God, Pharaoh and Moses: Explaining the Lord's Actions in the Exodus Plague Narratives

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William A. Ford

Foreword by R. W. L. Moberly
Chapter 1

The Issue and the Approach

1.1 The Issue under Discussion

The story of the exodus is primarily a story about YHWH.\textsuperscript{1}

The exodus is often seen as a story about the liberation of Israel. Yet Israel are absent from the action in most of the story.\textsuperscript{2} They may form the basis of Moses’ commission and the demand to Pharaoh, but they play little active part in the story, in contrast to many other Old Testament stories. Moses, and to a lesser extent Aaron, has a greater role. His story begins in Ex. 2, and he is present at nearly every point after that until the end of the exodus in Ex. 15.\textsuperscript{3} However, while he is present, it is as the one spoken to by YHWH, or as the one who speaks the word of YHWH. Apart from this role, little is said about him. In the same way, Pharaoh is present as the one who is addressed by YHWH and who refuses his demands during the plagues. Like Moses, he is one who is important inasmuch as he encounters YHWH. This does not mean that these others are unimportant. The fact that YHWH works with and through human beings will be considered throughout this examination. However, the prime focus in the text is YHWH.

Inasmuch as this story is part of the Old Testament, the fact that it focuses upon YHWH may not be surprising. However there are a couple of notable points concerning the story in relation to YHWH. First it is almost


\textsuperscript{2} They are present in chapters 1, 5, and 12-15, as well as very briefly in chapters 2, 4, and 6.

\textsuperscript{3} In this dissertation, due to the number of references to Exodus, all references will be given without the ‘Ex.’ prefix, unless stated. Thus Exodus 5:1 will be cited as ‘5:1’ and so forth. Other biblical references will retain their prefix.
unparalleled in terms of the concentration of YHWH’s acts and intervention. After appointing Moses as his messenger to the Egyptian Pharaoh and providing him with signs, YHWH strikes Egypt with a series of signs or plagues, cumulating in the plague on the firstborn, as a result of which Pharaoh releases Israel. When, subsequently, Pharaoh pursues Israel, YHWH destroys the pursuing Egyptian army in the waters of the Red Sea.

Secondly, this concentrated portrayal of divine interventions raises difficult moral and theological questions concerning the nature or portrayal of YHWH. This is particularly the case in that section of the narrative that deals with the plagues or signs (Ex. 7-11) which we may call the ‘plagues narrative’. We can summarise these issues under two main headings: the length and nature of the plagues, and the interaction of YHWH with Pharaoh, in particular the ‘hardening of Pharaoh’s heart’.

1.1.1 Length and Nature of the Plagues

The exodus story is one of the longest continuous narratives in the Old Testament. One could compare the Joseph story, and stories about David. A large part of this lengthy story comprises a series of encounters where YHWH sends ten increasingly destructive plagues upon Egypt. These plagues are accompanied by a demand from YHWH to Pharaoh: ‘send/release my people that they may serve me’.

However, although later plagues are inimitable (8:15 [19]; 9:11), and indeed unique (9:18; 10:6; 11:6), the series commences with signs, given by YHWH to Moses and Aaron, which the magi of Egypt can copy. As a result Pharaoh is not particularly interested in listening to them, which raises questions as to the reasons for such a commencement. At one point YHWH comments that he could have destroyed the Egyptians with a plague, presumably with the result that Israel could have then left unhindered. However he has not done this for his own reasons (9:15-16). Meanwhile, there is no suggestion that Israel, present only in the narrative from 6:9-11:10 as the object of YHWH and Pharaoh’s interaction, are doing anything other than working in the brick kilns, making bricks without

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4 The creation story obviously has a number of divine acts in it. Apart from this, one could mention the Elijah/Elisha stories.
6 The issue of the exact boundaries of the plagues narrative will be picked up in chapter 4.
straw.\textsuperscript{8} If Israel is to be freed; freeing them as quickly and painlessly as possible does not appear to be YHWH’s aim.\textsuperscript{9}

The plagues increase in their power, bringing destruction to the fertile land; suffering; the death of animals; illness; and finally death. Gowan notes that ‘few have thought to discuss at all God’s choice of death and destruction as his means of getting glory over Pharaoh (14:4). They just accept it, as the author of Exodus accepts it, but in our day we cannot avoid asking how this fits with the whole of scripture’s picture of God.’\textsuperscript{10}

Yet when we reach 11:10 at the end of the first nine plagues, we find Israel, Pharaoh and Egypt still seemingly in the same position as at the start. We may then ask with Plastaras:

It might be wondered why the sacred authors chose to tell the story of the earlier plagues at such length (four whole chapters), since they did not achieve their expressed purpose.\textsuperscript{11}

To put this another way, with all of the issues noted above, one could ask about the point of the plagues narrative in the exodus story. What is the point of the long description of the first nine plagues? What would be lost if the story skipped from, say, Ex. 5 to Ex. 12?\textsuperscript{12} Childs sums up the issue well:

Only in the plague stories was a tradition retained in which such great miracles, constantly repeated, continued to fail. The fact that ultimately plague X did


\textsuperscript{10} Gowan, 128. At this point we should note that the idea of YHWH sending calamities upon people, both Israel and non-Israel, is not unusual. There are a number of instances of YHWH bringing calamities, the most obvious being the Flood (Gen. 6-8). Moreover, passages such as Amos 3:6; Is. 45:7; and Dt. 32:39 appear to set this out quite programmatically. However the wider issue of YHWH bringing calamity in the Old Testament is beyond the scope of this work. For an interesting discussion of this issue, see Fredrik Lindström, \textit{God and the Origin of Evil – A Contextual Analysis of Alleged Monistic Evidence in the Old Testament}, CBOTS 21 (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1983). His argument is that these and other passages do not show a monistic view. Even if one accepts his analysis, it still leaves the lesser point that YHWH is certainly responsible for some calamities.

\textsuperscript{11} Plastaras, 133-34.

accomplish its end, did not remove the difficulty of the earlier one, nor explain the failure.  

1.1.2 Interaction of YHWH and Pharaoh

Although we are calling this section the plagues narrative, a large part of it is not concerned with the phenomena of the plagues, but rather with the interaction or encounters between YHWH and Pharaoh of which the plagues form a part.  

YHWH demands that Pharaoh send the people of Israel away, rather than just taking them himself. Such a demand introduces most of the encounters and the plagues are related to Pharaoh’s lack of response to this demand. However for each of the plagues before the firstborn Pharaoh’s response is to refuse to send Israel. We can continue from the same passage in Childs:

Indeed the sense of the mystery of Pharaoh’s resistance lies at the root of the tradition. Now it is apparent that the essential problem with which we began is not ultimately form-critical in nature, but profoundly theological. The interpreter is still faced with the task of penetrating the mystery of God’s power before human pride.

At the end of each plague Pharaoh’s response is explained by a narratorial comment on the hardness of his heart. Towards the end of the plagues this hardening is explicitly ascribed to YHWH.  

Thus he appears to be preventing Pharaoh from obeying his demands, exacerbating the length of the interaction and the effect of the plagues, both in terms of their number and power. Moreover YHWH tells Moses in advance of these encounters that he is going to harden Pharaoh’s heart (4:21; 7:3), raising the question of why YHWH would make such demands to Pharaoh at all.

Thus the question of why YHWH would lengthen the plagues is exacerbated by the question of why he would make a demand and then work against that demand by hardening Pharaoh. Discussions have tended to focus, understandably, on the hardening as perhaps the most theologically challenging of these issues. Such discussions vary from short

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14 The words ‘interaction’ and ‘encounters’ are being used in an attempt to avoid pre-categorising the content or the nature of the interactions/encounters between YHWH and Pharaoh before they are studied. Descriptions such as ‘contest’, ‘demonstration’, ‘negotiations’; ‘pedagogical/didactic’ would inevitably colour our reading. While there may well be elements of most, if not all, of these present, no single one of them can appropriately function as a summation of the entire process.
15 Childs, 149.
16 The specific hardening phrases will be discussed in chapter 3.
excursus in commentaries through articles to a monograph. Therefore we will begin our consideration of the portrayal of YHWH with a summary of representative discussions on the hardening.

