



## Who Hardened Pharaoh's Heart? (With the context most miss)

### Description



In Romans 9, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is used as

*the* example of divine hardening. Thus, understanding *how* Pharaoh's heart was hardened becomes very important to understanding the Romans passage, and also the sovereignty versus free will debate more broadly. However, there's a passage in the Exodus story that most don't consider (*Ex 9:34-10:1*), and some important elements of Hebrew grammar to consider as well. (*Thankfully, the grammar elements are so simple that no one should have trouble understanding them.*)

If an explanation of Pharaoh's divine hardening doesn't consider this key passage (*Ex 9:34-10:1*), or if the elements of Hebrew grammar aren't accounted for, it's easy to come away with an incomplete picture of the passage. Any understanding of a topic that's incomplete is naturally more likely to be wrong; that's why we'll examine both elements in detail in this article.

We'll first look at all the Hebrew words used, then we'll look at the important elements of grammar affecting the verses. With that context, we'll look at all the verses where such hardening is mentioned. Finally, we'll pool everything we've found into a cohesive understanding of the passage that doesn't ignore any element.

Here we go.

### The words and word forms used

One important thing about Hebrew words first: **The meaning of a Hebrew word changes slightly depending on the form of the verb.** Now, this mostly won't be a problem (or complex) because the specific word/form combinations we'll look at are fairly simple, but I wanted to mention it. It's important because you can't just say: Hebrew word \_\_\_ means XYZ without considering the form of the verb! most of the time. (*Hebrew is all about context.*)

However, because of this, we'll need to take a quick look at what those verb forms are in the relevant passages.

## The relevant Hebrew verb forms

Three verb forms will be relevant for this study:

- qal (*pronounce the qâ like a kâ*)
- Piel (*two syllables, so pi-elâ*)
- Hiphil (*also spelled hifilâ*)

The verb forms are called stems, for reasons that would be obvious if this was a Hebrew course. It's not a Hebrew course, so I'll just say that the stem is the addition and/or change to a base form (root) that indicates an element of meaning. (*Like how we add -ing to fight to change the form to fighting; in that example, fight would be the root, and -ing would be the stem.*)

We'll look at them one at a time.

### The Qal stem

This is the easy and simple one. The Qal stem typically indicates a simple action or state. So for example: He fought them. That's a simple action with nothing complicated about it. As for indicating a state, one example could be: He was strong. That indicates the state of the man: strong.

That's all you'll need to know about the qal stem for now. ð

### The Piel stem

This one is a little more complicated, but not much.

The Piel stem is the most flexible stem formation in Biblical Hebrew and can express simple, intensive, resultative, causative, or other kinds of verbal action depending on the context

and the specific verb.

אִשׁ;

It is recommended to *always* check a dictionary or lexicon for the meaning of a specific verb, because **this stem may express many different kinds of action in different contexts.**

[Source.](#)

One common usage of the Piel is as an intensifier. For example, the Hebrew word אִשְׁׁרָא (shabar) in the qal stem means אִשְׁׁרָא to break, but in the Piel stem, it means אִשְׁׁרָא to shatter. Here's an example:

**Leviticus 6:28** אִשְׁׁרָא Also the earthenware vessel in which it was boiled shall **be broken**; (shabar אִשְׁׁרָא qal) and if it was boiled in a bronze vessel, then it shall be scoured and rinsed in water.

**Exodus 23:24** You shall not worship their gods, you shall not serve them, and you shall not do according to their deeds; but you shall utterly pull them down and **shatter** (shabar אִשְׁׁרָא piel) their *sacred* pillars in pieces.

**The other sense that'll be important in this article is the causative sense.**

**Causative action means that the subject of the verb is causing the object of the verb either to perform the verbal action (for dynamic verbs) or to be in the state described by the verb (for stative verbs).** The Piel stem often serves this causative function with stative verbs. A good example is the verb אִשְׁׁרָא. **In the Qal stem, the verb אִשְׁׁרָא expresses the stative action אִשְׁׁרָא to be full. But in the Piel stem, the verb אִשְׁׁרָא expresses the causative action אִשְׁׁרָא to fill (meaning, to cause something to be full).** In English, causative action is expressed using the main verb אִשְׁׁרָא to cause paired with the infinitive of the verbal action in view. **In Biblical Hebrew, the causative nature of the verbal action is expressed by the Piel form of the verb** itself with no additional verbal element.

[Source.](#)

Note: The underlining in the following quote is original; I added the **red** emphasis. Also note that אִשְׁׁרָא below is irrelevant to this article; we only need to worry about אִשְׁׁרָא and אִשְׁׁרָא. אִשְׁׁרָא

According to the Gesenius Hebrew Grammar (Gesenius), אִשְׁׁרָא the fundamental idea of Piel, to which all the various shades of meaning in this conjugation may be referred, is to busy oneself eagerly with the action indicated by the stem. This intensifying of the idea of the stem, appears in individual cases as אִשְׁׁרָא (a) **a strengthening and repetition of the action**; (b) **causative**, or c) denominative. אִשְׁׁרָא

## Causative

A verb in the piel system typically infers a causative meaning. Following are some examples of how the same verb is translated in the qal and then in the piel with a causative meaning, followed by the use of each in Scripture:

<b>qal</b>	<b>piel</b>
he was great	he made great

**qal** May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you! May those who love your salvation say evermore, â??God is great!â?• Psalm 70:4

**piel** And the LORD made Solomon very great in the sight of all Israel and bestowed on him such royal majesty as had not been on any king before him in Israel. 1 Chronicles 29:25

[Source.](#)

Unlike the simple action of the qal stem, the piel stem indicates action that isnâ??t *necessarily* direct. **God didnâ??t just snap His fingers and make Solomon seem very great in the eyes of the people, He ensured that what Solomon did prospered; that caused Solomon to become very great in the eyes of the people. Thus, God was involved and gets the ultimate credit for Solomon being seen as very great in the eyes of the people, but the method used was somewhat indirect, as opposed to being direct.**

That will be important going forward.

