

Maimonides on the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

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Source: From the eighth chapter of Eight Chapters (introduction to commentary on Pirkei Avot in the Rambam's Commentary on the Mishnah)

One element of the story of the exodus that the Roberts' version elides is God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Moses Maimonides (ca 1135 - 1204 CE) recognized this element of the story as a significant paradox since it seemed to suggest that God forced Pharaoh to make the wicked decisions that brought about the punishment of the plagues. As Maimonides recognizes, if this were so, then the notion that the plagues were a punishment as well as a means of the liberation of the Jews would both destroy the notion that moral responsibility depends upon the assumption that human beings are moral agents and any corresponding notion of divine justice (though it should be noted that Maimonides' conception of "divine justice" is, in turn, not altogether obvious). Below is a passage from chapter eight of Maimonides' "Eight Chapters" (his introduction to his commentary on Pirkei Avot in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*). What do you make of the Rambam's attempt to reconcile this element of the story with a reasonable conception of human agency and divine justice?

Pharaoh and his followers disobeyed by choice, without force or compulsion. They oppressed the foreigners who were in their midst and treated them with sheer injustice. As it is clearly said: *And he said to his people: Behold, the people of Israel... Come, let us deal shrewdly with them.* This action was due to their choice and to the evil character of their thought; there was nothing compelling them to do it. God punished them for it by preventing them from repenting so that the punishment which His justice required would befall them. What prevented them from repentance was that they would not set [Israel] free.

God explained this to [Pharaoh] and informed him that if He had only wanted to take [Israel] out [of Egypt], He would have exterminated [Pharaoh] and his followers, and they would have gone out. But in addition to taking them out, He wanted to punish [Pharaoh] for oppressing them previously. As He had said at the very outset: *And also that nation, whom they shall serve, I will I judge!* It was not possible to punish them if they repented, so they were prevented from repenting and they continued holding [Israel]. This is what He says: *Surely now I have put forth my hand. . . but because of this I have left you standing etc.*

No disgrace need be attached to us because of our saying that God may punish an individual for not repenting, even though He leaves them no choice about repentance, For He, may be exalted, knows the sins, and His wisdom and justice impose the extent of the punishment. He may punish in this world alone, He may punish in the other [world] alone, or He may punish in both realms. His punishment in this world varies: He may punish with regard to the body, money, or both. He may impede some of man's voluntary movements as a means of punishment, like preventing his hand from grasping, as He did with Jeroboam, or the eye from seeing, as He did with the men of Sodom who had united against Lot.

Similarly, He may prevent the choice of repentance so that a man does not at all incline toward it and is destroyed for his sin. It is not for us to know His wisdom to the extent of knowing why He punished this individual with this kind of punishment and did not punish him with another kind, just as we do not know the reason he determined this species to this form and not another form. But the general rule is that all of His ways are just. He punishes the sinner to the extent of his sin and He rewards the beneficent man to the extent of his beneficence.