1.2 Different Approaches to the Issue

1.2.1 Previous Approaches to the 'Hardening’

A caveat is necessary at this point. As this study will not focus exclusively on the issue of the ‘hardening’, this summary is intended to be representative of general positions on the issue of the hardening, rather than exhaustive of all scholarly work thereon. The discussions have been grouped into different approaches to the issue for ease of reference. However the lines are necessarily arbitrary, and some works may fall into more than one category or on the borderline of two. The intention of this section is to summarise the different positions here, and in this short space it will not be possible to do justice to all of the arguments.

1.2.1.1 DIFFERENT SOURCES WITH DIFFERENT POSITIONS

The most common approach, certainly until recently, was to approach the problem of the hardening through historical critical methods. The different hardening vocabulary and phraseology were investigated as deriving from different sources, building up a composite picture of how the present text came to be. The most detailed example of this is the monograph by Franz Hesse.

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17 This having been said, there are fewer detailed discussions than one might expect.
19 For example Hesse’s discussion deals primarily with the different sources but sees them all, ultimately, as portraying YHWH as the cause.
20 The issue of the hardening will be considered in more detail in chapter 3.
Hesse’s comments on the hardening of Pharaoh form part of his overall study of the theme of hardening, considering the possible Old Testament origins of the New Testament issue, considering the hardening both of non-Israel (including Pharaoh) and also of Israel (especially Is. 6).

Although Hesse splits the hardening passages into J, E, P and redactional elements, he still finds tension between divine and human hardening within these individual sources. Thus while J leaves YHWH out of consideration, according to Hesse it is obvious to J that YHWH, who removed the plague, is ultimately involved with the hardening. ‘In my opinion, one cannot speak of a relationship of tension between ‘self-hardening’ and hardening by God in J. For this narrator Jahwe is the secret subject of the apparent self-hardening.’22 This of course is rather difficult to sustain. Räisänen comments that one ‘could just as well claim that J regarded Yahweh as the actual cause of the Fall (Gen. 3).’23 Hesse finds this tension also in E, and supremely in P.24 ‘In respect of the problem which he faces, P does the only thing that is possible for the theologian: He puts two propositions dialectically next to each other. In this respect theology has not gone beyond him to this day, and will not go beyond him.’25 Finally he argues that redactional elements such as 4:21 and 3:19 do not progress the matter beyond P at all.26

This approach raises the questions of the possible relationships between the assumed sources, and how this may make sense of the text.27 Thus

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22 Hesse, 45. ‘Von einem Spannungsverhältnis zwischen »Selbstverstockung« und Verstockung durch Gott kann bei J m. E. keine Rede sein. Für diesen Erzähler ist Jahwe das heimliche Subjekt der scheinbaren Selbstverstockung.’ (Unless otherwise stated, translations from the German are my own. I am grateful to Jenny Moberly for her help with my German.)

23 Räisänen Hardening, 54.

24 Hesse, 46-51.

25 Hesse, 48. ‘P tut also in der Aporie, in der es steht, das einzige, was dem Theologen möglich ist: Er stellt zwei Sätze dialektisch nebeneinander. In dieser Hinsicht ist die Theologie bis heute nicht über ihn hinausgekommen und wird nicht über ihn hinausgekommen.’ He notes Abot. 3:15 in support of this. Cf. Räisänen’s rejection of this view as too modern for P (55).

26 Hesse, 51-52.

27 For example, many recent studies explore the model of the later sources (especially the Priestly source) working with earlier sources and adapting the overall picture. The most detailed discussion is found in Fujiko Kohata, Jahwist und Priesterschrift in
Childs' excursus on the hardening is structured around J and P, and he concludes that in both cases the hardening is linked to the signs. For J the hardening prevents the signs from revealing the knowledge of God. For P the hardening results in the multiplication of signs. However Childs himself sees source criticism as unable to provide a breakthrough in the problem of the hardening. This, however, has not stopped other discussions. For example Wilson responds to Childs by investigating the function of the different narrative strands of J, E, and P. In J the motif has a literary function but does not give a reason for the plagues, only the next request to Pharaoh. E attributes Pharaoh's actions to YHWH by placing 4:21 at the beginning. Finally P adds 7:3 with מַעַּשָּׁה, encouraging the reader to interpret all of Pharaoh's actions negatively. Wilson notes the lack of agreement of scholars on any overall function, and the difficulty of generalising on the use of the hardening motif. These warnings, both implicit and explicit in the source critical approach, need to be heeded. An explanation needs to deal with the variances in form, vocabulary and phraseology to be successful.

1.2.1.2 ONE OVERALL POSITION – YHWH OR PHARAOH

An alternative to the above position is to attempt to find one overall understanding of the hardening, generally with regard to the author or cause of the hardening.

On the one hand, it is argued that YHWH is always responsible for the hardening. Appeals are made primarily to YHWH's initial statements concerning the hardening in 4:21 and 7:3 before the encounters begin, and the concluding phrase 'as YHWH said'. These are seen as indications that while the text may say 'Pharaoh hardened his heart', the reader is to understand that YHWH is ultimately responsible. This then becomes clear at 9:12. The most detailed recent discussion of this is the article by G.K. Beale, which seeks to discuss the hardening in context in a final form approach. In summary his argument has three points at its heart: YHWH

Exodus 3-14. BZAW 166 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), henceforth 'Kohata', who discusses the question of whether P knew the earlier sources. Another recent approach that diachronically considers the changing portrayal of YHWH and divine power in the plagues narrative, is that of Dozeman.

28 Childs, 170-175.
29 Childs, 170.
30 Wilson, 24-27, 27-29, and 29-35 respectively.
31 Wilson, 19 and 35 respectively.
32 This is the case even when, as here, one is looking at the final form. Our approach will be discussed at the end of this section.
foretelling his hardening of Pharaoh in 4:21, the phrase ‘as YHWH said’ referring back to 4:21 and 7:3, and the ‘transitive/intransitive’ pattern that he identifies in the hardening statements.\textsuperscript{34}

Conversely it is argued that Pharaoh is always responsible for the hardening. It is suggested that the attribution of the hardening to YHWH is due to the mindset of the writers who would attribute everything ultimately to YHWH, but in such a way as not to deny the reality and efficacy of proximate causes through human agency.\textsuperscript{35} Alternatively ‘YHWH hardened’ is understood in a permissive sense: YHWH allowed Pharaoh to remain hard-hearted rather than causing him to be hard-hearted.\textsuperscript{36}

The problems with these positions are similar, in that one has to decide which statements to read at face value, and which to ‘interpret’ in light of the ‘face value’ statements. That is not to say that the interpretations are not, at least in some cases, subtle. If we had to make a choice one way or the other, 4:21, 7:3 and ‘as YHWH said’ would favour YHWH as being ultimately responsible. However in light of the issues raised by the source

henceforth ‘Noth’, 68; G. Warshaver, “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart”, in the Bible and Qumranic Literature.” \textit{BIJS} 1 (1973): 1-12, 2-3. More famously see Luther’s ‘The Bondage of the Will’, in \textit{Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings}, John Dillenberger ed. (New York: Anchor, Doubleday, 1962), 192, 196-98, and Calvin, 101-102, 194. The discussion is quite subtle, speaking of YHWH using Pharaoh’s evil will against him, but Luther notes that the ‘as YHWH said’ rules out any freewill, and Calvin dismisses the view that the hardening was in any way permissive.

