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**Yahweh and the “Hardening” of Pharaoh’s Heart:  
The Polemics of Sovereignty and the  
Politics of Representation**

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**Abstract**

The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is undoubtedly the most reoccurring subject in the interpretative history of Exodus. It has occasioned several proposals and spirited efforts to deal with the perceived theological problems. Unfortunately, this interpretative history is largely chequered by the anachronic debates about free will and predestination. Departing from this historic path, the study engages the literary elements of characterization at the opening of Exodus particularly the representations of Pharaoh and Yahweh as contending rivals. On this contested space, Yahweh asserts his sovereignty by “hardening” the heart of his opponent. Underscoring the polemics of sovereignty and its imposing politics, the paper notes

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.sun.ac.za](http://www.sun.ac.za).

the overt defiance and the dynamics of sovereignty in the description of Yahweh and his confrontation with Pharaoh. Within this narrative landscape, Yahweh's sovereignty is clearly projected and the polemics of this important representation is directly engaged.

### Introduction

The “hardening of Pharaoh’s heart” in Exodus is perhaps the most difficult text or concept in the entire biblical narratives.<sup>2</sup> The difficulty is readily attested in the writings of both ancient and modern interpreters of the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> For example, this difficulty is particularly reflected in the earlier omissions of this motif in the writings of Josephus in his re-narrations of the Exodus.<sup>4</sup> The omission was so-well pronounced that William Whiston, the famous translator and commentator on Josephus observed, “...infatuation is what the Scripture styles the judicial hardening [of] the hearts, and blinding the eyes of men, who, by their former voluntary wickedness, have justly deserved to be destroyed, and are thereby brought to destruction...”<sup>5</sup> Significantly, Whiston noted,

...Josephus [refuses to]... puzzle himself, or perplex his readers, with subtle hypotheses as to the manner of such judicial infatuations by God, while the justice of them is generally so obvious. That peculiar manner of the divine operations, or permissions, or the means God makes use of in such cases, is

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<sup>2</sup> The National Society for scriptural reasoning in the second volume of their journal in 2002 devoted the entire work to address the problem of Yahweh's hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Several works within this journal wrestled with the difficulty inherent in the representation of Yahweh. For these studies see Kris Lindbeck, “Comments on ‘Pharaoh’s Hardened Heart,’” *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 2, no. 2 (2002); Daniel W. Hardy, “Pharaoh’s Hardened Heart,” *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 2, no. 2 (2002); Shaul Magid, “Pharaoh’s Hardened Heart: Cruel and Unusual Punishment and Covenantal Ethics,” *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 2, no. 2 (2002); Stanley Hauerwas, “Pharaoh’s Hardened Heart: Some Christians Readings,” *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 2, no. 2 (2002).

<sup>3</sup> See also Claire M. McGinnis, “Teaching Exodus as a ‘Problem Text,’” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 5, no. 2 (2002), 71-79.

<sup>4</sup> Josephus often omits and expands certain aspects of biblical stories with an intention to appeal to the general ideological disposition of his audience. For this practice in the writing of Josephus see Sabrina Inowlocki, “Josephus’ Rewriting of the Babel Narrative (Gen 11:1-9),” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 37, no. 2 (2006): 169-191; David Bernat, “Josephus’s Portrayal of Phinehas,” *Journal for the Study of Pseudepigrapha* 13, no. 2 (2002): 315-345; Michael Avioz, “Saul as a Just Judge in Josephus’ Antiquities of the Jews,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 8, no. 18 (2008): 1-9.

<sup>5</sup> The view is expressed in his comments on the footnote. See Josephus, “The Antiquities of the Jews,” in *Josephus: The Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston, 30-650 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 236.

often impenetrable to us... Nor have all the subtleties of the moderns, as far as I see, given any considerable light in this...<sup>6</sup>

For Whiston, the “hardening” of Pharaoh is part of those “secrets” or mysteries which are “impenetrable to us,” and hence, according to him, this subject should be placed among the difficult truths which from the perspective of the deuteronomist writer “belong to the Lord.”<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, this same silence or omission of the subject of Yahweh’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is noticeable in Philo who, in his allegorical reinterpretations of the life of Moses, ignored the philosophical and theological problems raised by this biblical narrative.<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, Philo merely attributed the stubbornness of Pharaoh to “his natural obstinacy and haughtiness” and the filling of his soul “with all the arrogance of his ancestors.”<sup>9</sup> In this perspective, Philo generally glossed over the apparent problem with the Exodus text and situated Pharaoh’s stubbornness in natural factors. Perhaps, Philo’s allegorical agenda overclouded his perspective and hence did not allow him to directly engage the problem that this text raises for the reader. In addition, Origen noting the problem in the “hardening” of Pharaoh primarily described the justice and goodness of God in his dealings with Pharaoh, thus exonerating God and defending him against any charge of wrong doing.<sup>10</sup> G. K. Beale has also described

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<sup>6</sup> Josephus, “The Antiquities of the Jews,” 236.

<sup>7</sup> Deuteronomy 29:29.

<sup>8</sup> While Philo has obsessively treat biblical narrative in terms of allegory, there is a clear allegorical commitment in the stories presented by biblical writers. Concerning this allegorical template in biblical narrative see Roland Boer, “National Allegory in the Hebrew Bible,” *JSOT* 74 (1997): 95-116.

<sup>9</sup> Philo, “On the Life of Moses, I (*De Vita Mosis, I*),” in *The Works of Philo*, trans. C.D. Yonge, 458-490 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2002), 467, 472.

