would respond in the manner necessary for God to achieve his goals. Additional contextual discussion is offered concerning certain theological implications regarding middle knowledge versus determinism, divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and the kind of obedience God desires—as indicated in the opening and closing pericopes of Romans—the obedience of faith. In addition, the article provides a brief investigation of the translational choice of “harden” for varying Hebrew terms overwhelmingly translated otherwise elsewhere in Scripture.*

**Key words:** *foreknowledge, middle knowledge, obduracy, divine hardening, Pharaoh, Exodus, Romans 9*

### I. INTRODUCTION

1. *Why this article.* Why did Paul use Pharaoh as an illustration in Romans 9? What did he reveal about God and Israel through what he revealed about Pharaoh? N. T. Wright astutely observes the unfortunate truth that much of Romans is read as though it were “simply about how individual sinners are justified by grace through faith.”<sup>1</sup> He also laments a prominent lack of reference to God’s promises to Israel, the covenant, or believers being part of the covenant family through whom God deals with evil.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, Witherington and Hyatt noted that since the English Reformation, not one major exegetical study has approached Romans through anything but “Augustinian/Lutheran/Calvinist readings of Romans.”<sup>3</sup> This influence extends into other traditions through authors such as Methodism’s C. K. Barrett, who gives Luther, Calvin, and Barth a special mention of indebtedness in his commentary on Romans.<sup>4</sup> Even post-Vatican II, in many Roman Catholic circles “Lutheran and Calvinist reading of Romans has been assumed to be fully rep-

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 1: Chapters 1–8* (London: SPCK, 2004), 65.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), xi.

<sup>4</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* (rev. ed.; BNTC; London: Continuum, 1991), vii.

representative” of the Protestant understanding of Romans.<sup>5</sup> In fact, nineteenth- and twentieth-century discussions of Romans so overwhelmingly perpetrated this bias that “even some Lutheran scholars, such as Krister Stendahl, wonder if another line of approach might be helpful in shedding fresh light on Paul’s text.”<sup>6</sup>

2. *Thesis.* In response, this paper seeks to add to the conversation using “another line of approach.” For example, this paper does not echo an Augustinian/Lutheran/Calvinist emphasis on God’s sovereignty in salvation.<sup>7</sup> Neither does it employ Barth’s “theology of unreason” rejecting Christian apologetics<sup>8</sup> or his dialectical approach illustrating God’s yes and no in Moses and Pharaoh.<sup>9</sup> Rather, this paper explores the thread of God’s middle knowledge concerning Pharaoh in the context of the plagues narrative (Exod 4:21–14:14). Using germane Scripture primarily from Romans and Exodus, this paper presents a case for the thesis that God raised a particular man to become Pharaoh because of foreknowledge that he would respond in the manner necessary for God to achieve his goals.

a. *The contribution of middle knowledge.* Middle knowledge proposes that “God possesses not only knowledge of everything that *could* happen (natural knowledge) but also everything that *would* happen in any appropriately specified set of circumstances (middle knowledge) ... including propositions about creaturely free actions.”<sup>10</sup> God does not control one’s decisions; one freely chooses one’s decisions. “Rather, the choices are *incorporated into the plan itself*.”<sup>11</sup> As such, middle knowledge offers a way to reconcile the data we have about God’s nature, character, and actions. God is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.”<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked and desires no one to perish but rather for all to come to repentance and live.<sup>13</sup> However, “a genuinely trusting relationship cannot be forced. Although a certain type of obedience can be forced, that is not ‘the obedience of faith,’ the kind of obedience which is key to the whole of Romans.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, God is all-powerful and has all resources. However, righteous-

<sup>5</sup> Witherington and Hyatt, *Romans*, xi–xii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>7</sup> See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 533; John Peter Lange et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 278; Witherington and Hyatt, *Romans*, xii.

<sup>8</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, “Karl Barth and Christian Apologetics,” *Them* 2.3 (1977): 66.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns; Oxford University Press: London, 1933), 351–53; Mark Galli, “Karl Barth,” *Christian History* 65 (2000): 20–23.

<sup>10</sup> J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 521–22.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Oxford, 2009), 179 (italics theirs).