\textsuperscript{34} He has other arguments, but these three appear to underpin other discussions. For example in discussing 8:11 [15], he notes the phrase ‘Pharaoh hardened’ but in view of ‘as YHWH said’ Pharaoh ‘must be viewed as YHWH’s agent, who truly hardens himself – however, never independently, but only under the ultimate influence of Yahweh.’ (143) cf. 144 on 8:28 [32] and 145 on 9:12, 30 and 9:34-35. While I will be disagreeing with several of his conclusions, it is refreshing to find such a detailed contextual approach. As his approach is both detailed and (to anticipate) comparable to ours, we will interact with it in our discussion of the hardening in chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{35} See especially U. Cassuto, \textit{A Commentary on the book of Exodus}, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1974), henceforth ‘Cassuto’, 55-57. Cf. S. R. Driver, \textit{The Book of Exodus}, CBSC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918), henceforth ‘Driver Exodus’ 53-54. This causes a problem if the principle is extended to other acts of YHWH, where ‘YHWH our God who brought us out of Egypt’ becomes ‘we brought ourselves out of the land of Egypt’ and so forth. Von Rad, commenting on Is. 6, warns against such a move to a general religious truth, asking why Isaiah would be needed (Gerhard Von Rad, \textit{Old Testament Theology}, D.M.G. Stalker trans. from German of 1960 (London: SCM, 1965), Vol II, 152-153). Moreover one could use this point to argue the reverse, that YHWH was indeed seen as behind everything. For different examples of the latter see Hesse, 52-53 and Beale, 143-49.

critical approach, we will attempt to find an approach which preserves these differences while remaining one narrative.

1.2.1.3 A CHANGE IN THE POSITION – PHARAOH THEN YHWH

In another approach it is noted that the initial hardening refrains state that Pharaoh hardens his own heart, and then subsequently that YHWH starts to harden at 9:12.\(^\text{37}\) This approach can then turn into a variant of one of the two positions in the previous approach. Thus one can understand the progression not as a change of authors of the hardening, but rather as a change of understanding on the part of the reader. Pharaoh’s obstinacy becomes more and more outrageous, until it becomes obvious that this unbelievable behaviour must have a cause other than Pharaoh. Probably the most detailed recent discussion of this is found in the article by David Gunn.\(^\text{38}\) He sees 4:21 and 7:3 together with the ‘as YHWH said’ as the hints of divine activity which become explicit at 9:12: ‘what was previously implicit has become explicit. Pharaoh’s obstinacy makes sense.’\(^\text{39}\) Gunn’s article is an interesting reading of the encounters, focussing on the richness of the narrative, discussing ambiguity and progression within it, in an approach similar to ours, albeit with different conclusions.\(^\text{40}\)

Alternatively the progression is understood as a change in Pharaoh’s will or psychology. Initially he starts to harden himself and this self-hardening can be reversed. However at a certain stage he reaches the point of no return. His intransigence has become so habitual and irreversible that he is unable to reverse it even if he wished. This is indicated by the change to ‘YHWH hardened Pharaoh’s heart’. YHWH is simply using Pharaoh’s own wilfulness against him.\(^\text{41}\)

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\(^{37}\) The transition is not totally smooth with 9:34 coming after 9:12, but the overall pattern is reasonable.


\(^{40}\) His summary that ‘“Pharaoh’s heart was hardened” thus becomes a kind of shorthand for “Yahweh caused Pharaoh’s heart to harden” ’ (79) unfortunately loses the subtlety in the rest of his discussion. To anticipate our comments in chapter 2, it would be interesting to see how he would discuss the explanation in 9:13-19 or the remonstrative comments in 9:17 and 10:3, which might argue against such an approach.

\(^{41}\) Cf. Sarna Exodus, 23, 36, and Nahum M. Sarna, Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel (New York: Schoken Books, 1986), henceforth ‘Sarna EE’, 64-65. Childs, in particular, is opposed to such a position, seeing it as burdening the text with later discussions (170f).
Fretheim offers a position that comes between these two, albeit somewhat favouring the second. He rejects any attempt at psychologising which aims to ‘get God off the hook’, but also does not see any glory for YHWH if Pharaoh is an automaton. He prefers a position of limited determinism. YHWH acts and brings in the word of God, and he makes Pharaoh’s obduracy of such a character that he is driven to the point of no return, using the image of someone on the river fighting against the pull of a waterfall, and losing.

*God as subject intensifies Pharaoh’s own obduracy.* While initially this does not result in a numbing of Pharaoh’s will, it begins to have that effect as events drive toward final disaster. Both need to be said: Pharaoh hardens his own heart, and so does God.

Keil and Delitzsch offer another variant on this approach. They understand the change from Pharaoh to YHWH as YHWH’s response to Pharaoh’s initial actions. The one who refused to listen to YHWH and learn from him leads himself into judgement, which is expressed by YHWH hardening him as he has hardened himself.

Overall the variants on this progressive approach are more nuanced than the previous one. Once again, the strength of 4:21, 7:3 and ‘as YHWH said’ would suggest that if one had to make a choice then the change of perceptions might be preferable to the change in psyche. Nevertheless one would still have to explain why the phrase ‘Pharaoh hardened’ was used at all, and why YHWH interacts with Pharaoh in the way that he does.

### 1.2.2 An Alternative Approach to the ‘Hardening’?

All of the above approaches to the theological issue of the hardening have both strengths and weaknesses, although not all in equal proportions. Another point that most, if not all, of these approaches share to some extent is the tendency to abstract the ‘hardening’ as a theological issue which needs to be solved. In particular it seems that the author or source of the hardening needs to be defined: is it always YHWH or always Pharaoh, or both (at the same time or consecutively)? This does not mean that they pay no attention to the text in which it is found. For example, Beale is concerned to understand the hardening in context. However while he is

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43 Fretheim, 98.


45 Beale, 130. He does state his surprise that ‘apparently no writer in the history of this discussion [on the hardening in relation to predestination and Rom. 9] has ever
interested in context, he is still concentrating on the issue of ‘the hardening’, due in large part to his interest in Rom. 9:17, rather than the larger issue of YHWH’s acts in the plagues narrative.

In light of the above, and the difficulties arising from the various different understandings of the hardening, this work will attempt to approach the issue in a different way. We have noted that the hardening is one of a number of theological issues in respect of YHWH’s actions in the plagues narrative. Therefore instead of considering the ‘hardening’ as a separate issue, we will consider the wider theological issues involved with the portrayal of YHWH in this text. The hardening statements will form an important part of this, but will be considered in relation to the wider issue. Our passage is by far the greatest concentration of references to the hardening of the heart in the Old Testament, but there are other issues present in the text that need to be taken into account as well. While this assertion needs justification, a substantive justification can only be made heuristically by discussing the other elements and showing their relevance. However at this point we can provide one example of how the hardening fits into a wider context, by consideration of the vocabulary used to describe the act of hardening.

1.2.2.1 רָבָן, דָּבָר AND נְשָׁפִּי IN EX. 1-15

There are three words used in Ex. 4-14 to describe the phenomenon of the ‘hardening’: רָבָן, דָּבָר and נְשָׁפִּי. 46 Pharaoh’s heart (בֶּל) is often the object of these. We do not need to discuss the meaning of בֶּל as the centre of a person’s will or resolve, except to note that the modern idiom ‘hard-hearted’ in the sense of ‘cruel’ or ‘pitiless’ is not an appropriate understanding here. The three terms have been discussed in relation to Pharaoh’s heart. Hesse especially discusses the three terms and other comparable terminology in detail. 47 To avoid going over the same ground, we can note that the nuances of meaning are that רָבָן indicates a heart that is firm or strong, דָּבָר suggests a heart that is heavy or unresponsive, and נְשָׁפִּי indicates a heart that is stubborn. There does not appear to be any

attempted to exegete all of the hardening predictions as they appear in consecutive order throughout their context in Exod 4-14.’ (129)

46 Hebrew citations and transliterations are taken from BibleWorks version 5 (Online: http://www.bibleworks.com/). When discussing the general sense of a Hebrew word, the pointing given will be that of the heading in BDB, excepting verbs only found in a stem or stems other than the Qal. (Citations of specific instances will follow the forms in the text.)

47 Hesse, 7-14 and 14-20. On the wider use of the terms see e.g. A.S. van der Woude ‘רָבָן’ TLOT 1, 403-406; C. Westermann ‘דָּבָר’ TLOT 2, 590-602; A. S. van der Woude ‘נְשָׁפִּי’ TLOT 3, 1175-1176; Hesse ‘רָבָן’ TDOT IV, 301-308; Stenmans ‘דָּבָר’ and Weinfeld ‘נְשָׁפִּי’ TDOT VII, 13-22 and 22-28; Zipor ‘נְשָׁפִּי’ ThWAT VII 1/2, 205-21.
obvious reason as to why one word is used rather than another in the
different hardening statements, and thus there appears to be no material
differences between the terms.\(^{48}\) However the heart is not the only object of
these words in our passage, although it is probably the most discussed. In
particular there are two other repeated uses that between them pick up all
three words. These are the description of Pharaoh’s actions in respect of
Israel, and the description of YHWH’s actions in respect of Pharaoh and
Egypt.