<sup>10</sup> On this issue, Origen observed, “and let us ask such in what manner they consider the heart of Pharaoh to have been hardened by God—by what acts or by what prospective arrangements. For we must observe the conception of a God who in our opinion is both just and good...And how shall the justice of God be defended, if He Himself is the cause of the destruction of those whom, owing to their unbelief (through their being hardened), He has afterwards condemned by the authority of a judge?” Origen also added, “the heart of those who treat His kindness and forbearance with contempt and insolence is hardened by the punishment of their crimes being delayed; while those, on the other hand, who make His goodness and patience the occasion of their repentance and reformation, obtain compassion.” See Origen, *Origen de Principiis*. The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 4, eds. Alexander [Footnote continued on next page ... ]

the problematic nature of Yahweh's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus in the discourses of the reformation on freewill especially as reflected in the writings of Luther, Calvin, Arminius, Erasmus and Castello.<sup>11</sup>

In more recent time, C. M. McGinnis in his work, "Teaching Exodus as Problem Text," has included the "hardening of Pharaoh's heart" as a central problem in the reading, interpretation and teaching of the book of Exodus.<sup>12</sup> In addition, Elaine Philips has described the "horrifying and complex process" involved in the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart by Yahweh and then later by Pharaoh himself.<sup>13</sup> According to Lyle Eslinger, the announcement by the narrator that Yahweh has "hardened" Pharaoh's heart ultimately compromised the stories and turned the Exodus narrative into a "sham" because "the narrator has discarded the possibility of telling a tale of real triumphs" by Yahweh "over the Egyptian king."<sup>14</sup> In the same vein, Northrop Frye observed that Yahweh appears to be a "trickster God" in his "hardening" of the heart of Pharaoh.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Robert Chisholm, describing the problem of Yahweh's hardening of Pharaoh, has also observed, "[if] God's primary goal in His dealings with Pharaoh was self-glorification...God would not really be glorified if He controlled Pharaoh like a puppet."<sup>16</sup> David M. Gunn expressed the same feelings when he observed that Yahweh stole Pharaoh's will and at the end he turned Pharaoh into "a mere puppet."<sup>17</sup> On the long run, this

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Roberts and James Donaldson, trans. Frederick Crombie, 222-384 (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2004), 309-10.

<sup>11</sup> See G.K. Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4-14 and Romans 9," *Trinity Journal* 5 (1984): 129-134.

<sup>12</sup> Claire M. McGinnis, "Teaching Exodus as Problem Text," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 5, no. 2 (2002): 71-79.

<sup>13</sup> She describes the "hardening" of Pharaoh as the "tragic side" of election. This tragic side of election is known as reprobation. See Elaine A. Philips, "Exodus," in *The IVP Women's Commentary*, eds. C.C. Kroeger and Mary J. Evans, 27-49 (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 31.

<sup>14</sup> See Lyle Eslinger, "Freedom or Knowledge? Perspective and Purpose in the Exodus Narrative (Exodus 1-15)," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 52 (1991), 57.

<sup>15</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 75. See also Michael Dolzani, "The Ashes of the Stars: Northrop Frye and the Trickster God," *Semeia* 89 (2002), 59-73

<sup>16</sup> Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (1996), 410.

<sup>17</sup> David M. Gunn, "The 'Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart' Plot, Character and Theology in Exodus 1-14," *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Literature*, ed. D. J. A. Clines, and A. J. Hausner (Sheffield: JSOT, 1982), 80.

manipulation of Pharaoh appears to make Yahweh, according to Chisholm, a divine “Puppeteer.”<sup>18</sup> For Cheryl Kirk-Duggan, “...Pharaoh never stood a chance. He and Yahweh engage in a turf war for power, recognition and control. Yahweh plays with Pharaoh’s head, for when Pharaoh is about to surrender, Pharaoh hardens his own heart. Sadly and outrageously, this divine manipulative action is premeditated.”<sup>19</sup>

In addition, Brian I. Irwin has suggested that the “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart could be added to a host of passages in biblical narratives where Yahweh appeared “immoral” because “God force[s] an individual to disobey” him.<sup>20</sup> In fact, for Irwin, the “hardening” of Pharaoh is morally “troublesome,”<sup>21</sup> and Abel Ndjerareou has described this same problem as a moral “paradox.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, Donald E. Gowan observed, “[i]f God could harden Pharaoh’s heart, why did he not instead soften his heart, and thus avoid all that suffering and death?”<sup>23</sup> It is from this same perspective that Dorian G. C. Cox has observed that in Yahweh’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart one “may feel sympathy for Pharaoh and have doubts about the Lord’s justice.”<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, Umberto Cassuto also observed, “[h]ere arises...a difficult problem, which exegetes...have struggled hard to resolve. It may be formulated thus: if it is the Lord who makes strong (or hardens) the heart of Pharaoh, the latter cannot be blamed for this, and consequently it is unethical for him to suffer retribution.”<sup>25</sup> For Brevard S. Childs, “the problem of hardening” of Pharaoh “is unique in Exodus. It emerges as if from nowhere and then

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<sup>18</sup> Chisholm Jr., “Divine Hardening in the Old Testament,” 429.

<sup>19</sup> According to Kirk-Duggan, “The persistence of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart seems to deny Pharaoh any freedom, a case of predestination, which Pharaoh seems to be a pawn in God’s chess game, which the Exodus editors do not address. See Kirk-Duggan, “Divine Puppeteer: Yahweh of Exodus,” *Exodus to Deuteronomy: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 102, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Brian P. Irwin, “Yahweh’s Suspension of Free Will in the Old Testament: Divine Immorality or Sign-Act,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 54 (2003), 55.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Abel Ndjerareou, “Exodus,” *African Bible Commentary*, ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo et al, 85-128 (Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive, 2006), 93.

<sup>23</sup> Gowan, *Theology in Exodus* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 128.

<sup>24</sup> See Dorian G. G. Cox, “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in its Literary and Cultural Context,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163, no. 651 (2006), 292.