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 24:6–7. Translations of Scripture are from the NASB unless otherwise noted. See also Num. 14:18; 2 Chr. 30:9; Neh. 9:17; Ps. 86:15; 103:8; 111:4; 112:4; 116:5; 145:8; Joel 2:13.

<sup>13</sup> 2 Peter 3:9. See also Ezek. 18:23, 32; 33:1; 1 Tim 2:4.

<sup>14</sup> Christian L. Ramsey, “The Obedience of Faith: Paul’s Understanding of Obedience in His Letter to the Romans” (Th.M. thesis, Regent University, 2018), 52.

ness (or rightness) cannot be produced by force; force alone depersonalizes.<sup>15</sup> Correspondingly, “any theory about the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart needs to fit with the other instances in Exodus of the Lord’s activity within responsible humans.”<sup>16</sup>

## II. PAUL, GOD, AND PHARAOH

The lightning rod clause in Romans referring to this context tends to be “He hardens whom He desires” (Rom 9:18 NASB). To better grasp what Paul meant, it is profitable to read what Paul recorded regarding Pharaoh, explore the context and language, and then revisit the reference in the context of Romans 9–11.

1. *What did Paul not say?* Trying to not impose what is so often implied, though notably absent, what does Scripture say concerning Pharaoh? What purposes did God have in mind? We read, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth” (Rom 9:17 NASB). Before looking more closely at God’s purposes, we note that this verse is often understood to mean, “For the very purpose of opposing Me and your ultimate condemnation, I created you ...” But Origen points out, “He has not said, ‘I have made you for this purpose,’” which would place the responsibility upon the Creator.<sup>17</sup> God never says, or even implies, that Pharaoh was created for perdition. Even if Pharaoh is one of the “vessels of wrath,” described as “prepared for destruction” (9:22), God is curiously not credited as being their preparer as he is with the “vessels of mercy” (9:23). Further, if the “vessels of wrath” did exactly as God desired, why would God be wrathful about them performing as he intended? Why would God feel need to “endure with much patience” vessels doing exactly as he wanted and intended? God raised up Pharaoh for purposes, not perdition. Origen wondered that people “should imagine that there is a nature of souls ... that would always perish and never be saved.”<sup>18</sup> Concerning the rational nature, he argues, “it can either obey the one inciting it, if it wants, or spurn the one exhorting it, if it is unwilling.”<sup>19</sup> Coover-Cox concludes that whatever the Lord’s hardening of Pharaoh entailed, “it becomes apparent ... He did not override Pharaoh’s will in at least one important respect. Exodus gives no sign that Pharaoh longed to submit to Yahweh as his sovereign and was pre-

<sup>15</sup> Dennis F. Kinlaw with John N. Oswalt, *Lectures in Old Testament Theology: Yahweh is God Alone* (Wilmore, KY: Francis Asbury Society, 2010), 352. Though compatibilist theologians propose a non-competitive relationship between God’s will and ours, such that God can influence such that one freely does what God predetermines one will do, the point remains regarding force alone—and the problem remains in explaining how God is not ultimately responsible for one’s doing.

<sup>16</sup> Dorian G. Coover-Cox, “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Its Literary and Cultural Contexts,” *BJSac* 163.651 (2006): 308.

<sup>17</sup> Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 6–10* (trans. Thomas P. Scheck; FC 104; Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002), 117.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 175–76. This is not a universalist statement against any nature of souls perishing. The full quote is: “I do not know how those who come forth from the school of Valentinus or Basilides, failing to hear what Paul has said here, should imagine that there is a nature of souls that would always be saved and never perish, and another that would always perish and never be saved.”