Pharaoh, who does not know YHWH (or Joseph), sets work upon Israel.
The first Pharaoh sets hard work upon them (נְדוֹרָּת 1:14) to prevent them
leaving. The second Pharaoh tells his men to make the work heavier (רְבָּֽעָה 5:9) so that they do not listen to Moses’ ‘lies’. This policy proves
successful, as the people do not listen to Moses because of the hard work
(נְדוֹרָּת 6:9).\(^{49}\) In all three cases, the main reason for, or result of, this action is
to act against Israel’s release from Egypt.

The link between these words and Pharaoh’s policy towards Israel
becomes even clearer in the plagues narrative and beyond. YHWH
threatens Pharaoh with a plague, if he keeps ‘grasping’ Israel (נְדוֹרָּת 9:2)
and refusing to send them. The institution of the sacrifice or redemption of
the firstborn is to be explained by YHWH’s actions when Pharaoh
‘stubbornly refused to let us go’ (נְדוֹרָּת 13:15). Finally in the last plague,
Egypt press Israel to leave quickly (נְדוֹרָּת 12:33, contrast 9:2).

This theme continues when we turn to YHWH’s acts. YHWH’s first
coment to Moses about Pharaoh is that he, YHWH, knows that Pharaoh
will not allow Israel to leave except by a mighty hand (נְדוֹרָּת אַל 3:19).\(^{50}\) This theme is repeated in 6:1 where YHWH says that now Pharaoh
will send them and drive them out because of/with a mighty hand. This
phrase becomes epigrammatical for the exodus, remembered as YHWH
bringing Israel out of Egypt with a ‘mighty hand’ (נְדוֹרָּת רְבָּֽעָה). In 13:14
YHWH’s ‘strength of hand’ is contrasted directly with Pharaoh being
‘stubborn’ in 13:15.

Moreover, as the plagues progress they begin to be defined as ‘heavy’ or
‘very heavy’ (נְדוֹרָּת – swarm 8:20 [24]; murrain 9:3; hail 9:18, 24; locusts

\(^{48}\) Perhaps we should restate this in terms of a lack of illumination of the final form of
the text. One could explain the different words, as many have, in terms of different
sources. However in the final form they appear to be largely interchangeable. There are
slight differences in use; thus one could note that the narratorial refrain tends to use a
form of נְדוֹרָּת for ‘Pharaoh hardened (dulled?) his heart’ and נְדוֹרָּת for ‘YHWH hardened
(strengthened?) Pharaoh’s heart’. However this does not lead to any firm conclusions.

\(^{49}\) The full phrase includes נְדוֹרָּת `shortness of breath’, which is an idiom for
impatience or depression (cf. Mic. 2:7; Job. 21:4; Prov. 14:29; Cornelis Houtman,
Exodus, Translated by Sierd Woudstra, HCOT, (Kampen: Kok, 1993, 1996), henceforth
‘Houtman’, I 56; Cassuto, 82).

\(^{50}\) The exact meaning of נְדוֹרָּת רְבָּֽעָה נְדוֹרָּת will be discussed in chapter 3.
10:14. Cf. קָרַנ (‘strong’ wind 10:19). As with 13:14-15, in 9:2-3 this heavy plague (רָעַב) from YHWH is contrasted directly with Pharaoh’s action. If Pharaoh continues to ‘grasp’ Israel, then YHWH’s hand will come upon Egypt’s livestock, with a very heavy plague. Pharaoh will not act to send the people without this heavy-handed treatment from YHWH, so YHWH will act accordingly. If Pharaoh’s hand is heavy upon Israel, then YHWH’s hand will be heavy upon Egypt.

Finally, in the Red Sea encounter, YHWH will glorify himself over Pharaoh and his army as they are vanquished and destroyed in the Red Sea (תְּם 14:4, 17, cf. v18).

It seems unlikely that these ‘other’ uses of קָרַנ, קָדַר, and קִשָּׁה bear no relation to their use in respect of the ‘hardening’. It seems more probable that a deliberate wordplay is intended. In our passage these three words are used primarily for Pharaoh’s actions with regard to Israel (grasping, increasing work, hardset against ‘sending’); and for YHWH’s actions in relation to Pharaoh and Egypt (mighty hand, heavy plagues, hardening Pharaoh, ‘glory’ over Egypt). Pharaoh’s heart is hard or heavy, but so are a number of other things and it forms part of a larger pattern. Thus it becomes more difficult to abstract the ‘hardening’ as a separate issue. In order to retain these resonances the ‘hardening’ needs to be read as one element of the ongoing narrative. To this point, and to our approach to the text, we now turn.

1.3 The Approach of this Study

1.3.1 General Approach - Narrative Theology

Our approach to the theological issues concerning the portrayal of YHWH in the plagues narrative will take the form of a narrative theological approach to the final form of the text. It is important for this study that both the theological content and also the narrative form of our passage are interlinked and mutually dependent. The story is more than just a story, because of its content, referent and significance. However it is important to recognise that it is a story, and not just a series of theological propositions that can be abstracted from their setting. We are concerned with the theology in the story, and thus are seeking to take the story seriously as story. There will be excursus at relevant points where a particular issue needs to be outlined and discussed in detail. However the intention will

52 Moreover Pharaoh’s state (i.e. his ‘hardness of heart’), is only of interest inasmuch as it affects how he responds to YHWH’s demands concerning Israel. Cf. Hesse, 31.
then be to understand the various occurrences of that issue in its narrative context. Therefore, as regards the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart, one key difference in our approach to many of those mentioned earlier is that we will not be attempting to find ‘an answer’ to the question of who is causing the hardening. Instead we will be trying to understand how these references can be sensibly understood within the narrative of which they form a part. To put it another way, we will not be abstracting the hardening as a separate theological theme; discussing issues of theodicy; or considering discussions of the hardening in post-biblical theology.53 Our focus is on the text and the role of the hardening within it.

The main focus in the study will be on passages that appear to be giving a rationale for what is going on, will go on, or has gone on in respect of YHWH’s actions in the plagues narrative. Its intention is to read these ‘explanations’ in the plagues narrative in context. Reading them as part of the narrative will involve paying particular attention to where and when they arise, to whom they are addressed, to what they respond, what their function appears to be in that context and how they are received.54 In the remainder of this introduction we will set out the specifics of our approach,

53 While not wishing to downplay these enterprises, a concentration on the text seems to be the best place to start (cf. Childs, 170-171; Propp, 353). This concentration may yield some insights that can form part of such wider discussions.
54 Eslinger ‘Freedom’ also advocates looking to the text and to the explanations and comments within it (47). He argues that the narratorial comments in the text are the best place to start, as the narrator is the one who stands above all the characters in the text (48). The reader should not carelessly assume that the authors voice their opinions through the principal characters in the text, and should be aware of the possibility that the authors might not uphold Israel’s views themselves (51ff). Thus his article concludes: ‘We can understand why they [Israel] celebrated God’s mighty acts in song (Exod. 15); we should also understand and allow that the narrator and the narrative do not.’ (59) His article raises questions over our use of two speeches from YHWH as our key texts in the following two chapters.

However Eslinger also points out the lack of any explicit evaluation of the events by the narrator (51). He sees this as leaving the reader to work out the authors’ views. Yet while one should not assume that the speech of any principal character is expressing the narrator’s views, one might expect a reasonably explicit sign that this is not the case, especially when the character is YHWH. Otherwise the burden of proof must lie on the one who would see the narrator disagreeing. His example of נָשָׁב and בָּר in 1:7-9 with the precedents in Genesis, and of Gen. 15:13-14 does not necessarily imply that Pharaoh and his reasoning ‘are only cogs in the machine engineered and run by God’ (53). Moreover the use of the hardening motif in YHWH’s messages to Moses (56-58) does not necessarily show that the narrator disapproves of YHWH’s actions, however problematic they may be for modern readers. Therefore in this chapter and the next, we will continue with our investigation of statements on the lips of YHWH, as a reasonable way into the theology of the text.
before returning to a couple of more general issues that need to be addressed.

