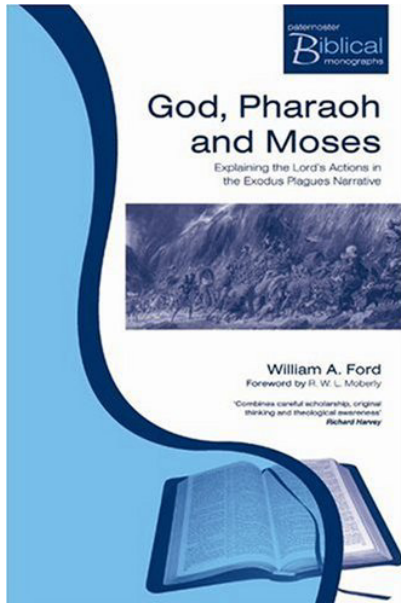


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Ford, William A.

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

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God, Pharaoh and Moses is based on Ford's doctoral dissertation "Whose Explanation? Which Context? A Narrative Theological Study of the Rationale for Divine Action in the Exodus Plagues Narrative," completed under Walter Moberly and submitted to the University of Durham in 2005. Ford has made minimal revisions to this earlier work.

William Ford has an interest in reading theologically difficult passages of Scripture. By working on the plagues narrative, Ford has chosen a worthy test. The plagues narrative confronts its readers with an array of challenging questions: How are readers supposed to interpret the hardening of Pharaoh's heart? Is God unfair to Pharaoh? What is the purpose (if any) behind God's use of catastrophic signs or plagues against Egypt? What sort of God is portrayed through these events?

God, Pharaoh, and Moses is a work of theological interpretation. Ford offers a highly technical exegetical study that confronts directly the questions that readers of the book of Exodus encounter. Ford's work is a gift to persons who read the Bible as Scripture and who are troubled by issues raised in texts such as the plagues narrative. Moreover, by approaching the biblical text as a person of faith, Ford seeks to be addressed by the text personally and not to read the text merely as an object for study. Rather than being

problematic, Ford's faith commitment presses him to eschew easy answers and to present a compelling interpretation that draws together the seemingly disparate textual evidence.

God, Pharaoh and Moses has six chapters including an introduction and conclusion. Ford also includes three appendices of key words and phrases used within the plagues narrative. These appendices are designed to help the non-Hebrew specialist by providing transliteration of key words and drawing together data into convenient charts. The work concludes with a full bibliography and three indices organized by names, citations of Scripture, and subject.

Ford's thesis is that God as creator and sovereign desires a response of obedient submission to his will and acknowledgement of his character from all persons. God's interaction with Pharaoh and Moses must be understood within this overarching framework. God's character is revealed through his interactions with others. The God presented in the plagues narrative is "a God who responds to human actions and acts himself in order to seek the appropriate response from them in turn" (214).

How does Ford reach this conclusion? Chapter 1 introduces the issues at stake and the approach to be deployed in the study. Ford agrees with recent interpreters who argue that the book of Exodus is more about the presentation of God's character than it is about the liberation of Israel. Thus, Ford will approach the plagues narrative and the hardening of Pharaoh's heart from a theocentric perspective. Also, Ford reveals to the reader that he will move beyond the traditional options for understanding the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. He is not convinced by either/or arguments that locate the locus of the hardening in either Pharaoh or God nor by arguments for a shift over time from Pharaoh as the primary agent to God as the primary agent. Ford will support his thesis through a narrative approach to the text of Exodus.

Chapter 2 offers an exegetical study of Exod 9:13–19, where God addresses Pharaoh. The passage explains to Pharaoh that God's actions have been self-restrained in order to open the possibility for Pharaoh to respond properly to God. The proper response would be an acknowledgement of God and the release of Israel from bondage. Pharaoh has continued to exalt himself rather than acknowledge God. In response, God plans to increase the pressure on Pharaoh. These verses portray God as one who *reacts*.