*(And again, itâ??s important to note that different Hebrew verbs will convey different meanings in different forms, which is why itâ??s always recommended to look the word up in a lexicon. Here, Iâ??m only focusing on the uses that will be relevant to this article.)*

Now, one last stem and it will be super fast.

## The Hiphil stem

This one will be very simple after the Piel stem. **The hiphil stem *always* expresses causative action.** ( *In the context of this article anyway, it does have other nuances.*) It does so with greater clarity because thatâ??s the primary function of this stem, unlike the piel which can (*and often does*) communicate multiple things.

**The Hiphil stem is generally used to express causative action in active voice.** In many cases the noun derived from the same root is the object or result of the hiphil verb associated with that root. For example, the Hiphil verb  $\text{x}^{\circ}\text{Ö}^{\circ}\text{x}^{\circ}\text{Ö}^{\circ}\text{x}^{\circ}\text{Ö}^{\circ}\text{x}^{\circ}\text{Ö}^{\circ}\text{x}^{\circ}$  means â??to cause to rain downâ?•; the noun  $\text{x}^{\circ}\text{Ö}^{\circ}\text{x}^{\circ}\text{Ö}^{\circ}\text{x}^{\circ}$  means â??rainâ?•.

[Source.](#)

Hereâ??s an example of a simple (*qal*) action and the corresponding hiphil sense:

- Active verb: He **rained down** destruction on them
- Hiphil verb: He **caused** destruction **to rain down** on them

Again, the **he** in that example is the ultimate cause of the destruction raining down, he just might be somewhat removed from the destruction he caused. For example, instead of the man operating the catapult that's lobbing fiery rocks into the enemy to directly rain down destruction, the **he** might be the king who ordered the catapults to open fire.

**Causative action often has this nuance, but not always.**

Hebrew is, unfortunately, highly context-dependent. **For this article though, the strict causative sense is all that's needed.**

Next, we'll look at the words.

**The words translated **harden****

The relevant words are:

- **חזק** (**chazaq**)
- **קבד** (**kabad**)
- **קשה** (**qasha**)

We'll look at them one at a time.

**חזק** (**chazaq**)

The general, overarching idea is this:

**חזק** verb **be or grow firm, strong, strengthen**

Next, what it means in each relevant form, since again, Hebrew words change meaning slightly depending on the form (*stem*) of the verb.

**In the qal:**

1. a. of physical strength of hands
- 2 be firm, fast:
- 3 press, be urgent,

4 in bad sense:

- a. **grow stout, rigid, hard, with idea of perversity, of Pharaoh's heart**

### In the piel:

1 make strong (physically):

2 strengthen the hands (accusative) of any one,

3 make strong = bold, encourage

4 **make firm:**

5 **make rigid, hard**, i.e. perverse, obstinate, **harden (the heart of any one)**

*(This word isn't used in the hiphil stem in any relevant verses, so I'll omit those definitions for space/time.)*

So yeah. **harden** makes perfect sense and is a great translation. However, notice the nuance difference in the piel versus the qal:

- Qal = grow hard
- Piel = make hard

**Notice the slight causative edge that the piel communicates.** While the qal simply means to grow hard, the piel means to make something hard. That will be important going forward.

Okay, next word.

**קָבַד (kabad)**

First, the general idea behind the word:

קָבַד verb **be heavy, weighty, burdensome**, honoured

And here's what it means in each relevant form:

### In the qal:

1 be heavy, in weight, of misfortune, heavier than sand

2 **heavy, insensible, dull**, of the eyes, so as to be unable to see Genesis 48:10 (JE); of the ears Isaiah 59:1; **of the קָבַד, hard, insensible Exodus 9:7**

3 be honoured

### In the piel:

1 **make heavy**, insensible (compare Qal 2) the  $\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}(\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}$  1 **Samuel 6:6** (twice in verse)

2 make honourable, honour, glorify,

### In the hiphil:

1 make heavy, a yoke

2 **make heavy, dull, unresponsive**, the ears Isaiah 6:10; Zechariah 7:11; the  $\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}\mu\text{x}^{\text{a}}$  **Exodus 8:11; Exodus 8:28; Exodus 9:34; Exodus 10:1**(J).

3 cause to be honoured

Again, I'm sure you can see why it's translated "harden" in the context of Pharaoh.

**Now, again, notice the overlap between the piel and hiphil, as both mean "to make \_\_\_" (causative action).** Now, this doesn't always hold true with every Hebrew word, but thankfully, the words we're looking at today are pretty "standard" in their meaning.

Now, here's the last word.

$\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}, \text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}, \text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}$  (qasha)

Here's the overall meaning:

$[\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}, \text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}, \text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}]$  verb **be hard**, severe, fierce

And in its different forms:

### In the qal:

1 **be hard, difficult**

2 be hard, severe,

### In the piel:

$\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}$ ,  $\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}\text{Ö}^{\text{a}}\text{x}^{\text{a}}$  Kings 2:10 thou **hast made hard** to ask, asked **a hard thing**.