<sup>25</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. Israel Abraham (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967), 55.

varnishes...it has become a gigantic stumbling block which has rendered the whole plague narrative opaque.”<sup>26</sup> Acknowledging the various merits of the preceding works in highlighting the general difficulties in the motif of Yahweh’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, the paper describes the characterization of Pharaoh as a competing deity in the polemics of Exodus. Consequently, the paper underscores the significance of Yahweh’s “hardening” of Pharaoh, and draws its implications in the wider context of Yahweh’s sovereign dealings with the nations of the earth.

### I. The Representations of Contending Deities

The art of characterization in biblical narrative was largely brought to the attention of biblical studies through the works of Meir Sternberg and Robert Alter.<sup>27</sup> This narrative craft describes the various ways in which the biblical narrator introduces and presents *his characters*. They are “his characters” in a sense because he is the only one that has access to them and bring them on the narrative stage as he pleases. He tells us what he wanted us to know through their speeches, actions and labels which he employed in describing them. It is in this perspective that Sternberg has described biblical characters as “the mouthpiece” of the narrator because through the different ways he describes or introduces them he directly or indirectly speaks to us, his readers.<sup>28</sup> Even though biblical characters are historical entities with their source driven from historical memory rather than a fabrication from imagination, there is still difference between the characters in a particular text and the actual historical persons in real life.

In noting this difference, Adele Berlin has rightly observed, “Above all, we must keep in mind that narrative is a *form of*

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<sup>26</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 170.

<sup>27</sup> See Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 203-9; 287-94; 297-99; 300-8. See also Sternberg, “Proteus in Quotation Land: Mimesis and the Forms of Reported Discourse,” *Poetic Today* 4 (1982):107-56. See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 63-87; 182-85.

<sup>28</sup> See Sternberg, “Double Cave, Double Talk: The Indirection of Biblical Dialogue,” *Not in Heaven: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative*, eds. Jason P. Rosenblatt and Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr., 28-57 (Bloomington: Indiana: University Press, 1991), 28

representation.”<sup>29</sup> Significantly, understanding the nature of a biblical character is important towards the rediscovery of the narrative significance of the text.<sup>30</sup> Consequently we must pay close attention to the characterization of Pharaoh as an “Anti-God” figure in the opening chapters of Exodus. Often ignoring this element of characterization, most interpreters have generally missed the significance of Pharaoh as a literary character at the opening of Exodus.

In the opening of Exodus, Pharaoh is described as an “anti-God” character whose decrees rivaled the one of Yahweh at the opening of the Hebrew Bible. The placement of Pharaoh here is not an accident because Pharaoh decreed against “being fruitful and multiply” that is, the very divine commands to the first couple in Genesis 1:26. Underscoring this same relationship, Peter Enns observed,

the reason God chooses such a means of punishment is due, at least in part, to the nature of the crime perpetrated against Israel, namely, Pharaoh’s posing as an anti-God force whose decree in chapter 1 is nothing less than a challenge to God’s creation mandate in Genesis 1.<sup>31</sup>

This Exodus narrative presents Pharaoh as a being who acts in defiance to the creation mandate and sought by every means to sabotage God’s creation from fulfilling its original purpose. It describes a gruesome reality of man’s dominion against his kind by enslaving his race rather than taking dominion over the earth as in Genesis 1. The portrait of Pharaoh here makes Pharaoh like a rival deity who is defiant and works against the creation mandate. In this representation as an “anti-God” figure, Pharaoh, as a character, is also a god who denied the Israelites to go and worship the true God, Yahweh. By his refusal to allow the Israelites “to worship,” Pharaoh shows himself to be anti-Yahweh. It is in this conflict between Yahweh and the description of Pharaoh as an “anti-God” figure that “the hardening” of his heart must readily be placed because it

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<sup>29</sup> See Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 13.

<sup>30</sup> On various forms of characters in the Bible see Berlin, *Poetics*, 23-42. For the various ways in which the biblical narrator creates his characters see Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narrative: Literary Criticism and the Bible*, trans. Yael Lotan (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 2001), 69-92.

<sup>31</sup> See Peter Enns, *Exodus. The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2000), 230.



provides us an insight into the dynamics at work within the text of Exodus. John M. Frame describes the significant way in which the representation of Yahweh at Exodus is juxtaposed with his representation at creation. He notes,

[At creation]...God commands all the forces of nature. He brings light to the earth, just as he brings darkness to Egypt (Gen. 1:3-5; Ex. 10:15). He divides the waters of the earth (1:6-10), just as he divides the waters of the Red Sea. He causes the earth to teem with living creatures (Gen. 1:20-25), just as he later inundates Egypt with frogs, gnats, flies, and locusts (Ex. 8:1-32; 10:1-20). He celebrates his creative work in a sabbath of rest (Gen. 2:3; Ex. 20:8-11), just as he calls Israel to celebrate redemption from Egypt by keeping the Sabbath day holy...In both creation and redemption...[at Exodus] God displays himself as the Lord of all the earth. Creation, redemption, and judgment are similar events, requiring the same sovereign power, authority, and presence...<sup>32</sup>

Seen from this angle, the story of Exodus describes “a contest between Yahweh and Pharaoh.”<sup>33</sup> Hence, the representation of Pharaoh in Exodus works with subtle allusions to the power of Yahweh at creation. Similarly, Pharaoh is also represented as building a royal edifice for himself at the opening of Exodus just as Yahweh will ask the Israelites later in the book to build him also a tabernacle. These are the only two significant building projects in Exodus.<sup>34</sup> In the same way, Pharaoh’s building project at the beginning of Exodus also mimics Yahweh’s creation of the world in Genesis. There are also subtle allusions in this building project to the builders of the towers of Babel in Genesis 11.<sup>35</sup> Considered in this way, Pharaoh appears to stage a defiant opposition against Yahweh, and thus the story of Exodus presents a direct conflict between Yahweh and the representation of Pharaoh as a competing deity.