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

vented from doing so; he received numerous rebukes, explanations, and commands that imply opportunity to submit.”<sup>20</sup>

2. *God's foreknowledge and Pharaoh.* How would God know then, in raising Pharaoh up, that he would be resolute enough in his position for God to achieve his purposes? Middle knowledge offers that God need not directly cause every response to know what would happen, for according to middle knowledge, God can make infallible prophecies involving future states of affairs as well as accurate conditional prophecies involving human choice.<sup>21</sup> Ambrosiaster and Chrysostom would agree, emphasizing that God's choice of people for various purposes is due to his foreknowledge,<sup>22</sup> and Theodoret clarifies, “Let no one say, however, the foreknowledge is responsible for them: it was not foreknowledge that made them like that.”<sup>23</sup> Wesley rightly argued that if man were not free, he could be no more accountable for his thoughts, word, or actions than the sun, the moon, or the stars.<sup>24</sup> Middle knowledge is free from theological determinism's difficulty of explaining how a person is responsible for one's actions when no other action was possible for that person. Middle knowledge also lacks “the additional problem of explaining how God himself is *not* responsible for human wrongdoing even though it is God's decrees which necessitate that the wrongdoing occurs.”<sup>25</sup>

3. *What did Paul say?* So, what did God actually say regarding Pharaoh? He said, “raised you up.” Elsewhere in Scripture, this indicates placing leaders into certain positions. The Lord raised up an adversary to Solomon (1 Kgs 11:14). Daniel 2:21 reveals that God “deposes kings and raises up others” (NIV). Exploring Paul's reference of Exod 9:15–16 in context clarifies God's purposes:

For if by now I had put forth My hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, you would then have been cut off from the earth. But, indeed, for this reason I have allowed you to remain, in order to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth.<sup>26</sup>

Was damnation God's purpose for Pharaoh? No; as we read in Ezekiel, 2 Peter, 1 Timothy, and Acts, it is not God's will that any should perish, but for all

<sup>20</sup> Coover-Cox, “Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart,” 310.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings* (3rd ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 398.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in J. Patout Burns Jr., *Romans: Interpreted by Early Christian Commentators* (The Church's Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 226–30. For Chrysostom, see discussion of relevant verses in John Chrysostom, *Hom. Rom.* (NPNF<sup>7</sup>). The Fathers are mentioned here in support of God's work according to foreknowledge as opposed to determinism, not specifically in support of middle knowledge directly.

<sup>23</sup> *Greek Patristic and Eastern Orthodox Interpretations of Romans* (ed. Daniel Patte and Vasile Mihoc; Romans through History and Culture 9; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 93. Theodoret is mentioned here in support of God's foreknowledge being non-deterministic maintaining one's personal responsibility for evil. He is not mentioned specifically in direct support of middle knowledge.

<sup>24</sup> John Wesley, “Sermon 58: On Predestination,” *Sermons, on Several Occasions* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1999), n.p.

<sup>25</sup> William Hasker, *Metaphysics: Constructing a Worldview* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1983), 51.

<sup>26</sup> The Septuagint reveals God as being even more active in that he “preserved” Pharaoh.

come to repentance and knowledge of the truth and live.<sup>27</sup> If not damnation, then what was God's purpose for Pharaoh?

4. *God's purposes.* Pharaoh's initial reply to Moses and Aaron in Exod 5:2 was, "Who is the Lord ...? I do not know the Lord." As Coover-Cox keenly observes, "The long conflict between the Lord and Pharaoh begins to answer that question by showing the Lord to be well worth knowing and respecting."<sup>28</sup> That initial response "offers a framework for understanding the larger significance of the events that follow ... the intended outcome of which is not merely the liberation of slaves but the knowledge of God."<sup>29</sup> Several times in Exodus—as it is now—God's goal is to be known. God acts so Pharaoh will know him in Exod 7:17; 8:10, 22; and 9:14, with Moses affirming this in 9:29. God also acts so the Egyptians shall know him in 7:5; 14:4, 18. Additionally, God's acts in 6:7 and 10:2 are so Israel will know him. It seems God's goal is Pharaoh *knowing* him. Oswalt contends, "The self-revelation that is central to the book of Exodus is particularly aimed at correcting the false view of deity that is at the heart of every worldview except the biblical one."<sup>30</sup> Despite God's eventual judgment, judgment is never intended to be his last word.<sup>31</sup> Were there not judgments or acts of vengeance on anyone? Indeed. In Exod 12:2, it is revealed that God was punishing the gods of Egypt.<sup>32</sup> The plagues were demonstrations of Yahweh's power over that of the Egyptian pantheon.<sup>33</sup> With the plagues came much destruction by which Pharaoh could have been killed. But God preserved him. Why? God gave Pharaoh two reasons: "to show you My power and in order to proclaim My name through all the earth."