## The qal of **חָזַק**

Ironically, the simplest form ends up giving the most trouble in translation. **The specific Hebrew word **חָזַק** in the qal stem focuses on the resultant state of an action, not the action itself.** It's the difference between:

- The helicopter **is landed**
  - versus:
- The helicopter **landed**

The first one indicates the state of the helicopter, that it's in the state of being landed. The second one indicates an action, that the helicopter is performing the action of landing. The qal form of **חָזַק** has this **state focused** meaning, which is why the lexical definition is:

a. **grow** stout, rigid, **hard**, with idea of perversity, of Pharaoh's heart

It's **grow hard**, not quite **harden**. However, **harden** isn't necessarily wrong, it just doesn't capture the focus of the Hebrew verb, which is on the final state, not the action that led to that state. English doesn't have this nuance, so translating it becomes interesting.

**That leads to the various translation options for **חָזַק** in the qal stem:**

**Option #1: **Pharaoh's heart was hard.**** This seems like a bad idea because it kills any sense of progression in the narrative. It seems to indicate that Pharaoh's hardness was flat throughout, which is clearly not the case in the narrative, as you'll see when we get to the verses.

**Option #2: **Pharaoh's heart grew/became hard.**** This is better, but it tends to imply the same thing as option #1, only in a different sense. That is, it doesn't seem to allow for degrees of hardness increasing throughout the story. At worst, it could imply that Pharaoh's heart might've softened between hardenings, which doesn't seem to be the implication of the text.

**Option #3: **Pharaoh's heart grew/became *more* hard.**** First, notice that **more** is italicized, which would indicate a translator addition. This solves the issue that #2 faced, but it becomes wordy and not natural English. It's probably the best compromise for this article though, mostly because the accuracy it conveys is more important than sounding natural. *(Note: the qal itself doesn't require **more**, but the repeated near-identical hardening statements throughout the narrative, especially when in the piel form, make **more** the natural way to read it. We'll come back to this in greater detail later.)*

**Option #4: **Pharaoh's heart hardened.**** This is easily the most readable option. However, it focuses on the action rather than the state that results from that action. *(Like the helicopter analogy.)*

Options 3 and 4 are significantly better than the others in the context of these passages. However, the choice between them does introduce an interesting nuance that we'll examine after looking at the

passages, which weâ??ll do now.

## The passages

I have copy/pasted the passages below in the NASB 95. (*Which I personally think is the best translation currently on the market. You can see my article [â??Whatâ??s the Best Bible Translation? And More Importantly, Why?](#) for why and the evidence.*) I also copy/pasted the NASB 95 underneath with modified wording according to what weâ??ve already seen. That will allow you to compare a normal translation to a modified one with the nuance that weâ??ve already seen.

Notably, there will be a few minor word order changes to accommodate the more precise translation, so Iâ??ll highlight the whole relevant phrase in red to make it obvious. The modified version will be longer and wordier, but more accurate to the nuance.

One note on the piel first; Iâ??ve chosen to translate the â??intensifiedâ?? sense in for most of these (*using â??moreâ??*), but that is not necessarily explicit in the Hebrew verb itself. Thatâ??s a contextual choice, and I would probably italicize â??moreâ?? to indicate a translator addition in a Bible translation. It seems to fit the context of the story perfectly, hence the decision.

Anyway, hereâ??s the full list.

### Exodus 4:21

**NASB 95:** The Lord said to Moses, â??When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will harden (chazaq â?? piel) his heart so that he will not let the people go.

**Modified:** The Lord said to Moses, â??When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but I will cause his heart to harden so that he will not let the people go.

*(You could also translate it â??I will cause his heart to harden moreâ??, which would indicate that Pharaohâ??s heart was already hard before God acted. More on this soon.)*

### Exodus 7:3

**NASB 95:** But I will harden (qashah â?? hiphil) Pharaohâ??s heart that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.

**Modified:** But I will cause Pharaohâ??s heart to harden that I may multiply My signs and My wonders in the land of Egypt.

**Exodus 7:13**

**NASB 95:** Yet **Pharaoh's heart was hardened, (chazaq â?? qal)** and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

**Modified:** Yet **Pharaoh's heart grew more hard**, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

*(Note: there's no stated agent making his heart hard; this verse simply says that his heart became hard without saying who or what prompted it. This applies to all qal verbs on this list.)*

**Exodus 7:22**

**NASB 95:** But the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts; and **Pharaoh's heart was hardened, (chazaq â?? qal)** and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

**Modified:** But the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts; and **Pharaoh's heart grew more hard**, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

**Exodus 8:15**

**NASB 95:** But when **Pharaoh** saw that there was relief, **he hardened (kabad â?? hiphil) his heart** and did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

**Modified:** But when **Pharaoh** saw that there was relief, **he caused his heart to harden** and did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

**Exodus 8:19**

**NASB 95:** Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, **â??This is the finger of God.â?** But **Pharaoh's heart was hardened, (chazaq â?? qal)** and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

**Modified:** Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, **â??This is the finger of God.â?** But **Pharaoh's heart grew more hard**, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

---

**Ex 8:32**

**NASB 95:** But **Pharaoh hardened (kabad â?? hiphil) his heart** this time also, and he did not let the people go.

**Modified:** But **Pharaoh caused his heart to harden** this time also, and he did not let the people go.

**Exodus 9:7**

**NASB 95:** Pharaoh sent, and behold, there was not even one of the livestock of Israel dead. But **the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, (kabad â?? qal)** and he did not let the people go.

**Modified:** Pharaoh sent, and behold, there was not even one of the livestock of Israel dead. But **the heart of Pharaoh grew more hard**, and he did not let the people go.