1.3.2 Specific Approach – Chapter by Chapter

1.3.2.1 CHAPTER 2: 9:13-19

Notwithstanding the interest in YHWH’s acts in the plagues narrative, one of the longest explanatory passages therein has received very little detailed consideration: the speech of YHWH in 9:13-19, which introduces the seventh plague of hail, thunder and fire from the skies. The reasons for such lack of consideration are uncertain. However, if one wished to speculate, there are two possible reasons that present themselves. Firstly, there is no explicit mention of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in this speech. Therefore any approach that restricts itself to, or focuses predominantly on, the hardening will not give much attention to this speech.

Secondly, this speech has been viewed as fragmentary from a historical critical perspective. In particular, vv14-16 are seen as a secondary insertion, interrupting the speech that previously would have flowed from v13 to v17. Hyatt comments that ‘verses 14-16 constitute a passage curious in its present context. It is too reflective for J, and it comes in awkwardly at this point, since this is not the last plague. Here someone explains the purpose of the plagues, and apparently he has in mind ‘all my plagues’ (14). We may attribute these verses to a late strand of P.’\(^{55}\) Noth sees these three verses as corresponding to the whole plagues narrative, but appearing ‘too early, for we would now expect it to be followed by the final decisive act of Yahweh.’ He also notes the secondary character of the passage in ‘the reference to the ‘pestilence’ in v. 15, i.e. to the secondary section 9.1-7.’ However he does continue by noting that ‘even if vv. 14-16 are cut out as secondary the announcement of the plague still remains unusually lengthy’, referring to vv19-21.\(^{56}\) Childs puts 9:14-16 together with 9:19-21, 31-32 and 10:1b-2 as sections considered to be ‘later than the three sources, often designated as glosses’. 9:14-16 contains ‘a theological reflection on the basis of the JE material which is concerned to explain why God has allowed the plagues to continue so long.’\(^{57}\) He notes that although there is ‘rather widespread agreement among the critical commentators’ that these passages did not belong to the major literary strands, yet ‘there is little consensus as to how to interpret these verses since no one set of forces


\(^{56}\) Noth, 80.

\(^{57}\) Childs, 141. Cf. Houtman, II 82.
seems at work. Durham, after giving a brief taxonomy of different opinions as to the makeup of the sources in 9:13-19, argues that the lack of consensus on the makeup of the composite underscores ‘both its somewhat patchy appearance and also the fragility of an over-precise assignment of verses and verse-fragments to specific sources without strong evidence for doing so.’

Schmidt discusses 9:14-16 and 10:1b-2 as two additions which, differing from their surroundings, have a wider focus than simply the plague in which they come. However they are not independent, instead only being readable in their (jahwistic) context.

Thus we have a speech that is acknowledged to be longer than others. It has an unusual section in the middle of it, containing some kind of overall explanation for the larger plagues cycle, which is often seen as a later addition. However, although these points are made, little more is said about this speech. In particular there is a very little comment on what the speech might mean, as a whole, and in its context.

To further justify our use of 9:13-19 in relation to the issues that we have identified for study, we can set out the points above slightly more fully, together with some other points of interest.

On the question of length, and looking at the speech as it stands, it is one of the longest, if not the longest, explanations in the plagues narratives. It is set on the lips of YHWH, thus giving an explanation of his own acts.

It picks up several themes that run throughout other explanations of YHWH’s behaviour offered in, before and after the plagues narratives. Thus our study of this passage will necessarily bring in these other passages. In particular the demand in v13 (∑חֶלֶט אֶת עַשָּׁת עָשָּׁתָהּ), and the reason in v14 (םבָּרָה הָאָרֶץ כֵּן אָסֵא כֵּן יִכְרָתָהּ) will require wider consideration. As 9:13-19 is not the first mention of these themes in the canonical order, it will be necessary to return to 5:1-5 in particular in order to deal with the themes as they unfold in the narrative.

However, as well as picking up wider themes, and the unusual offer of mitigation in v19 that will repay investigation, there is the contrast in vv15-16 of what YHWH has done with what he could have done. While there are other explanations that give reasons for why YHWH is acting, this is the clearest explanation set on the lips of YHWH of why he is acting in the way

58 Childs, 141.
61 Schmidt, 417.
62 Thus for example, Houtman gives an overall discussion of 9:13-35 (II 81-85) followed by comments on the individual words and phrases, but he does not focus on the speech as a whole.
that he does, rather than in another way. Thus for an examination of YHWH’s behaviour in the plagues narrative, this passage is of fundamental importance.

Therefore chapter 2 will offer an exegesis of 9:13-19. It will start with consideration of relevant individual words and phrases, before moving on to consider the meaning of the speech as a whole, and end with a consideration of the plague of which it forms the introduction (9:20-35).

Considering whether there may be an overall dynamic to, or message of, the speech does not demand that we understand this speech as the work of a single author, or that we see it (or indeed other passages) as a homogenous whole. It would be quite possible to accept that vv14-16 is a secondary insertion into a pre-existing speech, and yet still ask about the function of the amended and expanded speech. The only assumption made regarding such matters is that the redactor was not simply inserting this passage at random with no regard to its effect on the pre-existing material, but rather he had some reason for inserting the speech at this point. This assumption should not be taken as making the claim that this work will set out the intention of this redactor, especially considering the hypothetical nature both of him (or her) and of this insertion. The point is rather that, however the text of YHWH’s speech in 9:13-19 came precisely into its present state, vv14-16 now form an integral part of that speech. The question in this study is whether analysis of the speech as it stands can be illuminating. This focus is in no way meant to suggest that this is the only appropriate method of investigating this passage, or, more widely, that the approach to the wider plagues narrative followed in this work should be set up as the approach.

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63 The fact that, as noted above, this section is thought to be a comment on the whole plagues narrative would underline its theological importance, at least in the form of the narrative as we have it.

64 Schmidt, 417, 418 notes a couple of brief suggestions from Bruno Baentsch, Exodus, Leviticus und Numeri, HKAT I.2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoek und Ruprecht, 1903), henceforth ‘Baentsch’.

65 See Johnstone Exodus OTG, 252-254 in relation to a literary or ‘final form’ approach to the plagues narrative in particular, and the avoidance of polarising or absolutizing methods in general. Nonetheless it remains valid for us to focus on the theological affirmations of the text via a narrative approach to its received form.

On this point, Goldingay’s comments in his recent Old Testament Theology are also appropriate to mention. After noting the unusual detail in our story, he comments: ‘The particular significance of the stories about signs and marvels in Exodus 4-14 is to provide a narrative discussion of theological issues that do not exclusively relate to the once-for-all sequence of events that takes Israel from Egypt to Sinai. Narrative makes it easier to discuss a complicated issue such as the interrelationship between divine sovereignty and human free will, especially an issue that seems to require us to make a number of apparently conflicting statements – as this one does.’ John Goldingay, Old
In leaving issues of composition history for others to discuss, the intention is not to denigrate them. Instead, by taking an alternative look at the material, the hope is that different and further illumination can be shed upon both 9:13-19 in particular, and the plagues narrative in general, in respect of the theological issues regarding the portrayal of YHWH.

1.3.2.2 CHAPTER 3: 10:1-2

However, there are more explanations in the text of Exodus than simply 9:13-19. Most importantly, starting the discussion with 9:13-19 will leave the matter of the hardening outstanding. Although we are not restricting ourselves to it, this theme is of vital importance in considering the explanations for YHWH's behaviour. As a result we need to test the appropriateness of the exegesis of 9:13-19 offered in chapter 2 as an explanation for the wider plagues narrative in light of the hardening. Therefore the next chapter will concentrate upon the issue of the hardening, both in general, and in discussion of a specific passage: 10:1-2. There are two main reasons for selecting 10:1-2. First, this speech comes immediately after the explanation and plague in 9:13-35, at the beginning of the eighth plague (10:1ff). Secondly, as well as the mention of the hardening (10:1b) and the repetition of the 'know' theme (10:2b), there is YHWH's use of לְלָעֵל, which suggests something rather different than the explanation given in 9:13-19. Thus in both placement and content, 10:1-2 provides the sharpest test of an analysis of 9:13-19. Therefore exegesis of this passage will help us to amend, refine and develop the points that will have been made in the previous chapter.