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<sup>32</sup> John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2002), 295.

<sup>33</sup> Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 131.

<sup>34</sup> Concerning this connection, Ralph W. Klein observed, “[b]y the end of the Book of Exodus, worship and service to God have replaced slavery and service to Pharaoh. Instead of their forced labor on Pharaoh’s building projects, the people gladly participate in the building of the tabernacle. Hence, there are clear links between the tabernacle account and all the rest of the materials in the Book of Exodus.” See Klein, “Back to the Future: The Tabernacle in the Book of Exodus,” *Interpretation* 50, no. 3 (1996): 364-276.

<sup>35</sup> See Sheila T. Keiter, “Outsmarting God: Egyptian Slavery and the Tower of Babel,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 41, no. 3 (2013): 200-204.



## II. The Polemics of Yahweh’s “Hardening” of Pharaoh’s Heart

The “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart appears to be an idiom used by the narrator to describe Yahweh’s influence and control over the decisions of Pharaoh, thereby making a caricature of Pharaoh as an “anti-God” figure. Kirk-Duggan said, “[i]n this contest between gods (Yahweh and Pharaoh), Pharaoh is confident that he will remain triumphant...” However, “[t]his scenario places Pharaoh in a no-win situation. After all, his office made him a god; how does one god recognize the power of another deity without subverting his own power and authority.”<sup>36</sup> Polemically then, Pharaoh’s claim to godhood is indirectly subverted in a closer reading of this narrative. Considering this polemic, Brueggemann has described the role of Pharaoh in terms of a lord and his defiant vassal.<sup>37</sup> He underscores the subservient character of Pharaoh in relationship to the several commands issued by Yahweh to allow the Israelites to leave Egypt. Yahweh is represented as a master or lord, and Pharaoh placed on the secondary role of a vassal, albeit, a defiant vassal. Brueggemann said, “[it] is striking (as it is so familiar to us that we fail to notice) that in the plague drama Yahweh abruptly addresses Pharaoh with an imperative, issuing a command that increasingly takes the form of an ultimatum...”<sup>38</sup> These demands are repeatedly given in Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1, 2, 20, 21; 9:1, 2, 13; 10: 3-4 respectively. The repeated demands (and not requests) issued by Yahweh suggest the placement of Yahweh above the cultural claims of Pharaoh to sovereign authority.<sup>39</sup> In this way, Yahweh makes a demand on a subservient character who is not his equal or mate. Brueggemann added,

Each time, Yahweh addresses Pharaoh with an imperative, clearly expecting to be obeyed. The narrative never suggests the grounds upon which Yahweh holds such an expectation, but they are assumed as the necessary premise of the entire narrative. Pharaoh is addressed as one who is subject to such an imperative, and by the grammar of the imperative he is assigned a subordinate role. The command itself is neither argued nor justified. No special point is made that it is

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<sup>36</sup> See Kirk-Duggan, “Divine Puppeteer,” 97.

<sup>37</sup> Brueggemann, “Pharaoh as Vassal: A Study of a Political Metaphor,” *CBQ* 57 (1995): 27-51.

<sup>38</sup> Brueggemann, “Pharaoh as Vassal,” 35.

<sup>39</sup> According to J. Philip Hyatt, “[t]he story of the plagues is the account of a confrontation between Yahweh, God of the Hebrews, and the gods of Egypt and Pharaoh himself was considered a god by his subjects.” Hyatt, *Exodus*. New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1980), 99.

a demand for liberation, for ‘letting go.’ All that matters is that it is a command issued by a superior to an inferior, who is expected to obey.<sup>40</sup>

Following James S. Ackerman and Moshe Greenberg, Brueggemann has also underscored the importance of the word עִבֵּר in the opening of Exodus.<sup>41</sup> The true “intention of the command” to Pharaoh “is that the ‘Hebrews’ should ‘serve/worship’ Yahweh” because “the verb ‘serve’ [עִבֵּר] dominates chaps. 1-2” and used to describe Israelites as slaves in service to Pharaoh. “The use of the same verb in the plague episodes, in the phrase ‘serve me,’ then can be understood as an intentional contrast to the earlier use.”<sup>42</sup> Situated on this template, Pharaoh’s demands on the Israelites is directly counteracted by the demands of Yahweh that the Israelites should be freed from Egypt in order to serve him in the wilderness. In this regards, it appears that Pharaoh is represented as a self- deluded character who illegally seeks to claim for himself worship or service that rightly belong to Yahweh.

To further this caricature of Pharaoh, Yahweh exercises his power over the heart of Pharaoh. By suggesting that the heart of “Pharaoh” is under the control of Yahweh, the narrator wants to point his readers to the sovereign Lordship of Yahweh over Pharaoh.<sup>43</sup> John van Seters has placed the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart within the “obduracy themes” in biblical narrative whereby Yahweh “hardens the heart of a foreign ruler and people in order to force them into a confrontation to their destruction...”<sup>44</sup> Within this understanding, the narrative here is not to show the freedom or bondage of the human will, as historic discussion on this text has generally gone to describe, but to underscore the overarching reality, from the point of view of an

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<sup>40</sup> Brueggemann, “Pharaoh as Vassal,” 35.

<sup>41</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *Understanding Exodus*. Heritage of Biblical Israel Series 2. New York: Behrman House, 1969), 128; James S Ackerman, “The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story (Exodus 1-2),” *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives 1*. Bible in Literature, ed Kenneth R R Gros Louis *et al* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 83-84.

<sup>42</sup> Brueggemann, “Pharaoh as Vassal,” 35.