**Exodus 9:12**

**NASB 95:** And **the Lord hardened (chazaq â?? piel) Pharaohâ??s heart**, and he did not listen to them, just as the Lord had spoken to Moses.

**Modified:** And **the Lord caused Pharaohâ??s heart to harden more**, and he did not listen to them, just as the Lord had spoken to Moses.

**Ex 9:34**

**NASB 95:** But when **Pharaoh** saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, **he sinned again and hardened (kabad â?? hiphil) his heart**, he and his servants.

**Modified:** But when **Pharaoh** saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, **he sinned again and caused his heart to harden**, he and his servants.

**Ex 9:35**

**NASB 95:** **Pharaohâ??s heart was hardened, (chazaq â?? qal)** and he did not let the sons of Israel go, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

**Modified:** Pharaoh's heart grew *more hard*, and he did not let the sons of Israel go, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

### Exodus 10:1

**NASB 95:** Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh, for I have hardened (kabad hiphil) his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may perform these signs of Mine among them,

**Modified:** Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh, for I caused his heart to harden , and the heart of his servants, that I may perform these signs of Mine among them,

### Exodus 10:20

**NASB 95:** But the Lord hardened (chazaq piel) Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the sons of Israel go.

**Modified:** But the Lord caused Pharaoh's heart to harden *more*, and he did not let the sons of Israel go.

### Exodus 10:27

**NASB 95:** But the Lord hardened (chazaq piel) Pharaoh's heart, and he was not willing to let them go.

**Modified:** But the Lord caused Pharaoh's heart to harden *more*, and he was not willing to let them go.

### Exodus 11:10

**NASB 95:** Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh; yet the Lord hardened (chazaq piel) Pharaoh's heart, and he did not let the sons of Israel go out of his land.

**Modified:** Moses and Aaron performed all these wonders before Pharaoh; yet the Lord caused Pharaoh's heart to harden *more*, and he did not let the sons of Israel go out of his land.

**Exodus 13:15**

**NASB 95:** It came about, when Pharaoh was stubborn (qashah hiphil) about letting us go, that the LORD killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the LORD the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.

**Modified:** It came about, when Pharaoh caused [himself] to be stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the LORD the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.

*(Note: I added himself in [brackets] to indicate an addition, because the Hebrew grammar indicates that Pharaoh was the person doing the action.)*

**Exodus 14:4**

**NASB 95:** Thus I will harden (chazaq piel) Pharaoh's heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord. And they did so.

**Modified:** Thus I will cause Pharaoh's heart to harden more, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord. And they did so.

**Exodus 14:8**

**NASB 95:** The Lord hardened (chazaq piel) the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he chased after the sons of Israel as the sons of Israel were going out boldly.

**Modified:** The Lord caused the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to harden more, and he chased after the sons of Israel as the sons of Israel were going out boldly.

**Ex 14:17**

**NASB 95:** As for Me, behold, I will harden (chazaq piel) the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army,

through his chariots and his horsemen.

**Modified:** As for Me, behold, **I will cause the hearts of the Egyptians to harden more** so that they will go in after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.

## 1 Sam 6:6

**NASB 95:** Why then do you harden (kabad piel) your hearts as **the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened (kabad piel) their hearts**? When He had severely dealt with them, did they not allow the people to go, and they departed?

**Modified:** Why then do you harden your hearts as **the Egyptians and Pharaoh caused their hearts to harden**? When He had severely dealt with them, did they not allow the people to go, and they departed?

Now, there's also Romans 9 to consider, but we'll do that later in this article.

## Some observations about the verses

**Observation #1.** Nowhere in these verses is a qal verb ever used to describe God hardening Pharaoh's heart. Not once. **Every single time that God is stated to be the one doing the hardening, a causative verb is used.** I don't think this is accidental, but we shouldn't make too much of it either. The causative sense allows for God to use indirect methods to harden Pharaoh's heart, but it doesn't necessarily *require* indirect methods. I would even go so far as to say that it *implies* indirect methods, but that's interpretive and not perfectly certain.

**Observation #2.** Another important observation is this: except for possibly the prophetic statements in Exodus 7:3 and 4:21, the *initial* hardening appears to be on Pharaoh's end. This is especially obvious in Exodus 8:15, where Pharaoh "caused his heart to harden", with the verb being a hiphil there. This is often noted by commentators, but comes out with slightly greater clarity in Hebrew, as translated above.

**Observation #3.** There are two legitimate ways to understand the initial condition of Pharaoh's heart. This is important enough to get its own subsection, so we'll examine that now:

### What was the initial state of Pharaoh's heart?

Notice the interplay between the following two verses, and I'll modify the translation slightly to more clearly demonstrate the two nuances that are legitimately possible. The following verse is the first time that a hardening of Pharaoh's heart occurs outside of predictive prophecy.

### Exodus 7:13

- Yet Pharaoh's heart **grew hard**, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.
- Yet Pharaoh's heart **grew more hard**, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

This matters because all the various qal stem instances of hardening are worded essentially identically in Hebrew. (*Not identically, but there are no differences that matter to this discussion.*) **Because of this, they should be translated identically in English to properly capture the Hebrew parallelism.**

For reasons that we've already talked about above, the second seems like the superior translation. However, that would imply that Pharaoh's heart was already hard before the Exodus narrative began.

### We'll explore that for a moment.

For clarity and completeness, here are all the places where the qal stem is used of hardening. Note that Exodus 9:7 uses a different verb, (*âkabadâ*) but it shares the same state-based focus that *âchazaqâ* has. As you read, notice the use in Exodus 7:13.

