**Exodus: Sympathy for the Pharaoh**

*Will Graham: He’s not going to stop.*

*Detective: Why not?*

*Will Graham: Because it makes him god. Would you give that up?*

*(Red Dragon, 2002)*

Am I weird for finding the pharaoh an oddly relatable character? Like, I get it; he’s a bad guy. But there is so much evidence in this story of emotional depth and pathos within the confrontation that we’ve referred to thus far as “Moses V Pharaoh”. For instance, there’s this weird passage in Exodus 11.8 where it speaks about Moses storming out of Pharaoh’s presence – literally in the Hebrew “with heat of nose,” similar to passages that speak of God’s anger. But it’s deeper than that. Psychologists will tell you that anger is a secondary emotion, that it often stems from fear or sadness which tend to be primary emotions. When you consider the context, especially after Moses has dealt with Pharaoh’s constant recalcitrance, and to inform him that the blood of so many firstborn in Egypt will be on his hands only to see Pharaoh won’t budge – he’s absolutely heartbroken. How else should we feel when faced with the concretization of sin?

I don’t know if I’d go as far as many depictions in film that communicate that this Pharaoh and Moses were on familiar terms (I mean, maybe?), but it’s clear there’s a lot of emotional content on this battlefield.

**Not Because God Hardened Him**

Now, I don’t sympathize with Pharaoh in the sense of many articles I’ve seen that feel bad for the sort of hand he was dealt. Many believe, I think wrongly, that God so hardened Pharaoh that he couldn’t have any moral responsibility in the end – that God did it against his will, and that before God acted upon his heart Pharaoh would’ve easily faced the evidence and repented. No, that’s precisely what I think he didn’t do.

I’ve appreciated so many comments I’ve received post-sermon that have indicated surprise at just how relevant the message of Exodus still was for us today. And it is! Even here as we look at the interplay between the plagues and Pharaoh’s heart. There’s so much we can learn about what it means to be human, and the consequences of our choices as God tries to turn our heads toward truth – and what, in the end, we decide to do with that truth.

So, no, I don’t sympathize because I think it was out of Pharaoh’s power. In fact, there’s much evidence to the contrary.

**The Exodus That Could’ve Been**

We’ll see more of this play out in the sermon today, but I want to show you some strange passages that indicate that Pharaoh could’ve chosen a different path. That he could’ve relented and allowed Moses’s request, that the story of Exodus implies, as David Fohrman points out in his book, an “Exodus that could’ve been”.

* **Moral Language (Exodus 9.27**). Remember, from past articles and sermons, that one of the points of the plagues is to overturn Pharaoh’s polytheistic worldview and convince him of the truth on One Creator God: YHWH. (That was the point of the first snake-eating-staff sign, remember? Exodus 7.12). There’s even a point where Pharaoh shows signs of beginning to understand as he introduces moral language into his religious worldview (uncommon for pagan polytheism): Exodus 10.16. He’s beginning to get his moral culpability in all of this.
* **“Honored Through Pharaoh”? (Exodus 14.4**). Exodus 14 is a chapter about Pharaoh chasing down Israel as God makes a way for them through the Reed Sea. God uses oddly familiar language here when describing what he’ll do through Pharaoh and Egyptian chariots. He said he would receive honor – but through their drowning? What does he mean? If you hearken back to an earlier tale, you’ll see the *last time* Pharaoh and the Egyptian honor guard - with chariots, arches, and all – honored God: I’m talking about **Genesis 50.9**. Joseph’s Pharaoh allowed Israel to leave Egypt to honor Jacob with a Hebrew burial in the promised land, and this Pharaoh didn’t chase the Israelites with chariot and archers through the Reed Sea, but he accompanied Israel, protecting them, as they performed this duty. This is even more significant when you consider this is the only other time in the Exodus tale that we’re told of Egyptian chariots.
* **“Only leave your little ones and flocks behind” (Exodus 10.24).** Strange – another familiar phrase. Why is it significant to mention babysitting plans for Israel’s leaving Egypt? Ask again: when was the last time they made arrangements like these? Answer: in Joseph’s exodus – see **Genesis 50.8**. This parallel is deliberate. This is just another place where the author is hinting that there is so much to be gleaned by comparing Israel’s last exodus (Exodus 14) with Israel’s first exodus (Genesis 50).

The point is that one way of reading Exodus is to see it as the *Tale of Two Pharaohs*. The Pharaoh Moses is dealing with very well could’ve made a choice similar to that of Joseph’s Pharaoh – but he didn’t. Indeed, the story is a comparison of the two.

Why is this Pharaoh so different? That’s what this morning’s sermon is all about.