What, then, of God hardening whomever he wants? What does that mean? Is it an active or passive hardening, or both? The original languages reveal much.

### III. WHAT OF "THE HARDENING"?

Considering Paul's appeal to Exodus, the usage there is most determinative for his meaning here.<sup>34</sup> God reveals to Moses that he will harden Pharaoh's heart, and, taking the KJV translation as a representative English translation,<sup>35</sup> there are eighteen instances of "harden" throughout the narrative.<sup>36</sup> Various words are used,

<sup>27</sup> Ezek 18:23, 32; 33:11; Acts 17:30; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9.

<sup>28</sup> Coover-Cox, "Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart," 311.

<sup>29</sup> Claire Mathews McGinnis, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Christian and Jewish Interpretation," *Loyola University Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6 (2012): 60.

<sup>30</sup> John N. Oswalt, *Genesis and Exodus* (Cornerstone Biblical Commentary; Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2008), 272.

<sup>31</sup> John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 83. See also pp. 43, 107, 289, 493, 695.

<sup>32</sup> See also Num 33:4.

<sup>33</sup> J. E. Currid, "Why Did God Harden Pharaoh's Heart?," *BRev* 9 (1993): 47. See also John N. Oswalt, *Genesis and Exodus*, 272–73.

<sup>34</sup> Brian J. Abasciano, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:10–18: An Intertextual and Theological Exegesis* (LNTS 317; London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 203.

<sup>35</sup> Other English translations yield similar results.

<sup>36</sup> Exod 4:21; 7:3, 13, 14, 22, 8:15, 19, 32, 9:7, 12, 34, 35, 10:1, 20, 27, 11:10, 14:4, 8. NASB does not translate Ex 7:124 in terms of being "hardened" as ESV, KJV, NKJV, HCSB, do.

with two being particularly in the foreground. Pharaoh and God each are credited with hardening Pharaoh's heart, and there are other merely descriptive occurrences.

1. *Words behind the hardening.* After a different word is used in 4:21, the word קָשָׁה [qásháh] is used in 7:3 for "harden." This word is used only once in the plagues narrative and is descriptive of what God says he will do. Again using the KJV as a representative English translation, we find that in other OT passages, the term is translated "harden" twelve times, "hard" four times, and "stiff-necked" and "grievous" each twice. Though not the first word describing what God will do, and despite only a single use, it seems this particular word carries the popular connotation for all the others. But investigating the others reveals vital nuances and significant questions.

a. *Chazaq.* The most frequent word is חָזַק [chazaq]. It is used twelve times and is the term first used (Exod 4:21). Seven times in the exodus narrative, God performed the action represented by this term, while Pharaoh never did. Other instances are descriptive, not having a clear subject. From the lexical idea of the verb, at least in Exod 4:21, Beale has concluded that just as Yahweh gave Moses power, he also gave Pharaoh power, in each case enabling their relative functions, with both seen as contributing to a *Heilsplan* goal.<sup>37</sup> Although English translations typically render חָזַק [chazaq] as "harden" in Exod 4:21, the word is most often translated with "strengthen" or some similar term when used elsewhere in the OT.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly enough, "harden" is sometimes not even included by lexica as a definitional option.<sup>39</sup> In its 290 OT occurrences, חָזַק [chazaq] is translated as "harden" solely in contexts involving Pharaoh, with two exceptions.<sup>40</sup> In the KJV (again, as representative of other English translations), we find חָזַק [chazaq] translated "strong" forty-eight times, "strengthened" twenty-eight times, "strengthen" fourteen times, "stronger" five times, "repair" forty-seven times, "hold" thirty-seven times, and with other terms such as "encourage," "courage," etc.<sup>41</sup> This word is used when the Lord told Gideon he would strengthen his hands to go against Midian (Judg 7:11). Samson asked God to strengthen him to destroy the Philistine temple as his last act (Judg 16:28). David strengthened or encouraged himself in the Lord (1 Sam 30:6). Nehemiah prayed the Lord would strengthen his hands in Neh 6:9 and uses the word for *repairing* the wall throughout its construction. The word is used this way in the Psalms and Prophets as well. It is noteworthy that this strengthening is not irreversible by the person. In Hos 7:14, God laments, "Although I trained and strengthened their arms, yet they devise evil against Me." Since the term is so frequently translated with words such as "strength," "repair," etc., it seems questiona-

<sup>37</sup> G. K. Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4–14 and Romans 9," *TrinJ* 5 NS (1984): 134.