**Exodus 7:13:** Yet Pharaoh's heart **grew more hard**, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

**Exodus 7:22:** But the magicians of Egypt did the same with their secret arts; and Pharaoh's heart **grew more hard**, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

**Exodus 8:19:** Then the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God." But Pharaoh's heart **grew more hard**, and he did not listen to them, as the Lord had said.

**Exodus 9:7:** Pharaoh sent, and behold, there was not even one of the livestock of Israel dead. But **the heart of Pharaoh grew more hard**, and he did not let the people go.

**Ex 9:35:** Pharaoh's heart **grew more hard**, and he did not let the sons of Israel go, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

Thus, if we translate the first instance of hardening in Exodus 7:13 as "Pharaoh's heart grew hard" (*with no "more" added*) then we should also translate all the rest as "Pharaoh's heart grew hard" (*with no "more" added*) too for consistency! leading us to conclude that there's no progressive hardening happening.

However, if we add "more" to indicate the clear progression of Pharaoh's heart getting harder, that leads to the conclusion that Pharaoh's heart might've already been hard before the narrative began.

---

**There actually might be support for this from the piel stemâ??s usage, for similar consistency reasons.**

For example, here are two verses that use effectively the same construction:

**Exodus 4:21** (*modified*) The Lord said to Moses, â??When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but **I will cause his heart to harden** so that he will not let the people go.

**Exodus 10:27** (*modified*) But **the Lord caused Pharaohâ??s heart to harden more**, and he was not willing to let them go.

*(The only differences that matter for this article are â??lâ?• vs â??the Lordâ?•, and the future tense â??will causeâ?• versus past tense â??causedâ?•.)*

Thatâ??s the first occurrence next to a later occurrence thatâ??s constructed the same way in every way that matters to this article. **All the piel verbs are effectively identical in the ways that matter to this article.** Thus, it makes sense to translate them consistently throughout the Exodus account. If we do that, then we would end up translating in the pielâ??s nuance of â??intensificationâ?• into the passage with the word â??moreâ?• as we did with the qal stem. *(As in the long verse list above.)* **And if weâ??re consistent with the use of â??moreâ?•, that means we would include it the first time as well.**

Hereâ??s what that would look like in the first occurrence:

**Exodus 4:21** (*modified*) The Lord said to Moses, â??When you go back to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders which I have put in your power; but **I will cause his heart to harden more** so that he will not let the people go.

Being that consistent leads us to the conclusion that Pharaohâ??s heart was either:

- already hard
- Already inclined to be hard

**This is not certain.**

**If everything about the grammar was clear, there would be no debate about this.**

However, my own personal reading of the text, including the understanding that youâ??ve already seen, is that Pharaohâ??s heart was already at least *inclined* to hardness. I personally suspect that it was already hard, but donâ??t want to overstate the data. The data seems to lean in the direction of Pharaoh already being inclined to hardness, and/or already hard.

**Again, thatâ??s not certain.**

**Itâ??s a reasonable interpretation of the text grounded in Hebrew grammar, but it isnâ??t the only reasonable interpretation of the text.**

Sometimes, scripture isn't perfectly clear on things. This isn't as clear as, for example, the undisputed fact that Abraham named his son from Sarah to Isaac. That's clear from the text. This is less clear. I personally find it compelling, but you can disagree without ignoring the text.

**For the rest of this article, I will assume that Pharaoh's heart was at least inclined to hardness before the narrative began; it actually being hard is also a reasonable possibility.**

Again though, this is an *interpretation*, not stated explicitly in the text.

Next, we'll look at what is probably the most important section of this narrative as it relates to understanding who was doing the hardening, and how.

## The linchpin passage

This passage is notable because it records both Pharaoh hardening his own heart and God hardening Pharaoh's heart as seemingly the same event. That will be important for understanding the passage at large. **Notably, verses 9:34 and 10:1 both use kabad in the hiphil form.** 9:35 uses chazaq in the qal form.

### Exodus 9:34 and 10:1 (modified)

**9:34** But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned again and caused his heart to harden, he and his servants.

**9:35** Pharaoh's heart grew more hard, and he did not let the sons of Israel go, just as the Lord had spoken through Moses.

**10:1** Then the Lord said to Moses, Go to Pharaoh, for I caused his heart to harden, and the heart of his servants, that I may perform these signs of Mine among them,

Let me compress the context to make it more clear:

- **9:34:** Pharaoh! caused his heart to harden
- **10:1** the Lord said to Moses, Go to Pharaoh, for I caused his heart to harden

Again, both verses use kabad in the hiphil form/stem, so there's no mismatch between words or verb forms here. Almost as important, the two verses both use the hiphil stem, so we know for a 100% certain fact that it's causative action. If it was the piel, there might be some doubt since the piel is very flexible. However, since it's the hiphil form in both verses, it's definitely causative action in both verses.

**This establishes something important:**

**Pharaoh hardens his own heart and God takes credit for that.**

---

## That's important.

In fact, the importance of this parallel using the exact same word and causative verb form for both provides an important balance that strikes at both extreme ends of the debate. Most Calvinist/Reformed theologians will say that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was done entirely by God and that Pharaoh played no role in his own heart hardening whatsoever. On the other side of the debate, many on the Arminian side will say that the hardening is essentially all on Pharaoh's side, with little-to-no direct involvement by God.

**This verse pairing demonstrates that both extreme ends of the spectrum are wrong.**

If a theory is going to correctly articulate who was responsible for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, it must include both parties. That is, it must say that both Pharaoh and God are the source of the hardening. If a theory removes responsibility from one party or the other completely, then that theory has failed to account for this passage.

That said, we'll cover my own personal take on how to harmonize this next.