Chapter 3 presents a second case study. This time Ford reads Exod 10:1–2 closely. Like Exod 9:13–19, 10:1–2 offers theological reflection on the events of Pharaoh's hardening. The difference in perspective between these texts is a study in contrasts. In 10:1–2, God addresses Moses and announces that he has hardened the heart of Pharaoh. Rather than viewing this as a shift or as evidence of the deployment of a new source, Ford offers a

compelling explanation. The contrasting presentations in the passages are understood best in light of the situation of character who is being addressed. In other words, God interacts differently with Moses because Moses requires a response unique to his context. At this point in the narrative, Moses does not need signs or opportunities to acknowledge God, but he certainly needs *reassurance* in the face of Pharaoh's intransigence. This is precisely what 10:1–2 offers. It explains Pharaoh's actions and presents reasons for Moses to continue to walk the road of faithful obedience.

Chapters 4 and 5 widen the study to consider the plagues narrative as a whole, the broader themes of the book of Exodus, and 1 Sam 4–7 in light of Ford's thesis. These chapters are necessary for Ford's work because they allow him and his readers to assess the theological implications of his findings for illuminating other texts related to the portrayal of God's character in the plagues narrative. Chapter 4 studies carefully the shape and message of the plagues narrative. Ford's reading opens new insights into the progression of the story. Chapter 5 compares the portrait of God in the plagues narrative with the portrait in the ark narrative in 1 Sam 4–7. This is a fruitful comparison because a major block of this story (5:1–6:12) focuses on the relationship between God and the Philistines. God interacts with the Philistines in ways analogous to God's interplay with Pharaoh.

Chapter 6 is a four-page conclusion to Ford's study that summarizes his key findings. Ford reiterates his thesis that the God of Exodus is "a God who responds to human actions and acts himself in order to seek the appropriate response from them in turn" (214).

Ford succeeds in presenting an illuminating study of the plagues narrative. The work has several strengths. First, Ford approaches the knotty subjects of the hardening of Pharaoh and the devastating nature of the plagues from a wider concern with the portrayal of the character of God. The first line of Ford's argument reads, "The story of the exodus is primarily a story about YHWH" (1). By focusing on the theocentric nature of the book of Exodus, Ford avoids isolating discrete elements of his study from the broader theological concerns of Exodus.

Ford achieves a commendable balance in his exegetical work. If the most compelling interpretations retain a balance between the details of individual pericopes and the concerns of the wider context(s) in which such passages fall, then Ford walks this tightrope adroitly. His detailed study is impressive. Moreover, the architectonic design of Ford's study enhances the credibility of Ford's thesis. By moving from focused exegesis of key theological statements in Exod 9:13–19 and 10:1–2 to broader studies of the wider contexts of the plagues narrative and book of Exodus as a whole to the presentation of God in 1 Sam 4–7, Ford demonstrates the veracity of his thesis in a thoroughgoing

reading of two brief but seemingly disparate speeches in Exodus and then shows how its implications illuminate related passages.

God, Pharaoh and Moses has only minor shortcomings. For instance, if a strength of Ford's work is his attention to reading the final form of the text, some scholars may object to his methodological neglect of behind-the-text issues. Ford is up front about this move and does not disparage scholars who study compositional issues, but a decision to focus on the received text and to assume an intentionality on the part of the author/editor in arranging material risks isolating Ford's work from broader conversations within the guild. This is particularly true in his handling of 9:13–19 (ch. 2). The fragmentary nature of these verses has been a hallmark of historical-critical opinion.

Ford could have strengthened his work by attending more to style. First, his writing is wordy and needs tightening. Ford is careful in his conclusions but at times approaches equivocation. For example, his purpose statement reads, "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." Second, Ford provides an appendix of key Hebrew words and phrases for the benefit of those who are not Hebrew specialists in order to make *God, Pharaoh and Moses* more accessible to a wider audience. I doubt that this will provide much help, given that Ford's exegetical sections are laden with untranslated Hebrew. The savvy reader may be able to follow his arguments, but the burden will be on the nonspecialist.

In conclusion, Ford presents an informed, careful, creative, and substantive study of the plagues narrative and its reverberations within parts of the Old Testament. Scholars and students will find in *God, Pharaoh, and Moses: Explaining the Lord's Actions in the Exodus Plagues Narrative* a worthy conversation partner as they seek to understand the final form of the book of Exodus.