<sup>43</sup> Irwin rightly observed, “While the task of demonstrating divinity to a human audience might require only a supernatural act, the task of proving the same point to one who claims to be divine requires a far greater burden of proof. It is in this context that the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart functions as divine demonstration. The only way for Yahweh to demonstrate his own deity, and to establish Pharaoh’s mortality, is to remove his opponent’s free will.” See Irwin, “Yahweh’s Suspension of Free Will in the Old Testament,” 59.

<sup>44</sup> John van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster, 1994), 90.

ancient Hebrew writer, that nothing escapes or lies outside the sphere of divine sovereignty. Frame observes,

When God spoke with Moses about delivering Israel from Egypt, he told him in advance that Pharaoh would not let Israel go unless he was compelled by ‘a mighty hand’ (Ex. 3:19). Then God hardened the heart of Pharaoh to create that unwillingness (4:21; 7:3, 13; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). Note the sustained emphasis on God’s agency. It is also true that Pharaoh hardened his own hear (8:15), but in the narrative God’s hardening of him is clearly prior and receives greater emphasis.”<sup>45</sup>

Significantly, the “hardening” or “control” of Pharaoh’s heart is a theme closely related to the “operations” or workings of “Satan,” lying or evil spirits under the authority of Yahweh as seen in the Old Testament. For the Old Testament writers, every rebelling force or defiant being cannot stand outside the perimeters of divine sovereignty, God must and is in control of every power whether good or bad.<sup>46</sup> There is no room in their thinking of a being who is evil and who wills and does his things independent of God’s control, operations or activities.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, Yahweh must “control” or “harden” Pharaoh’s hearts because as a “Satan-like” figure, the narrator cannot afford to give him the luxury of acting in direct rebellion against God on his own terms.

Interestingly, the same control that Moses had over the snake (Exodus 4:4) is the same control that Yahweh exercises over Pharaoh (7:13). Like the serpent turned back into a harmless staff, Yahweh is going to compel Pharaoh into submission. It is interesting that the first sign given to Moses is his control of a snake (4:1-5). The snake or the uraeneus (cobra) has served as the royal symbol of the Pharaohs. Consequently, Yahweh first assignment to Moses to “grasp” (חִזַּק) the snake at the tail is a symbolic representation of the later confrontation

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<sup>45</sup> Frame, Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 66.

<sup>46</sup> Wayne Grudem discusses the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart under the theology of concurrence whereby “*God cooperates with created things in every action, directing their distinctive properties to cause them to act as they do*” (italics in the original). Here he added, “[m]oreover, our analysis of concurrence given above, in which both factors can be true at the same time: even when Pharaoh hardens his own heart, that is not inconsistent with saying that God is causing Pharaoh to do this and thereby God is hardening the heart of Pharaoh.” See Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 317, 323-331.

<sup>47</sup> According to Cassuto, Yahweh hardens Pharaoh’s heart and Pharaoh hardens his own heart “can be interchanged because their essential meaning is identical.” For Cassuto, Pharaoh hardens his heart but from the idiomatic description of ancient society there is nothing wrong to suggest that Yahweh ultimately supervised this process. See Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, 56.

between Yahweh and Pharaoh which here is represented by a snake. Like Moses' exercise of control over the snake, Yahweh also קָזַח (grasp) or better still harden the heart of Pharaoh. To show this connection, the same word קָזַח used in the grasping of the snake in Exodus 4:4 is also used to describe the several instances of the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus (3:19; 4:21; 6:1, 2; 7:13, 22; 8:15; 9:12, 35; 10:20, 27; 11:10).

It is also important to note that the staff-turning to snake is the only rehearsed sign which Yahweh directed Moses and Aaron to perform before Pharaoh (7:9-14). Moses and Aaron staged this snake sign before Pharaoh. According to Exodus, the court magicians of Pharaoh also turned their own staff into snakes, but the staff of Aaron swallowed the snakes of the palace magicians.<sup>48</sup> It is also interesting to observe that at the beginning of the plague and before the confrontation between Yahweh and Pharaoh, the narrator reported that Yahweh told Moses and Aaron thus: "Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the water. Wait on the bank of the Nile to meet him, and take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake" (7:15).<sup>49</sup> In this particular meeting of Moses with Pharaoh, there is an emphatic reference to the staff as expressed in the command: "take in your hand the staff that was changed into a snake."<sup>50</sup> Just like the earlier turning of the snake back to a staff, the narrator's reference at this point to the first sign possibly suggests the need to read the entire encounter between Moses and Pharaoh in terms of this first sign (4:21-23).<sup>51</sup> In this regard, Yahweh saw Pharaoh as a harmless staff, who despite his snake-like activities still lives within Yahweh's sovereign control, thus the same word קָזַח employed to describe the turning of snake into a staff is also used to describe several instances of Yahweh's hardening of Pharaoh's heart.

Similarly, in the same story of the "turning" of the staff into snakes at Pharaoh's court, the narrator appears to also suggest that

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<sup>48</sup> Concerning the connection between Pharaoh and the dragon of Egyptian mythology see Ph. Guillaume, "Metamorphosis of a Ferocious Pharaoh," *Biblia* 85 (2004), 232-236.

<sup>49</sup> The word קָזַח is used to describe "turning" of water into blood and the "turning" of the staff into serpent in 7:15 (cf. 7:17, 20).

<sup>50</sup> The same staff was also instrumental to the turning of the water into blood (7:19), and there is also the presence of the same staff in generating some of the plagues (8:1, 12; 9:23; 10:13).