## My theory to account for all of this data

I want to say at the outset that this is my own personal theory of how this works. It is consistent with the text and the cultural context of the Exodus story, but **it is not explicitly stated in scripture**. As such, please read it with discernment because I've been wrong before. (*I try very hard not to be wrong, but I'm only human and thus make mistakes.*) If you see a way that my theory fails to account for some point of data, please mention it in the comments and I'll engage with the objection.

Here's my theory in a nutshell:

**I think that the way God told Moses to phrase "let my people go" was designed to harden Pharaoh's heart. God knew that the specific phrasing would harden Pharaoh's heart, and so He can reasonably take credit for the hardening. However, Pharaoh ultimately chose to harden his heart of his own free will, making it Pharaoh's responsibility as well.**

## This might be best explained by an analogy.

Let's say that an extremely conservative Christian is talking to a modern and extremely dedicated 4th-wave radical feminist. The conservative Christian says that a wife must submit to her husband in the same way that she submits to the Lord according to Ephesians 5:22. Now, imagine how the 4th-wave radical feminist will likely react.

She would be incensed.

Furious.

She would likely never listen to another thing that the conservative Christian man said, possibly ever. That would be an example of hardening someone's heart based purely on the words used, without directly affecting the other person's thoughts or brain chemistry. *(As some in the Calvinism/Reformed camp will suggest is happening with Pharaoh.)*

Now, some might say that this makes God manipulative, and I understand the charge. However, God wasn't capricious or petty in His command to Pharaoh; **He commanded Pharaoh to do the right thing**. Using this understanding, He didn't force Pharaoh to harden his heart, but He knew it would happen. Unfortunately, as most people reading this probably have experienced, telling someone to do the right thing often has a hardening effect.

It's the same when God does it.

**Again, this is only a theory, but I think it fits the data quite well.**

For more cultural context, here's a small excerpt from the scholar Dr. Michael Heiser, commenting on the Exodus story on a podcast:

Pharaoh's resistance to what Moses is doing turns out to be like the last straw. And then God says, "Okay, I'm going to take over from here." And the confrontation (when God enters the picture, as it were when it's an undeniable act of God) therefore shifts to not Moses versus Pharaoh or Moses versus Pharaoh's magicians. **Now it's God versus Pharaoh, who is the living Horus in Egyptian thinking. Pharaoh was considered the incarnation of a deity.** In Egyptian theology, the pharaoh was thought to be the living incarnation of Horus, the son of Re. And as soon as the pharaoh dies, his son (the next in line) becomes the new Horus. (This was the thinking.)

[Source.](#)

And from another source:

It has long been known that the Egyptian pharaoh was regarded as divine in Egyptian culture. He was the son of Re and the mediator between the gods and humankind. During the royal coronation, he was transformed into a manifestation of the god Horus. He could be referred to as a ntr (divine being, god), and was regularly described in inscriptions as "the good god" or "perfect god" (ntr nfr). **By the New Kingdom period, the king's divinity was believed to be imbued by his possession of a divine manifestation of the god Amun-Re called the "living royal ka", which came upon him at his coronation, and which was also renewed during the yearly opet festival held in the Luxor temple in Thebes.**

[Source.](#)

Yeah, there's a chance that Pharaoh was actually possessed, but that's a rabbit trail from this article's topic. *(It's discussed in [my article about spiritual warfare in my PSA series](#) if you'd like more information.)*

---

**Pharaoh and all of the Egyptians thought that Pharaoh was an incarnate God. Consider for a moment what that might do to someone's pride, and how it could lead to a greatly inflated ego.**

Now, also consider that Pharaoh had enslaved the Israelites for centuries at this point. We know from the story of Moses's birth that they were considered a threat to Egypt. Further consider that, from an Egyptian perspective, the God who had let His people be enslaved would likely be considered weak, possibly even powerless. And lastly, consider that Egypt was the undisputed greatest power in the world at that time.

Now, with all that context, imagine that two slaves showed up to Pharaoh's court and said the following:

### **Exodus 5:1-2**

**1** And afterward Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh, **Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, Let My people go that they may celebrate a feast to Me in the wilderness.**  
**2** But Pharaoh said, Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice to let Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and besides, I will not let Israel go.

With all that context, do you think that Pharaoh's heart might've instantly hardened at hearing what was arguably a command from his slaves to let the slaves leave Egypt to go worship their God?

I think so.

I think that makes good sense.

Again, it's my own personal conclusion based on the evidence, and it could certainly be wrong. However, it does seem to fit the data.

### **But what about Pharaoh's heart hardening after the miracles and plagues?**

Virtually everyone I know has had experience with this, so I'll omit citing the evidence because it is such a common experience. Have you ever shown someone conclusive proof of something, only to have that person obstinately double-down on their position? Have you noticed that showing someone the evidence many times, bringing better evidence each time, can sometimes result in that person obstinately doubling-down on their position even more?

**My guess is that's what happened with Pharaoh.**

As we previously covered, the Hebrew grammar, especially the piel stem, suggests a steadily increasing hardness in Pharaoh. This would make sense with the near-universal human experience of showing someone the evidence (*miracles and then plagues in the Exodus account*), and then that person becoming more obstinate anyway. (*Sometimes, subjectively, it seems like people become more obstinate because of the evidence.*)

Again, that aligns well with what happened to Pharaoh.

I've spent rather a lot of time buried in this topic while researching this article, and I haven't found anything that would seem to contradict this theory or make it implausible. Again, this is only a theory and it could be wrong, but it does seem to fit the data.