1.3.2.3 CHAPTER 4: THE WIDER PLAGUES NARRATIVE

Chapter 2, in discussion of 9:13-19, will set up a thesis concerning the explanation of YHWH's behaviour in the plagues narrative. The comparison of 10:1-2 in chapter 3 will then refine and expand this thesis. After this it will be appropriate to test the refined thesis more widely in chapter 4, by reading through the plagues narrative in light of the thesis and considering whether it forms a reasonable interpretation of the wider story. At this point we should ask the question of what the wider story comprises. Our focus will be upon the plagues narrative in Ex. 7-11 as the place where YHWH's behaviour raises the most theological issues, and this narrative will be considered in some detail. However in such a widening of focus, it might be noted that the plagues narrative in Ex. 7-11 forms a part of the larger exodus story. Several of the issues that we will have considered (YHWH's demand to 'send my people', the theme of knowledge, the hardening of the heart) are first expressed in Ex. 1-6. Thus, in the final form

of the text, the reader would be introduced to them at that point. Therefore a case could be made for starting our detailed read-through at Ex. 1, rather than at Ex. 7. However there are a number of issues in Ex. 1-6, such as the name of God in 3:14-16 that would require significant comment. The passages, such as 3:18-20; 4:21-23; and 5:1-5, that are directly relevant to our discussion of YHWH’s acts in the plagues narrative will have been covered in chapters 2 and 3. Therefore, for reasons of space, a full discussion of Ex. 1-6 will not be attempted in this work.

One particular passage deserves mention at this point. The enigmatic encounter between Moses and YHWH in 4:24-26 might be held to raise similar questions to those of YHWH’s acts in the plagues narrative. However, while this does raise similar issues, it has proven difficult to apply our approach to this passage due to the comparatively ‘stand alone’ nature of the episode, and therefore the difficulties of reading it in context (though it may, in certain respects, anticipate the passover narrative). This, combined with the large amount of material already present on this short passage, would make any investigation unprofitable in terms of the space required to do it justice.\(^6^6\)

Concerning the exodus story as it continues after the plagues narrative, there are two main divisions in the text. The story of the exodus from Egypt as such ends at 15:21 after the deliverance at the Red Sea. This is followed by the brief beginnings of the wilderness wanderings, before Israel arrives at Sinai (15:22-18:27), where the covenant and the events surrounding it take place (Ex. 19-24; 25-31; 32-34; 35-40). As the encounters between YHWH and Pharaoh continue after the plagues narrative, we will consider briefly the story of the final plague and the encounter at the Red Sea in light of our thesis. The details of the Passover will be largely ignored for these purposes. The chapter will end with some very brief comments on 15:22-18:27 in light of the points made on the previous story.

1.3.2.4 CHAPTER 5: 1SAM. 4-7 AND THE WIDER OLD TESTAMENT USE OF THE EXODUS

While we will be concentrating on the plagues narrative, with some comments on the story up to Sinai, in the final form of the text we will need to remember that, as well as being part of the wider exodus story, our passage also forms part of a wider scripture that uses this story. In a study that considers the theological issues raised in the plagues narrative, it is appropriate to recognise this importance and to widen the focus once more.

\(^6^6\) This underlines the point made in summarising 9:13-19. Our approach is not one that will solve every problem or deal with every passage. However the plagues narrative, as a continuous episode rather longer than 4:24-26, is more suited to it. Thus there will only be a brief comment on 4:24-26 in chapter 3.
to the impact that the exodus story, and more specifically the plagues narrative, has had on the wider Old Testament.

Much could be said on the importance of the exodus story.\textsuperscript{67} It is of paradigmatic importance for the Old Testament, for those faiths that hold it as important, and beyond. Any consideration of use outside of the Old Testament is outside the scope of this work. However even restricting ourselves to the Old Testament leaves a vast amount of material. The tradition of the exodus runs through the Old Testament. Hoffmann has listed over 120 uses of the exodus tradition in the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{68} It would be difficult to find any other tradition that is more important than that of the exodus.

Thus an examination of all or even many of the references to the exodus in the Old Testament in any kind of detail is also outside the scope of this work. How then are we to proceed? We could focus on those texts that refer to the plagues narrative rather than simply to ‘YHWH bringing you/us/them out of Egypt with a mighty hand...’. Two possible candidates might be Psalms 78 and 105, which refer to some of the individual plagues of Egypt.\textsuperscript{69}

Ps. 78, for example, lists the plagues in the context of the later ingratitude of Israel in forgetting what he had done for them (vv40-43 and vv56-58 surround and contextualise the list of plagues in vv44-51, and the exodus and conquest in vv52-55). This continues through their time in the wilderness and at Shiloh, until Jerusalem is chosen.

Ps. 105, by contrast, is a psalm of praise to YHWH, which recounts his mighty deeds on behalf of Israel (vv1-6 set out the context of the psalm). As one might expect in such a context, the emphasis is almost wholly on what YHWH does, rather than what the humans do. Thus the section on the plagues in vv26-38 is preceded by vv23-25 which recounts Israel coming to Egypt and becoming fruitful as in Ex. 1. However, v25 states that it was YHWH who turned the hearts of Egypt (נַחֲלַת נַחֲלַת) to hate his people, and to deal craftily with them. Here even the initial treatment of Israel in Ex. 1-2:23 is ascribed to YHWH, although Ex. 1-2:23 makes no mention of this.

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\textsuperscript{68} Y. Hoffmann, \textit{The Doctrine of the Exodus in the Bible} cited in Sarna EE, 2. Cf. Plastaras, 6-11.

\textsuperscript{69} In keeping with our focus on the final form, questions of the different number and order of plagues therein, and possible theories of historical relationship or dependence in relation to the plagues narrative will not be discussed here.
However we will choose to focus on the story of the capture of the ark of YHWH by the Philistines, found in 1Sam. 4-7. The reasons for the choice of this passage are as follows:

1. It is the only place in the Old Testament outside of Ex. 1-15 to make reference to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (1Sam. 6:6).

2. Like the exodus story, it is in narrative form, rather than being recapitulation, exhortation or other genre.

3. There is a similarity in situation. Something belonging to YHWH is held by foreigners. YHWH acts, by sending plagues, in order to induce them to return it.

4. The focus in at least part of the story is on YHWH’s dealings with non-Israel. In 1Sam. 5:1-6:12 Israel do not appear at all, in a way comparable to the encounters with Pharaoh in the plagues narrative. Such a focus is unusual in the Old Testament. Yet this forms part of a wider story concerning Israel (compare 1Sam. 4:1-22; 6:13-7:17 with Ex. 1-6; 12-15).

5. As with the plagues narrative, the rationale for YHWH’s acts is often unclear or difficult to comprehend. Thus it raises the same sort of questions.

These similarities suggest that 1Sam. 4-7 would be a good text for comparison. Therefore in chapter 5 we will examine this story. This is not the first work to compare the exodus story and the ark narrative. However the focus here will be on reading the 1 Samuel story in light of the points that will have been made in chapters 2-4 in order to see whether this story can be illuminated by these points.

1.3.2.5 CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

Finally, chapter 6 will conclude the study by returning to the issues raised in this original chapter by briefly considering how the points that have been made might feed into the wider discussion of YHWH, his character and his acts.

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70 The exact boundaries of the story will be touched on in chapter 5.
71 Ps. 105:25 is less clear. It will be compared to 1Sam. 6:6 in chapter 5. This story also has mention of the wider exodus (1Sam. 4:8).
1.4 A Couple of General Issues

Before starting our investigation, it is appropriate at this point to say a little more on a couple of issues concerning our method of approaching the text. First, we have largely eschewed conventional historical critical approaches to the text, and perhaps this requires some further comment. Secondly, this dissertation will be addressing issues of theological significance in this text. Such theological issues arise, at least in part, from the fact that this text is read as part of Scripture. Therefore it is appropriate to consider how the text may be approached responsibly in light of this fact.