<sup>38</sup> BDB 304. See also Wilhelm Gesenius and Samuel Prideaux Tregelles, *Gesenius's Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures* (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons, 1846), 269.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. William Lee Holladay and Ludwig Köhler, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 99–100.

<sup>40</sup> The two exceptions are Exod 14:17, referring to the Egyptians (still in the narrative context but not speaking of Pharaoh directly), and Josh 11:20, speaking of the nations fighting against Joshua.

<sup>41</sup> For deeper, similar analysis, see Carl Philip Weber, "חָזַק," in *TWOT* 276–77.

ble to render the term “harden” in contexts involving Pharaoh. Perhaps, “made strong” or “strengthened” would be more accurate.

b. *Kabad*. The other main word is **קָבַד** [*kabad*], used five times. God did this once after Pharaoh did this to himself three times, and it is descriptive with no clear subject once. In similar fashion as **חָזַק** [*chazaq*] above, **קָבַד** [*kabad*] occurs 113 times in the OT with only seven translated as “harden,” and only in contexts involving Pharaoh. Elsewhere (again, in the KJV) this word is translated as “honor” thirty-four times, “honorable” fourteen times, “glorify” fourteen times, “glorious” five times, and “harden” seven times, with other less common translations.<sup>42</sup> This word is used in Exod 20:12 as “honor your father and mother,” and in Lev 10:3 where the Lord declares “he will be honored among the people.” In Prov 27:18, one caring for his master will be honored. Psalm 86:12 has the Psalmist declaring that he will glorify the Lord’s name forever. God speaks of glorifying himself in Ezek 39:13. The Hebrew concept of glory includes an aspect of weightiness with it. Paul mentions “the eternal weight of glory” (2 Cor 4:17). This is seen in English in phrases regarding an argument having weight or a person having a heavy heart. With *kabad* carrying the idea of honor and glory sixty-seven times, why translate it “harden,” and why only in context with Pharaoh? Perhaps “made heavy” or “honored” would be more accurate.

Though the terms used are similar, Beale acknowledges “possible distinctions in usage.” He offers, “The term *hāzaq* may specifically stress the volition’s strong desire to refuse Israelite release. The idea with *kābēd* may emphasize the qualitative intensity of the volition’s power with respect to refusal, so that such a power of decision is seen to be so psychologically ‘heavy.’”<sup>43</sup> If we follow the most common word usages (or at least ignore the curious translation choices), there is a case that Pharaoh’s heart was strengthened by God seven times, Pharaoh made his own heart heavy or honored his own heart three times, and God did so once. Furthermore, this “hardening” was not for Pharaoh’s demise or condemnation but for God to show his wonders and become known.

c. *σκληρύνω*. With the Hebrew discussion in mind, what does Paul’s language reveal? For Pharaoh’s hardening, Paul uses the LXX’s main verb, *σκληρύνω*, which aligns with the prominent Hebrew verb **קָבַד**.<sup>44</sup> Abasciano concludes:

The natural connotation of “strength” seems to be the most obvious root of the LXX’s usage of the term. ... Since the word itself can suggest strength, the Exodus context suggests this nuance, and the word translates a Hebrew word that most basically means “to strengthen” and carries this meaning in the exodus narrative, it is likely that Paul’s use here carries this sense too.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> See Robert L. Thomas, *New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Including Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries* (upd. ed.; Anaheim, CA: Foundation, 1998), #3513.

<sup>43</sup>Beale, “Exegetical and Theological Consideration,” 147.

<sup>44</sup>*The Lexham Analytical Lexicon to the Septuagint* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012), s.v. *σκληρύνω*.