<sup>51</sup> McGinnis, "Teaching Exodus as a 'Problem Text'," 72.

just as the staff-snake of Moses and Aaron prevailed over Pharaoh's magicians so also Yahweh will also triumph over Pharaoh who is commonly represented by the symbol of the cobra. In fact, the Pharaohs of Egypt often wore the uraneus (cobra) emblem on their crowns as a symbol of their authority.<sup>52</sup> Working within this preceding assumption, the narrator presents subtle allusions to the defeat or the taming of snakes by Yahweh's representatives. Polemically then, the turning and swallowing of the staff of Pharaoh's magicians by the staff of Aaron and Moses is a preview in a limited scale of the subsequent larger confrontation between Yahweh and Pharaoh via the unleashing of the plagues.

Considering these preceding polemics further, Yahweh is represented as a deity who controls "the heart" of a self-proclaimed god namely Pharaoh. In this perspective, Enns rightly observed, "God is making a mockery of the king of Egypt. He is trapped in a divine plot with unexpected twists and turns, and there is no way out..."<sup>53</sup> Consequently, like the creations in six days, the 10 plagues were unleashed on Pharaoh in order to reassert the sovereignty of Yahweh over his creation.<sup>54</sup> Sailhamer is right to note that the plagues were intended to "unmask Pharaoh's claims to deity."<sup>55</sup> However, beyond this, the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart shows the futility of Pharaoh's claims to divinity.<sup>56</sup> In this light, the opening of Exodus is an indictment on the claims of Pharaoh and the assertion of Yahweh's sovereign authority over his creation. It also appears that the narrator of Exodus used the word חזק to show the confrontation between the "strong" (חזק) heart of Pharaoh, and the "strong" (חזק) hands of Yahweh (3:19; 13:3, 9, 14, 16; 14:4, 8, 17).

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<sup>52</sup> John I. Durham observed, "[q]uite widely in the ANE, the serpent was a symbol of special wisdom, fertility, and healing. In Egypt in particular, serpents were worshipped. This latter point is worth noting in view of the fact that this sign occurs in the OT only in connection with the exodus from Egypt." It seems that the snake itself in the story represents Pharaoh himself because like the serpent worshipped in Egypt Pharaoh is also worshipped. Here, however, Pharaoh is rendered harmless. See Durham, *Exodus*. WBC 3 (Dallas, Texas: Word, 1987), 44.

<sup>53</sup> Enns, *Exodus*, 227.

<sup>54</sup> Seen from this perspective, the reference to Yahweh hardening of Pharaoh's heart is to show the sovereign authority of Yahweh over all human powers and structure and to underscore their limits and controls. This same thought is greatly captured by Proverb 21:1, which reads, "The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes."

<sup>55</sup> See Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 252–53.

<sup>56</sup> See the footnotes in Irwin, "Yahweh's Suspension of Free Will in the Old Testament," 58.

The second sign given to Moses also in this context received an added significance particularly in the representation of a withered hand (4:6-7). Yahweh earlier described the use of his “mighty hand” to “compel” Pharaoh to let the Israelites go in 3:19-20.<sup>57</sup> Like the leprous hand, Yahweh will render useless every hand that stand in his way. Since hand is often used metaphorically to describe strength, the picture of a withered hand suggests Yahweh’s ability to subdue every hand that has risen to challenge his sovereignty. From the point of view of the narrator, the Exodus narrative is not primarily to provide theological treatise on the freedom or bondage of the human will, but to underscore the authority of Yahweh over everything that seeks to undermine and sabotage his purposes. Therefore, no opposing hands of Pharaoh could prevail against him or in any way sabotage his plans. Martin Noth observed, “Pharaoh is thus as much a tool of the divine action on the one side...without realizing this while following the dictates of his will...”<sup>58</sup>

For the Old Testament writers and the narrator of the Exodus in particular, every power or force is brought under the sovereign rule of God. Its dominant commitment to monotheism did not allow a strict dualism between good and evil, and hence tends to subsume everything by and large under God by deriving its origin, motivation and existence in God. Consequently, on the long run, God is responsible indirectly or directly for the “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart because this ridiculed Pharaoh and brings Pharaoh under the sovereign control of God. Scattered throughout this part of Exodus is Yahweh’s self-declaration such as “that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth,” to show you my power,” “so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth.”<sup>59</sup> The declarations suggest that Yahweh was bent on asserting his sovereignty over Pharaoh and to show his supreme power over a monarch who claims to be a deity. In this way, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart appears to ridicule a character who is claiming to be a god while he exercises no control over his own heart. On this same level, the narrative uses of

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<sup>57</sup> The “mighty hand” of Yahweh as used in this place has raised a lot of issues. For this study see Peter Addinall, “Exodus III 19B and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative,” *Vetus Testamentum* 69, no. 3 (1999): 289-300.

<sup>58</sup> Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 68.

<sup>59</sup> Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 133.

the verb “know” becomes also important in the quest to assert the sovereignty of Yahweh. Concerning this “knowing” intention of Yahweh’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, Brueggemann said,

The plague narrative is dominated by the verb ‘know’ and by Yahweh’s intention that Pharaoh should ‘know’ Yahweh. It is most plausible to assume that ‘know’ in this narrative means that Pharaoh should acknowledge the sovereignty of Yahweh, and conversely, that he should acknowledge his own role as a dependent vassal who rules by the leave of Yahweh.<sup>60</sup>

This assertion of Yahweh’s sovereignty in the reoccurring motif of “knowing” is directly challenged by the blatant rejection of this intention of Yahweh by Pharaoh in Exodus 5:2. Pharaoh said, “Who is Yahweh that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh and I will not let Israel go.” The response is not about Pharaoh’s “ignorance about the identity of Yahweh but it is “a blatant refusal to respond to or acknowledge his own subordinate and derivative position of power.”<sup>61</sup> The motif of “knowing” is also complemented at the end of the plague narrative with the motif of “getting glory” over Pharaoh (14:1-15:21). Brueggemann observed, “[i]n these assertions the event of the exodus is understood as a contest for sovereignty between Yahweh and Pharaoh.” Consequently, “[t]he ‘getting of glory’ is the assertion of power, dominance, and majesty which can have its own way over against Pharaoh, and which can require Pharaoh to submit to the will and intention of Yahweh.”<sup>62</sup> According to Kirk-Duggan, “By definition then, the issues cannot have ever been to change Pharaoh’s mind, since he could not be open; the significant purpose for hardening Pharaoh’s heart unfolds as mechanism for making it clear that Yahweh is the sovereign, omnipotent, omnipresent God.”<sup>63</sup> Within this thinking, the narrator clearly placed Pharaoh at the mercies of Yahweh, and suggesting that the refusal of Pharaoh to allow the Israelites to go out of Egypt stands on the way of Yahweh’s glory.