1.4.1 Matters ‘Behind the Text’

Our interest in the final form of the text and how it is read, will exclude four main areas of study.

As noted in the section on 9:13-19 above, issues of composition, whether concerning source-, form- or redaction-criticism will not be investigated in detail. These are issues that, understandably, have received a great deal of interest and discussion over the last couple of centuries. Such discussion forms a reasonable part of many influential commentaries on the text, and the subject of many monographs.\(^73\) However, the issues that we have raised appear in the final form of the text, which is understood as Scripture. Even if their origin could be explained in terms of putative earlier sources and the redaction thereof, this would still leave the reader with the final text.

This, of course, raises the question: ‘which text?’ Speaking simply of ‘final form’ or ‘final text’ might suggest that there is only one version of the story. However there are four main ancient textual traditions or versions of the Exodus narrative: the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT); Samaritan Pentateuch (Sam Pent); fragmentary Exodus scrolls from the fourth cave at Qumran (4Q11, 4Q13-22); and the Greek Septuagint (LXX)\(^74\). If this were a work concerned largely with issues of the relationship of the different versions to each other, or the historical development of the Hebrew text (whether searching for an Urtext, or discussing textual traditions,

\(^73\) For example, one influential work is that of Pedersen (Johannes Pedersen, ‘Passahfest und Passahlegende.’ ZAW 52 (1934): 161-175), whose argument is that the plagues narrative grew out of the Passover. For a criticism of this, see McCarthy ‘Plagues’, esp. 153ff.

\(^74\) It is slightly simplistic to speak of ‘the MT’, ‘the LXX’ etc, which might imply that there is only one text of each. More specifically, in this dissertation mention of the MT; LXX; Sam Pent and the Qumran exodus texts should be understood as referring to the Leningrad Codex B19\(^A\) as set out in BHS; Rahlfs’ edition of the Septuagint; Von Gall’s edition of the Samaritan Pentateuch; and the Qumran material as set out in DJD IX and XII respectively (excepting any occasions where other scholars’ comments on the ancient versions are cited).
recensions and so forth), then a great deal more work would need to be done on the differences between these versions.\(^75\)

However, this dissertation, concerned as it is with the theological problems that have arisen from the text as read, is interested primarily in the received text, rather than raising questions of historical development. Therefore it takes as its starting point the MT and seeks to understand the narrative as set out therein. However this should not be taken as a dismissal of the other ancient versions. At one stage all of the four ancient versions were the ‘received text’ of at least one community, and all but the Qumran material continue so to be.\(^76\) Therefore this study will take its lead from the approach of BHS and other editions which are based upon one text but bring in variants in the critical apparatus.\(^77\) In keeping with the focus of this work, the versions will be mentioned or discussed primarily insofar as specific variants or interpretations therein are of theological significance for our thesis.\(^78\)

A second area of study on the plagues is the attempt to ‘explain’ the events in terms of natural phenomena. Some of these even attempt to link the phenomena, or some of them, in a causal chain. The most commonly


For more detailed work on 4QpaleoExod\(^m\) (4Q22) see Judith E. Sanderson, *An Exodus Scroll from Qumran: 4QpaleoExod\(^m\) and the Samaritan Tradition*, HSS 30 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), henceforth ‘Sanderson’. Put crudely, 4QpaleoExod\(^m\) is regarded as being closest to the Samaritan tradition albeit retaining flexibility (Sanderson, chp4; Tov, 97). The other text that contains large parts of the plagues narrative is 4QE\(^m\) (4Q14).

\(^{76}\) One could also note that any earlier version of the narrative might well have been the received or ‘canonical’ version of its community (Johnstone *Exodus OTG*, 241).

\(^{77}\) A recent discussion of the merits of the ‘diplomatic’ as against the ‘eclectic’ approach was given in H. G. M. Williamson, ‘Do we still need commentaries?’ Presidential paper to the winter meeting of the Society of Old Testament Study, 5-7 Jan 2004.

\(^{78}\) The main differences that Sam Pent and 4Q22 have to the MT are nine expansions, repeating commands that YHWH has given to Moses to show that they have been carried out. See Sanderson, 196-207, for detailed discussion of these cases. She also provides a complete list of variants between the versions where 4Q22 is extant in her Appendix 2 (325-343). Although my decision to base this work upon the MT was taken for different reasons, it is interesting to note her conclusion that, in a comparison of the variants, ‘the statistics have shown that for the book of Exodus [the MT] is by far the best text available to us’ (241).
cited example is Greta Hort’s article “The Plagues of Egypt”. However, there are a number of other examples, scholarly and popular, in article, book and even televisual form.

While this study is focussed upon the plagues narrative, it will not focus on the exact nature of the plagues themselves, but rather upon the dialogue concerning the plagues, generally between YHWH (through Moses) and Pharaoh.

The concern of our study is with why YHWH does what he does, rather than with exactly how he does it. Thus detailed study of the actual plagues would not be particularly relevant to this discussion. Moreover, the text itself does not appear to be particularly interested in the causal links. One point on which the text is clear is that it is YHWH who brings the plagues. Thus Propp dismisses attempts to find rationalistic explanations as intrinsically inconsistent:

To believe that the Bible faithfully records a concatenation of improbable events, as interpreted by a prescientific society, demands a perverse fundamentalism that blindly accepts the antiquity and accuracy of biblical tradition while denying its theory of supernatural intervention.

Thirdly, in continuity with the previous point, this work will not attempt to address questions of historicity. There is a perennial interest in the exact place of the crossing of the ‘Red Sea’, the date of the exodus (together with discussions of whether it happened at all) and so forth. However while one may be able to argue that the facts make such a place or such a time more or less likely, it is most unlikely that one could prove, on the evidence that we have, either that the events happened exactly as written, or that they have no basis in history whatsoever. Moreover even if one were to settle this debate one way or the other, this would not resolve the issues of what kind of God this is. Thus, if the exodus happened, one could still raise serious questions about this God from the events. If it did not happen, there is still the text, revered and influential, which will continue to influence people’s views of this God. Warrior sums up the issue well:

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81 The only explicit link between separate individual plagues is found at 10:5, 15. However even this compares the effects of the plagues rather than their causes.
82 Sarna Exodus EE, 75.
84 On this see John Goldingay, “That you may know that Yahweh is God”: A Study in the relationship between theology and historical truth in the Old Testament, TynBul 23 (1972): 58-93, esp. 58.
People who read the narratives read them as they are, not as scholars and experts would like them to be read and interpreted. History is no longer with us. The narrative remains.\(^{85}\)

Finally, there is still the issue of the world in which the text is set. However, this dissertation will not spend a large amount of time discussing other ancient Near Eastern concepts of deity. This is partly because it is a huge area, studied by others, and I am no expert in this area. The main reason, however, is that it is very difficult to find any close parallels to the story of the exodus in Near Eastern culture. As we will be examining the text in detail, we would need something reasonably close to it in order to be able to compare and contrast properly. However Dt. 4:34 appears to have a point:

‘Or has any god tried to come and take for himself a people from the midst of a(nother) people with tests, with signs and with wonders, with battle, with a mighty hand and with an outstretched arm, with great terrors, like all the things that YHWH your God has done for you in Egypt before your eyes?’

This is not to say that there are no examples of groups leaving one country for another.\(^{86}\) However there are few that explicitly ascribe this to divine action. Initial research suggests three possible comparisons.\(^{87}\) First there is a passage in the second plague prayer of the Great King Muršili II of Hatti. As part of a confession of guilt for various individual and corporate offences in an attempt to end a plague Muršili explains that he found two tablets:

The second tablet dealt with (the town of) Kuruštama – how the Storm-god of Hatti took the men of Kuruštama to Egyptian territory, and how the Storm-god of Hatti made a treaty concerning them with the Hittites.\(^{88}\)

The prayer continues by speaking of the Hittites breaking the treaty, but no more is spoken of the movement of the men of Kuruštama. We are given no details as to the circumstances of the move; its methods, or the motivations of the Hittite Storm-god.