(For those who have seen the movie: *The Prince of Egypt*, there's a line during the song about the plagues that leans this way. Pharaoh sings *Then let my heart be hardened, and never mind how high the cost may grow, this will still be so, I will never let your people go.* I'm not saying that they believed my view. However, it lines up well.)

## What about Romans 9?

Here's the famous passage:

### Romans 9:14-18

**14** What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! **15** For He says to Moses, *I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.* **16** So then it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. **17** For **the Scripture says to Pharaoh, *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.*** **18** So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and **He hardens whom He desires.**

Fortunately, there is very little about the Greek grammar here that differs from the translation above, or most any translation. It's a present indicative active verb used as what's called a *gnomic present*, which is the usual form for statements that are generally true at all times, not just the current time. It's the same verb form used in, for example:

### Matthew 7:17

So every good tree **bears** good fruit, but the bad tree **bears** bad fruit.

It's the exact same verb form there, and used the exact same way: the *gnomic* (or *timeless*) present to indicate something that's generally true across time. It's the same way that we might say: *No good deed goes unpunished* in English; it indicates a timeless truth.

Here's another example of a *gnomic/timeless present* using the exact same verb form:

### James 1:15

Let no one say when he is tempted, *I am being tempted by God*; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself **does not tempt** anyone.

Now, there's a logical leap I'm about to make, and I want to make it clear that it's a logical leap and not explicitly stated in the text. Here it is: James 1:15 clearly says that God doesn't tempt anyone. That's explicitly stated. A logical inference from that statement is that He also doesn't force anyone to sin. Again, that's a logical leap and not explicitly stated in the text, but it does make logical sense.

**That's relevant to divine hardening for obvious reasons.**

This logical inference seems to strike against Exhaustive Divine Determinism (*EDD*), which is a doctrine that says God enforces every single action taken by every single person, animal, or object. (*Including sins like murder; its opponents often argue that it makes God the author of evil.*)

Now, if your view of hardening involves EDD, then you have missed the fact that Pharaoh is given credit for hardening his own heart. If only God hardened it and Pharaoh had no role in hardening it, as EDD suggests, then the statements about Pharaoh hardening his own heart would be false. **No matter which position you end up believing, don't forget that any view which doesn't give responsibility to both God and Pharaoh doesn't fit with the text of the Exodus account, especially the linchpin passage.**

**Now, back to Romans 9.**

This Romans 9 passage has a myriad of factors that would be required to understand it correctly. Each of them could likely be another article this long, or longer, so they are beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we'll stay laser-focused on only the application to Pharaoh, since he is used as the example of divine hardening.

Given that:

- Pharaoh is the example of divine hardening
- His hardening clearly and explicitly is stated to be done by both God and himself
- James 1:15 says that God doesn't tempt anyone

**Thus, we can logically conclude that the EDD view is wrong because it doesn't allow Pharaoh to have a role in his own hardening (*it would all be God*), and it would almost certainly violate James 1:15**

**Now, as a counterbalance to that, the other extreme is incorrect as well.**

**We can also conclude from the text that God definitely did have an important, even crucial, role in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart; it can't have been all Pharaoh.**

Again, the understanding that I suggested allows for both, and it also maintains the element of personal responsibility for Pharaoh for his actions.

There is far more to say about Romans 9 — for example, whether election is corporate about nations or individual about each person — but I'm trying to keep this article focused on Pharaoh. I will quite likely write more articles on this topic, as it's likely to become a shorter article series at some point. However, that point isn't today. Perhaps in the future.

---

For today and this article, we've covered everything about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart that can be covered without getting into large amounts of additional context. Thus, we'll mostly leave it here, except for links to further reading in the next section.

## Further reading

If you'd like to read some scholarship on this topic, I've put some links below to scholarly research. They will be a little harder to follow if you don't know the original languages, but still doable with a bit of effort. Also, as always, be aware that literally every single person on the planet has biases. Scholars try to set them aside, and I do as well, but they exist.

I've uploaded PDF files of these papers to my website, accessible via the links below. Each of the papers has a different focus, which I've put just before the link:

- **Balanced view:** [Divine Hardening in the Old Testament](#), by Robert B. Chisholm Jr.
- **Emphasis on God's sovereignty:** [An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4:14 and Romans 9](#), by G. K. Beale
- **Emphasis on Pharaoh's responsibility:** [The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Its Literary and Cultural Contexts](#) by Dorian G. Coover Cox

Those should keep you busy for a while and give a more complete picture if you want more information from scholarly sources. I would like to take a moment to address the paper by G. K. Beale though.

## My thoughts on Beale's paper

First, Beale correctly says that Pharaoh bears responsibility for hardening his own heart, and thus is culpable for his sin. We agree on that. However, while Beale correctly and repeatedly affirms that Pharaoh is culpable, he also consistently says that God is the ultimate cause, even in the self-hardening verses. While his view accurately gives God credit, it doesn't leave much room for Pharaoh.

Importantly, Beale doesn't address the parallelism in our linchpin verses, where the same hiphil verb is used of both God and Pharaoh referring to the same hardening event. Instead, he sees Exodus 10:1 as meaning something different and so likely doesn't think that the parallelism applies.

Beale sees Exodus 10:1 this way, and don't overlook the final sentence:

Since 9:34-35 seem to function as a literary device for summarizing the sequential hardening predictions—the hardening motif of these narratives, *the Hiphil hikkadti (Yahweh) have made heavy his heart, 10:1) begins a new section that looks ahead, and functions best as a prophetic perfect rather than a definite past referring to the previous action*. The verb here shows Yahweh has determined not only the hardening later

in this narrative, but the rest of the events involved (cf. v 1a and 1b).<sup>7</sup>

*(From the paper linked above.)*

**Ultimately, Beale overlooked the important parallelism that we focused on in this article.**

Perhaps he didn't notice it, or perhaps he didn't think it worth mentioning, or perhaps (*most likely*) he saw the above understanding as a more convincing understanding that matched the Hebrew text better.