On the other hand, Gershon Hepner has drawn attention to language of “hardening” of Pharaoh’s heart in the background of

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<sup>60</sup> Brueggemann, “Pharaoh as Vassal,” 35.

<sup>61</sup> Brueggemann, “Pharaoh as Vassal,” 36.

<sup>62</sup> Brueggemann, “Pharaoh as Vassal,” 42.

<sup>63</sup> See Kirk-Duggan, “Divine Puppeteer,” 96.



Egyptian mythology. In Egyptian mythology, a dead person is expected to possess a “light heart” as a “feather.”<sup>64</sup> Concerning this practice, Hepner observed,

Each Egyptian of rank or substance in the New Kingdom period would have a scroll, or ‘Book of the Dead,’ which was prepared for him or her to be placed in the coffin to guide the deceased through the underworld to the after-life. One of the first major rituals on this journey was ‘the Weighing of the Heart’. In the process of mummification, the vital organs were removed and placed in four canopic jars, one of them containing the heart. Before the deceased could be presented to Osiris, Pharaoh of the Underworld, he or she had to be proved worthy, and to do this, the heart had to be shown to be lighter than a feather.<sup>65</sup>

When the heart of the dead is weighed, the Egyptian Scribe deity Thoth is expected to make a pronouncement to Osiris, the Egyptian god of the underworld that the heart of the deceased is light. The following declaration is thus given by Thoth, “Hear ye this judgment. The heart of (the one who comes before) Osiris hath in very truth been weighed ...” He will add, “it has been found true by trial in the Great Balance. There has not been found any wickedness in him, he has not wasted the offerings in the temples, he has not done harm by his deeds, and he has uttered no evil reports while he was upon earth.”<sup>66</sup> With this declaration, the dead character is given passage and now accepted to the abode of Osiris. Interestingly, the second word used to describe the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is כָּבֵד which primarily has the idea of making something “heavy” (7:14; 8:11, 32; 9:7, 34; 10:1). Even though Hepner was more concern about the scatological character in the usage of this word here, it seems the narrator of Exodus drawing from this background of judgment is making an indictment of Pharaoh. In this reading, the description of “hardening” or making “heavy” of Pharaoh’s heart suggests that Pharaoh’s heart is already weighed and deemed guilty on Yahweh’s scale of justice. While every Egyptian has to wait till the afterlife to know the state of his heart, the narrator suggests that the Pharaoh of exodus is already under divine scales of judgment. Technically also, Yahweh’s pronouncement to harden Pharaoh’s heart suggests that

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<sup>64</sup> Hepner, “Scatology in the Bible,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 18, no. 2 (2004), 279.

<sup>65</sup> Hepner, “Scatology in the Bible,” 279.

<sup>66</sup> Hepner, “Scatology in the Bible,” 279.

Pharaoh is subtly perceived as a dead character who has lost full control of his heart. Within this mythological backdrop, the narrator appears to make a hidden polemic against Pharaoh because the heart of Pharaoh is now in the hands of Yahweh just like the heart of ordinary Egyptians is in the hand of the Osiris at death. Through this representation, Yahweh has also denied Pharaoh the joy of dwelling in the blissful abode of the dead. Like the hearts of the Egyptian dead, the heart of Pharaoh himself is no longer in his control. It is not placed in a jar, but it is in the hands of Yahweh. The politics of this representation suggests that Pharaoh is subtly mocked within this story because his heart is in the hands of Yahweh and not himself. Consequently, the full politics of this representation suggests that the description of Yahweh's hardening of Pharaoh's heart is not merely to point to his stubbornness but also to suggest that Pharaoh is definitely doomed because his heart is placed on Yahweh's scale of judgment and it is considered heavy rather than light.

### **III. The Significance of Yahweh/Pharaoh Confrontations**

There is a further politics of representation which lies at the heart of the combative representation of Yahweh and Pharaoh at the opening of Exodus.<sup>67</sup> The overall intention is to assert the sovereignty of Yahweh over ancient monarchs and deities. For the modern reader, Yahweh's confrontation of Pharaoh in plagues underscores certain importance. In particular, the understanding that Yahweh controls, hardens or owns the hearts of Pharaoh has direct significance for modern politics. Four of these significances could readily be emphasized. First, the modern reader, reading the Yahweh-Pharaoh saga is greatly overwhelmed by the narrator's quest to assert the sovereign control of Yahweh over hostile political offices. For the narrator of Exodus, Yahweh is not only in control of the destinies of Israelites, but he is also in control of the "heart" of Pharaoh.

Personally, I like the idea of God in control of the "heart" of the oppressors and tyrants of the world because this shows that God can give them, jokingly-speaking, "heart-attack" or "heart failure" if he wishes. This is not to be revengeful, but it appears from the reading of

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<sup>67</sup> Concerning the politics of representation in Exodus, Jonathan Boyarin said, "The politics of Exodus constitute an exemplary case of the link between history and interpretive reading." See Boyarin, "Reading Exodus into History," *New Literary History* 23, no. 3 (1992), 523.

