Aaron to Speak for Moses

God can draw a straight line with a crooked stick. This is a quote attributed to Martin Luther and is often used to illustrate that God can use flawed instruments to accomplish His will. Certainly, anytime He uses a human being He is using damaged goods. While it’s true that God may enable believers to exceed their own abilities, God sometimes uses non believers for His sovereign purposes. God sent a number of prophets to warn the Israelites of the consequences of their disobedience. When they would not listen, God used Nebuchadnezzar to take them into captivity in Babylon. God later used King Cyrus to restore a remnant to rebuild the temple. In chapter 7 of Exodus, God uses Pharaoh to demonstrate his power.

The chapter begins with God telling Moses that He had made Moses to be like a god to Pharaoh and Aaron would be his prophet. While Pharaoh refused to acknowledge that God existed, God must have instilled in Moses a commanding presence which enabled him to gain an audience with Pharaoh. Verse 3 says that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart (more on that later) then prophesied that Pharaoh would continue to refuse to let the Israelites leave until He performed mighty acts of judgment.

Moses and Aaron appeared before Pharaoh performing a miracle of turning a staff into a snake. Pharaoh summoned sorcerers who were able to match what Aaron had done. We should not be surprised when evil men are able to perform such feats since they are channeling the power of Satan. The fact that Aaron’s staff swallowed the staffs of the sorcerers shows that God’s power is superior to that of Satan.

Next God tells Moses that Pharaoh’s heart is unyielding and that Moses was to meet Pharaoh by the Nile and announce that by the hand of God, the Nile would be turned into blood. At Moses’ command, Aaron raised his staff and turned the Nile into blood, however Pharaoh’s sorcerers did the same. The chapter ends with Pharaoh leaving Moses to return to his palace while his people were forced to dig for water.

In this chapter we first see for the second time the statement that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart (see also 4:21). We will see this repeated in the next several chapters as well as verses in which Pharaoh hardened his own heart. This has been the subject of great debate as some believe it indicates that Pharaoh was under God’s influence and unable to act on his own. The natural question arising from this would be: Should Pharaoh be held accountable for his refusal to relent if he had no say in the matter? Before we explore this, let’s take a brief look at Pharaoh’s identity. Pharaoh was not a name but instead a title much like the Jewish title Herod. Pharaohs ruled Egypt for about 3000 years and some estimate that there were 170 different Pharaohs during this period. The first Pharoah in the Bible ruled during Joseph’s lifetime and treated Joseph and his family well (See Gen. chapters 41-50). Some 400 years later a new Pharaoh ascended to the throne who was not familiar with Joseph (Ex. 1:8). This Pharaoh oppressed the Israelites and was so wicked that he ordered all Hebrew boys to be killed at birth as a method of population control. Many scholars believe that this Pharaoh was not the Pharaoh in power during the time of Exodus. I have read several authors who conclude that the most likely candidate for the Pharaoh against whom Moses contended was Amenhotep II who ruled from 1450-1425 BC. If that is true, then his father Amenhotep I would have been king at the time of Moses’ birth.

Regarding the matter of hardening the heart, Amenhotep would have required no assistance from God. He was a ruthless despot who learned from his father, a murderer of children. In addition to his inhumane treatment of the Israelites, we see his indifferent attitude towards his own people on display in chapter 7 as the Nile is turned to blood and the Egyptians are forced to dig for water. All the other plagues God released had a direct impact on the Egyptian people. He was responsible for their welfare yet did nothing to help them. He only relented when he was personally affected by the death of his son. Pharaoh hardened his own heart long before the events of Exodus.

Romans 9:12 provides us with the following additional scripture that is equally hard to understand: *“For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: ‘I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ Therefore God has mercy on whom He wants to have mercy, and He hardens whom He wants to harden.”* For me, this is one of those times I am reminded *“Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor”* (Rom. 11:34). I wonder if God’s way of hardening Pharaoh’s heart was to withhold the convicting power of the Holy Spirit from Pharaoh (there are several examples of the Holy Spirit at work in the Old Testament, e.g. Numbers. 27:18, Judges 3:10, 6:34 and Ezekiel 2:2). Regarding God’s purpose, he used the crooked stick Pharaoh to display his power. The miracles performed by God during the plagues and afterward as the Israelites were pursued by the Pharaoh’s army were evidence of a mighty God not only for the Israelites but also the Egyptians just as His works today are to be seen by the saved and the lost.