<sup>45</sup> Abasciano, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:10–18*, 203.

G. A. Chadwick clarified that “to harden Pharaoh’s heart was to inspire him, not with wickedness, but with nerve.”<sup>46</sup> After all, Pharaoh was already set on not releasing the Hebrews (Exod 1:10).

#### IV. ALIGNING THE HORIZONS

Is there an understanding that aligns the context and language regarding the conflict between Pharaoh and God, what Paul is doing in Romans 9, and the truths we know of God’s character? The research contained here suggests there is.

1. *Paul’s words.* Revisiting the paragraph in Exodus 9 which Paul references, God tells Moses, “Present yourself before Pharaoh and say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD, the God of the Hebrews, . . . I will send all My plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth.’” Then Paul references verses 13–17:

For by now I could have put out my hand and struck you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been cut off from the earth. But for this purpose I have raised you up (“were you preserved,” LXX), to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth. (Exod 9:13–17)

Again, why did God preserve Pharaoh, allowing him to remain? It was to show Pharaoh his power and to proclaim his name throughout the earth.

For God to display his power as undeniably superior, however, he needed the ultimate in earthly opposition. Having middle knowledge, God foreknew that if that specific man was raised up as the ruler of all Egypt, that man as Pharaoh would fit the bill, so he raised him up. Paul clearly locates the raising up of Pharaoh in the will of God, but he does not conclude that God is responsible for evil, nor does he exempt Pharaoh from responsibility.<sup>47</sup> In context, Abasciano clarifies that *σκληρύνω* “applies to the strengthening of an already freely formed will,” not to a supernatural infusing of stubbornness, a divine controlling of Pharaoh’s will, or the withdrawing of divine grace.<sup>48</sup>

2. *God’s purpose.* Furthermore, because it was not God’s purpose for Pharaoh to be eternally condemned, but for Pharaoh to know him, God, as Luther might say, did not reach in and “turn Pharaoh’s heart from one direction to another, transforming a ‘fleshy’ heart to a stone by some divine alchemy.”<sup>49</sup> Rather, the Lord sovereignly “gave Pharaoh the strength of will necessary to go on opposing Him, in accord with Pharaoh’s most fundamental desires and despite what should otherwise have been effective inducements.”<sup>50</sup> In so doing, God also enabled Pharaoh to

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 103, as cited by R. T. Forster and V. P. Marston, *God’s Strategy in Human History* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 265.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 790.

<sup>48</sup> Abasciano, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:10–18*, 203–4.

<sup>49</sup> Cited in McGinnis, “Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,” 58. The quotes refer to Luther in *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (ed. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson; LCC 17; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 234, 236.

<sup>50</sup> Coover-Cox, “Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,” 310.



respond in sincerity in the obedience of faith, not merely fearful compliance. Origen argues, “God is patient and did not want to deprive even [Pharaoh] of an opportunity of repentance.”<sup>51</sup>

3. *God’s ways.* God is always personally working in human history. Though predestination is largely discussed in Romans 9, the discussion begins in 8:28 speaking of God’s working things together for the good of the called. Verses 29–30 clarify that those he foreknew, he predestined, called, and so on. Foreknowledge comes first. God’s choosing is not based upon impersonal criteria beyond one’s capacity, like biology or region. While God predestines certain consequences to those choosing good or evil, God did not predestine some to be irreversibly good and others irreversibly evil.<sup>52</sup> Luther would offer that “God does not create evil in us ‘from scratch’ like one who ‘blends poison into an innocent vessel.’”<sup>53</sup> Augustine, Origen, and Gregory would concur. Though they disagree on other facets regarding God’s hardening, they share “the view that God does not harden by imparting malice. For all three, hardening is more a passive than active work of God, in which God allows the consequences of human disobedience to take their natural course.”<sup>54</sup> As such, those like Pharaoh who refuse to respond in faith and obedience “are fully responsible for their cold and resistant hearts.”<sup>55</sup>

After mentioning Pharaoh, the later references in Romans to “hardening” refer to ethnic Israel. Those references employ a different Greek word: *πωρόω*, which indicates the process of petrification itself rather than the state of hardness (as *σκληρύνω* describes) and carries the nuance of insensibility, deterioration of faculties, dullness, etc.<sup>56</sup> Paul reveals that the provocation for this stubborn resistance to God is “God’s sovereign act of making elect status conditional on faith in Christ apart from works or ancestry.”<sup>57</sup> Yet, Paul, with zeal nourished by hope, warns Israel not to be hardened.<sup>58</sup> Could it be that Paul was unveiling a parallel between God’s interaction with Pharaoh and what is occurring within Israel as a warning to not follow suit?

