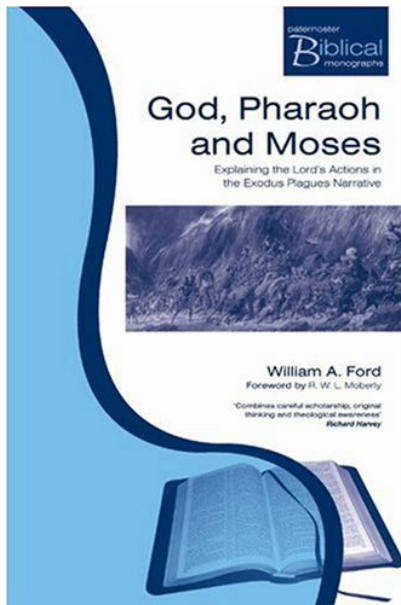


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Ford, William A.

God, Pharaoh and Moses: Explaining the Lord's Actions in the Exodus Plagues Narrative

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This monograph is a slightly revised version of William A. Ford's doctoral dissertation written at the University of Durham under the supervision of R. W. L. Moberly, who has also authored the foreword for this work. It comes with five chapters, a conclusion, appendices, bibliography, and indices of names, scriptural references, and subjects.

Chapter 1 introduces readers to a number of debated issues that are significant to this work. The responsibility for the "hardening of Pharaoh's heart" (either YHWH or Pharaoh) is a key issue raised in this section. This chapter also provides a survey of previous scholarship, a chapter-by-chapter summary of the monograph, and a defense of the proposed methodology. Ford's first contention here is that one should read the plagues narrative from the perspective of a narrative approach and attempt to find the meaning of the "hardening" issue as it plays a role within the overall narrative context. Ford's second contention is that the work will deal only with the final form of text, in this case, the Masoretic Text of the book of Exodus. He also clarifies that other methodological concerns, such as questions of sources, traditions, the historicity of the text, or the possibilities of interaction with the ancient Near Eastern context, will not be addressed. In a word, Ford chooses to interpret the plagues narrative in accordance with its canonical form, from which he thinks its theological message can be obtained.

In chapter 2 Ford offers an exegesis of Exod 9:13–19 in order to suggest a thesis that he believes explains YHWH's actions displayed in the plagues narrative: YHWH is deliberately restraining his power in waiting for a certain response from humans, in this case, from Pharaoh. Yet what Pharaoh actually does is in sharp contrast to YHWH's will: Pharaoh uses YHWH's restraint to exalt himself over YHWH's people. This relationship between YHWH and Pharaoh establishes a pattern, Ford argues, that extends to other parts of the plagues narrative.

In chapter 3 Ford attempts to refine and develop his thesis in light of Exod 10:1–2, which seems to give a somewhat different perspective. The difficulty arising from this passage is that YHWH's attitude to Pharaoh appears to have changed, even to the extent that it seems contradictory to his previous attitude to Pharaoh. While in 9:13–19 YHWH awaits Pharaoh's obedient response, he hardens Pharaoh's heart in 10:1–2. To deal with this complication, Ford takes into account the contexts in which the speeches are delivered. Specifically, he draws attention to the identities of the addressees of YHWH's respective speeches. In Ford's analysis, the first speech (9:13–19) is addressed to Pharaoh, the second (10:1–2) to Moses. In the former, YHWH wants the addressee (Pharaoh) to be fully responsible for the stubbornness of his heart and to give adequate obedience to YHWH, namely, to repent and release YHWH's people. In the latter, YHWH wants the addressee (Moses) to fully understand YHWH's plan—to harden Pharaoh's heart and to take Israel out of Egypt—and to obey, that is, to return to Pharaoh and continue to deliver YHWH's message. On this basis, it is further argued that YHWH's seemingly inconsistent actions are in fact consistent, as they present the same intention of YHWH: to have the addressees give obedient responses to him. Put simply, Ford asserts that the comparison between these two passages functions to refine his thesis into one that fits well with the whole account of the plagues narrative, inasmuch as its readers focus upon YHWH's intentions rather than his actions.

Chapter 4 surveys the entire plagues narrative (Exod 7–11) from the viewpoint of Ford's thesis established in the previous two chapters, along with another brief look at the remainder of the exodus story (Exod 12–18). Specifically, Ford takes into account the well-known analysis that structures the ten plagues in terms of three-triads plus one last plague (plagues 1–3, 4–6, 7–9, and 10) and, in so doing, traces the thematic progression of his thesis, primarily through the lens of how various characters of the narrative—Moses, Pharaoh, Israel, magicians, and servants of Pharaoh—respond to YHWH's demands.

Chapter 5 examines 1 Sam 4–7 in comparison to the plagues narrative so as to test how the thesis fits in the wider context of the Old Testament. This examination shows, Ford says, that his thesis works well in 1 Sam 4–7, as he finds it very likely that YHWH acts with intention in anticipation of humans' appropriate responses, both in the case of the

Philistines' dealing with the ark and in the ensuing event of the Israelites' handling of the ark.

By way of evaluation, I offer a few comments about the book. First of all, Ford has done a fine job in attempting to provide a fresh reading of the plagues narrative as a whole. Paying attention to some texts that were not previously emphasized in these discussions (e.g., Exod 9:13–19; 10:1–2) helps expound the progressive literary nature and theological fruitfulness of the plagues narrative. These types of insights should help readers better appreciate the story. Second, another merit of this work results from its methodological stance, which gives respect to the final form of the text, so as not to “flatten out the different messages into one meaning or abstract them as propositions” (216). Attempts have been made throughout the work to appropriately weigh various aspects of literary affiliations along the progression of the narrative and thereby not to unwarrantedly discolor one aspect in light of another that might be a priori seen as theologically more significant.

Still, I have a reservation with regard to the way Ford uses his shrewd observations in order to create a paradigm that governs the entirety of the plagues narrative. In my view, his argument that YHWH acts with intentions in anticipation of human responses fails to work in some parts of the narrative. For instance, Ford contends that the seemingly contradictory concepts of YHWH hardening Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh hardening his own heart prove acceptable insofar as one considers YHWH's intentions for the addressees. However, this only appears valid for some, not all, of the accounts that carry this theme of hardening. A negative case is observed in Exod 10:20, which states that YHWH hardened Pharaoh's heart. This verse comes from the narrator and does not have any addressee. Consequently, it is not viable here to find YHWH's intention for the addressee, which does not match Ford's thesis well. The same can be said of Exod 10:27 and 11:10. Therefore, it seems warranted to say that, whereas Ford's meticulous study on Exod 9 and 10 and his thesis established therein significantly enhances our understanding of how the various parts of the plagues narrative cooperatively serve the whole, they do not construe *the* complete paradigm that legitimately governs the interpretation of everything in the narrative.

Nonetheless, I warmly commend this work with acknowledgement of its keen interpretive observations and coherent presentation of fresh arguments. Its attentive engagement with scholarship is also noted. Appendices are helpful for those unfamiliar with the Hebrew text. *Mutatis mutandis*, it is an important addition to the study of the book of Exodus and the theological interpretation of the Scripture. Therefore, it certainly deserves the serious attention of readers at all levels.