**I disagree.**

Parallelism is often extremely important in Hebrew, and it's regularly used throughout scripture to reveal and/or clarify important things. **Remember that Pharaoh caused his heart to harden, and the Lord said: I caused his heart to harden when seemingly referring to the same hardening event.** To miss the close parallel in this passage where they seem to refer to the same hardening event with the same hiphil verb is a significant omission from his analysis. And, as I said at the beginning, any incomplete understanding of any issue is more likely to be wrong.

Beale actually says the following about a different verse in his paper, and he's speaking of a hiphil form verb as well.

In deciding upon matters of grammar in crucial and debated theological texts of Scripture, any interpreter is faced with a tension between his theological assumptions and the objective facts of grammar. Such is the case here. **A canon in grammatical interpretation in such texts where contexts cannot absolutely determine a particular grammatical option is: the exegete should conclude with that option which is most usual elsewhere. In the present case, according to this canon, the basic causative sense of the Hiphil stem should be preferred over the declarative.**

That paragraph is 100% correct and I agree fully.

Again, this was originally said about another verse. However, we can take that standard which Beale himself says is a canon of good interpretation and apply it to our linchpin verse.

**If we apply Beale's own standard to the linchpin passage, it argues against his interpretation of that passage.**

The parallelism in the linchpin passage, read in context and considering the repeated use of the same hiphil verb, seems to clearly present *both* God *and* Pharaoh as the active agents in the hardening. Beale's view de-emphasizes Pharaoh, which isn't consistent with the linchpin passage; that's the major weakness of Beale's position. Again, he rightly says that Pharaoh is still culpable. Ultimately though, I think his view of God's role is too strong.

The Hebrew grammar of the linchpin passage, plus a little cultural context, allows for a more nuanced option. God, being all-knowing and thus knowing Pharaoh perfectly, could choose to present the message in a way where Pharaoh would choose to harden his heart.

### In this understanding:

- God remains sovereign because he deliberately chose to deliver a message that He knew would harden Pharaoh's heart. Thus, He can claim ultimate responsibility. (*God didn't force Pharaoh to sin, nor even tempt him to sin because He rightly ordered Pharaoh to do the right thing; thus, God cannot be charged with wrongdoing or being the author of evil.*)
- Pharaoh chose to harden his heart in response; thus, he is culpable and guilty for that choice.
  - Pharaoh continued choosing to further harden his heart in response to plagues because relenting would mean publicly admitting that he was weaker than the "slave God" and wasn't divine. Especially in that culture, that would be an almost impossible blow to his ego.

This tension allows both God and Pharaoh to be responsible while fully preserving the free will of both, and it prevents God from being the author of Pharaoh's sins. (*A pitfall of stronger views.*)

**Again, this view is speculative and not explicitly taught in the text.** (*It might even be brand new/novel, though I doubt I'm creative enough to come up with something completely brand new. As it is written: "there's nothing new under the sun".*) **However, this view seems to account for all the data without sliding into extremes on either side.**

In my estimation, that makes it the best understanding that I've personally heard. (*If you hear a better one, please put it in the comments.*)

## Conclusion

The qal stem verbs used in the Exodus account indicate Pharaoh's heart entering the state of hardness. Given the repetition with near-identical forms, the context virtually demands that we understand these verbs as his hardness increasing as the narrative progresses.

The piel stem verbs indicate causation, which allows for God to have used indirect methods to harden Pharaoh's heart. Additionally, the piel stem often has an intensifying or iterative sense, which would again suggest that Pharaoh's heart got progressively harder as the narrative unfolds.

Given the qal and piel stem uses, it's reasonable to conclude that Pharaoh's heart was at least inclined toward hardness before the story begins. It's not unreasonable to say it was outright hard before the story began, but that's not certain, only reasonable.

The hiphil stem verbs indicate clear causation, both on the part of God and Pharaoh. **In Exodus 9:34 and Exodus 10:1, both Pharaoh and God are given credit for the hardening of Pharaoh's heart over the same event using the same word and same stem. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude "especially given the causative sense of the piel in other verses" that this is true of the other events as well.**

**Thus, any understanding of how divine hardening happens requires both God and Pharaoh to have a hand; it can't be only God or only Pharaoh.**

The way that I personally see to harmonize this is that God had Moses and Aaron give the message in such a way that Pharaoh's own ego would cause him to harden his heart. The Plagues would then be an intensification of this hardening.

Romans 9 uses Pharaoh as *the* example of divine hardening, so it's likely but not explicitly stated that the other forms of divine hardening happen in a very similar manner to Pharaoh's. If that's the case, then God does not simply directly alter a person's thoughts or brain chemistry. Rather, He would present the person he wants to harden with a choice, situation, confrontation, etc., that results in that person hardening his own heart. Importantly, this leaves personal responsibility for wicked choices solely with the person doing them, not God.

There is far more context to cover with divine hardening in the Bible, but this article was narrowly focused on the case of Pharaoh because it is *the* example given in Romans 9. I'll likely extend this into an article series on sovereignty versus free will at some point, and for reasons that will become obvious, that'll also bleed into a discussion of God's relationship to time.

Until then, take care, and you can look at the "further reading" section if you want to read more.

God Bless,  
Berean Patriot