#### IV. CONCLUSION

This brief exploration of God’s middle knowledge concerning Pharaoh in the context of the plagues narrative and germane Scripture from Romans and Exodus demonstrates the merit of the case for God raising Pharaoh to such preeminence

<sup>51</sup> Origen, quoted in Burns, *Romans*, 230.

<sup>52</sup> Vic Reasoner, *A Fundamental Wesleyan Commentary on Romans* (Evansville, IN: Fundamental Wesleyan, 2002), 79.

<sup>53</sup> Martin Luther, cited in McGinnis, “Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,” 58.

<sup>54</sup> McGinnis, “Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,” 59.

<sup>55</sup> Schreiner, *New Testament Theology*, 343.

<sup>56</sup> Ivar Vegge, “Not ‘Hardened Hearts’ but ‘Petrified Hearts’ (Mark 6:52): The Challenge to Assimilate and Accommodate the Vastness of Jesus in Mark 6:45–52,” in *Mixed Feelings and Vexed Passions: Exploring Emotions in Biblical Literature* (ed. F. Scott Spencer; SBL Resources for Biblical Study 90; Atlanta: SBL, 2017), 257–61. This seems to align well with spirit of stupor, etc. mentioned in Scripture.

<sup>57</sup> Abasciano, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:10–18*, 205.

<sup>58</sup> Karl Ludwig Schmidt and Martin Anton Schmidt, “*παχύνω, κτλ.*,” *TDNT* 5:1027.

because of foreknowledge that he would respond in the manner necessary for God to achieve his goals. Middle knowledge is an option that allows for God's omniscience and omnipotence as well as human free choice and responsibility. God knows what one's free choice will be in a specific circumstance, like the individual raised to be Pharaoh in the midst of God's action throughout the plagues. The early Church Fathers among others affirm that a person may genuinely choose, and that God's foreknowledge informs his choices as he achieves his plans, but that foreknowledge does not make a person choose. As such, God knows what will be and is powerful enough to both enable a measure of free will and orchestrate those free choices into his master plan.

Though God strengthens one's heart or makes one's heart heavy and less moveable, he will honor one's decision, not forcing one against one's will. Notably, God is specifically cited as the author of hardening in John 12:40, and other passages must be understood in this light, yet "the hardening by God is also a self-hardening of the unbeliever who does not obey God."<sup>59</sup> Accordingly, the hardening having occurred to part of Israel in Rom 11:25 indicates not only that those in Israel were hardened by God (11:7–10) but also that they chose the wrong path themselves (9:30–10:3).<sup>60</sup>

As indicated in the opening and closing pericopes of Romans, the obedience of faith—not any other kind of obedience—has always been key.<sup>61</sup> There is always the issue of this obedience that is made up of grace-enabled, personally-activated, trusting faith. God did not want Pharaoh to obey out of fear, pragmatism, ritual, or anything other than the desired obedience of faith. As such, God needed to empower Pharaoh (as the rest of us) in a way that enables a free choice (or free rejection) of him, and the Hebrew seems to paint such a picture.

The raising up of Pharaoh is an example of God's middle knowledge in knowing Pharaoh would be obstinate enough for God to achieve his goals. Pharaoh is also an example of God's extravagant mercy in preserving Pharaoh from destruction and strengthening his heart, allowing for free choices despite God's knowledge he would reject him. And finally, Pharaoh is a warning to Israel against persisting as Pharaoh did lest they arrive at such an end themselves.

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 1026.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 1027.

<sup>61</sup> Rom 1:5 and 16:26. The phrase bookends Romans and is thematic throughout. See Ramsey, "Obedience of Faith."