Exodus that God can eliminate any power and cause them to work in line with his good purposes and plans. Secondly, the knowledge that the hearts of the great men and women of our world is in God's hand or lies within the perimeters of his power is indeed comforting. Often we get "hypertension" ourselves because we are worried about the economic meltdowns, the political instabilities and the general confusion among the nations of the world, but Exodus is a reminder that we can be at peace because the "hearts" of the rulers of the world is within the reach of God. They can hide themselves in protected-wired houses or electrified mansions, but their hearts are within God's reach and are under God's control. Thirdly, "the hardening" of Pharaoh's heart underscores ultimately the victory of God and his people over the structures of powers of this world. In a sense, the intention of the plagues, but more specifically the "hardening" of Pharaoh's heart is that "the God of the covenant, the Creator of the universe, is superior to the powers of the nations."<sup>68</sup> Gowan also observed,

If freeing the Hebrews from slavery had been God's main intention, as Israel told the story of the plagues and the Sea, then for God to harden Pharaoh's heart so as to extend the agonies of the process would be indefensible on any grounds. But Israel did not tell the story that way. For them the intent of the plagues was to make a convincing demonstration that Yahweh alone is God, and that would require unconditional surrender by the pharaoh. There could be no negotiating, no compromises, no easy way so that Egypt's king could save face. 'Let my people go' was a nonnegotiable demand.<sup>69</sup>

Lastly, the "hardening," "control" and Yahweh's power over Pharaoh's heart has salvation as its final aim. The reason Yahweh defeated and incapacitated Pharaoh is not only to deliver his people, but to also allow the nation of Egypt to know him. In fact, repeatedly, Yahweh says in Exodus, "and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."<sup>70</sup> This statement is actually a direct answer to the "defiant question" of Pharaoh who asked in Exodus 5:2, "Who is Yahweh?"<sup>71</sup> According to Chisholm, "When Yahweh's judgment was

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<sup>68</sup> Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*, 253.

<sup>69</sup> Gowan, *Theology in Exodus*, 138.

<sup>70</sup> See 7:5; see also 7:17; 8:22; 9:29.

<sup>71</sup> Chisholm Jr., "Divine Hardening in the Old Testament," 418.

complete, Pharaoh's question would be answered in no uncertain terms and the Egyptian ruler would be forced to acknowledge Yahweh's superiority and sovereignty."<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Sailhamer also observed, "the purpose of the plagues is clearly stated: 'so that the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord' (7:5). Throughout the plague narratives we see the Egyptians learning precisely this lesson (8:19; 9:20, 20, 27; 10:7)."<sup>73</sup> Like we have already observed in the preceding discourse, Brueggemann has shown that the idea of "knowing" here is not that Pharaoh is ignorant of Yahweh's identity, but has more to do with his refusal to accept Yahweh's ultimate authority.<sup>74</sup> Significantly, Yahweh wants the nation of Egypt and its ruler to know that "He alone is the Lord." It is this same knowledge that Yahweh wants the nations of the world to know that "He alone is Lord" and he alone defines or determines the destinies of the human race. In the New Testament, this desire of God for the nations takes a new turn with its emphasis on the knowledge of salvation in Jesus Christ. Enns rightly observed, "The end result is an implicit recognition, if not confession, by the nations that Yahweh is God. Thus, when God delivers Israel from oppressive circumstance, his glory is revealed not only to Israel but to the nations as well."<sup>75</sup> He also added,

The focus of the New Testament is the inclusion of the nations into the family of God through faith in the risen Christ. The final result will be that all people in all ages, whether in Christ or not, will acknowledge the Lord as the one who raised Christ from the dead. 'At the name of Jesus every knee [will] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.'<sup>76</sup>

In this New Testament perspective, the nations and their rulers will recognize ultimately the lordship of Jesus Christ and God over his world. Consequently, every opposition by worldly powers now is only temporal and in the end fruitless because the New Testament underscores the victory of God over Pharaoh-like powers partly in the present age and fully in the age to come when in the words of the

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 250.

<sup>74</sup> See Brueggemann, "Pharaoh as Vassal," 35-37.

<sup>75</sup> Enns, *Exodus*, 184.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 186.

writer of Revelation, “the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our God and his Christ” (Rev 11:15) Then we will finally say, “amen,” to our Lord’s prayer, “let’s your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10).

### **Conclusion**

The narrator of Exodus describes Pharaoh as an “Anti-God” character who seeks to oppose God especially in bringing about the deliverance of his covenant people. The world has seen several “anti-God” and Pharaoh-like persons such as Hitler, Napoleon, Saddam and the more recent Gadhafi. The most intriguing characteristic of these persons is their persistent opposition against God and his people. To say that God controls, owns and manages the “hearts” of these tyrants is not unorthodox, but in doing so, we are affirming the sovereignty of God over every form of person and the human powers at their disposal. In this perspective, the discourse of Yahweh and Pharaoh in Exodus is not primarily about the hair-splitting arguments on the freedom or bondage of human will *per se* but it seeks to assert the sovereignty of God over human rulers and their powers.

In the world of the Old Testament, God is highly exalted that no human persons and their authorities exist independently or outside God’s influence and control. The evil spirits, demons, Satan and Pharaohs are all conceived to derive their energy and ability ultimately in God because the Old Testament writers in their strict monotheism could not envisage a standard dualistic world whereby good and evil did not originate from the same source. In these modern times of chaos and confusion, we need to reaffirm once again this same Old Testament domineering emphasis on divine sovereignty over Pharaoh-like entities. In particular, we must express the supremacy of God over the nations and their rulers. In doing this, we hope that nations of the world will come to the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and trusting ultimately for the divine transformation or transplanting of the “hearts” of our modern Pharaohs.



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