\(^{87}\) In conversation with Professor Kitchen at a Society for Old Testament Study meeting I raised this point. Whilst pointing to the above examples of people leaving, he did not suggest any that were ascribed to divinity other than those which I now specify in my main text. This was also the case for other ancient Near Eastern experts with whom I spoke briefly.

\(^{88}\) ‘Plague Prayers of Muršili II’ translated by Gary Beckman (COS, 1.60: 156-160), 158.
Moving further afield, there is Virgil’s Aeneid, where the remnants of the free Trojan people are led by Aeneas to found Lavinium in Italy, via Carthage. This is the removal of a people (or the remains thereof) from one land to found another, which becomes a foundation myth for the nation of Rome. There are also comments on the intent of the gods in respect of this removal. However, there are a number of differences. The comments about the gods’ actions are mostly in relation to the journey from Troy (cf. Aeneid I:8–297). Thus it would make a better comparison with the wilderness wanderings, and the forty year ruling in Num. 14 than with the exodus proper. The equivalent for our purposes would be Book II of the Aeneid, whose account of the fall of Troy does not contain the requisite theological reflection. One could in any case question the proximity of the Aeneid to the exodus story in historical, geographical or cultural terms.

Within the Old Testament there is the enigmatic phrase in Amos 9:7:

‘Are you not like the sons of Cush to me, sons of Israel?’ oracle of YHWH. ‘Did I not bring up the Israelites from the land of Egypt, the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?’

As with the Mursili passage, this saying is so short that it is difficult to come to any firm conclusions on it.\(^89\) Excepting this one phrase, there is nothing really comparable within the Old Testament itself. There are instances of YHWH dealing with a foreign ruler through an Israelite (Joseph and Pharaoh in Gen. 41-50; Daniel, his friends and the kings Nebuchadnezzar, Belshazzar and Darius), as well as YHWH acting for his people. However none of these provide a good comparison with the specific events here. Therefore, while we will bring in other OT stories and, rarely, other Near Eastern stories, our main concentration will be on the story of Exodus itself, and how it is to be understood.

Summary of general approach

In light of the above, our approach may be summarised by considering the relevance of the following questions to our study of the plagues narrative:

- ‘When?’/‘Where?’ These questions, concerning matters of historical detail either of the narrative itself or the text containing it, will not be covered in this work.
- ‘How?’/‘What?’ These questions will be covered to an extent. Our interest is in how YHWH interacts with people, and what he does. However we will not be looking into the specific details of the plagues, except inasmuch as the text describes them as a whole, or in relation to each other.

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\(^89\) This is even without raising questions of what Amos is doing with this text, and whether one could use this as a basis for reconstructing a general Israelite belief in a divine exodus for others.
The Issue and the Approach

- ‘Who?’/‘Why?’ These are the key questions that we will be considering: why YHWH does what he does in the way that he does, and what this says about who he is. This will be based upon an analysis of the ‘explanations’ in the text, giving due attention to their place in the narrative, their speaker, addressee, context and purpose (if such can be determined).

1.4.2 Approaching a Problematic Scriptural Text

How does one responsibly approach a text which forms part of the scriptural portrayal of the God that one worships, yet is ‘problematic’ in some way for that portrayal? The purpose of this work is to take a closer look at the text, and to examine as best it can how this God is portrayed, and what implications this may have for one reading it, especially in the context of Christian theology. However, even a close reading may find that which it seeks, especially if one is familiar with the text, or thinks one is. This may be the case especially if one holds strong views about the God portrayed in the story, as may well be the case if one follows, trusts and worships him. Alternatively this may lead one to reject certain interpretations as inappropriate. An example of this issue can be seen in certain treatments of the issue of the ‘hardening’. Thus some treatments of the hardening appear to arise from the underlying conviction that YHWH could not act in a manner as arbitrary, capricious or unfair as the text appears to portray him as behaving. Indeed this conviction, or at least the problem, is openly stated in some cases: ‘the statement that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart cannot be taken literally since it would contradict some essential presuppositions about God…’. However one must tread carefully in this area. We are approaching this passage, at least in part, as a problem for those who follow this God. Thus it would not be appropriate to seek to dismiss attempts to read the text as part of a wider whole with an overall perception of YHWH. However the text, and the issues that it raises, require us to approach it in a more open manner.

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90 This does not mean that the questions raised are relevant only to Christians reading the text, and it would be gratifying if it were to be of use to a wider audience. However, my own position is that of a Christian approaching the text, and it is this background that has contributed both to the questions raised, and to the formulation of the answers.

91 Those who are opposed to this God may well be coloured by their pre-understandings, albeit in rather different ways.


93 There have been attempts that try to understand the story in relation to the wider perception of God, without necessarily rejecting the hardening. Thus Göran Larrson,
To put it another way, if Exodus is read as a part of Scripture, certain preconceptions about God may be imported into the text, which may sit uneasily with the story, and make it difficult to read. One answer to ‘if God is X, then why does he do Y?’ may be the question ‘Is God X?’ 94 This may be felt to be inappropriate from a position of faith. However if one holds one’s faith as based, at least in part, upon the Bible, then one needs to take its portrayals seriously. This, of course, raises very large issues that are beyond the scope of this work. The point here is to stop any premature closure on such problems by saying ‘this cannot be the case’ and proceeding from this assumption, or by appeal to such concepts as belief, doctrine, orthodoxy or equivalent.

This raises questions about the interaction of theology and objectivity. It is inevitable that one’s beliefs will have an effect on one’s study. The concern is to ensure that they do not control it, by making certain avenues completely impossible to follow.

Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1999), henceforth ‘Larsson’, 104, notes the Mekhila on the Red Sea which has YHWH not celebrating the death of ‘his children’ the Egyptians. However such understandings still leave the question of what is contained within the text, and whether such attempts can be accepted.

94 One way to challenge any preconceptions would be to examine readings of the text which give a picture of YHWH that is less comfortably assimilated into a faith context, and consider the validity or otherwise of their interpretations. Two such different pictures of YHWH are given, albeit briefly, in H. W. F. Saggs, The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel (London: The Athlone Press, University of London, 1978), 35-38 and Norma Rosen, Biblical Women Unbound: Counter-tales (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 159.

Saggs’ general concern is to trace out ways in which the Israelites and the Mesopotamians viewed God or the gods, to see how different Israelite religion really was. This comparison is in the light of a dichotomy that he detected in study of the ANE, where Old Testament or Israelite religion were regarded as ‘truth’, in comparison to other Near Eastern religions which were seen as merely ‘data’.


Rosen’s concern is the treatment, or lack of it, of women and women’s voices within the text or the midrash of the Old Testament. Therefore she set out to write some new midrashim to set out the voices of the Matriarchs, to bring such narratives closer to our interests, and to ask questions that have lain dormant and unnoticed or which ‘should not be asked’. However in one particular midrash: ‘Bitiah: Memoir of a Tyrant’s Daughter (as interviewed in the Jewish Press)’, she considers the actions of YHWH in the plagues narrative.
One approach that I find appealing is that of Ellen Davis in her ‘bias’ that ‘no biblical text may be safely repudiated as a potential source of edification for the church.’

95 The importance of the text compels us to recognise and take seriously the difficulties in the text, as part of the text that should not be ignored. However as the problems are problems precisely inasmuch as they form part of a religiously authoritative text, this compels us to keep working on the text, rather than rejecting it as judged wanting by our own standards, standards which may themselves need to be scrutinised in their turn. In his discussion of the sacrifice of Isaac in Gen. 22, another ‘difficult’ yet traditionally authoritative text, Moberly makes a number of insightful comments on the need of the Christian theologian to interact with, and yet not be dominated by, ethical difficulties or ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’.

96 Thus in summary, this story may be a text that was written a long time ago, containing elements which may be problematic for many modern readers. However, it is a story that is still regarded as, in some sense, true by many people. This creates the problems, and it also creates the need to work with the text.


96 R.W.L. Moberly, The Bible, Theology and Faith – A study of Abraham and Jesus, CSCD (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), henceforth ‘Moberly BTF’. On these two issues see 127ff and the chapter ‘Genesis 22 and the hermeneutics of suspicion’ respectively.