

## AN OLD TESTAMENT SANCTIFYING INFLUENCE: THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

by  
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The secular as well as the “Christian” world often reflects a pervasive commitment to an anthropocentric view of life. Even from the standpoint of the “Christian” world, many embrace a worldview that does not have God as sovereign in every detail of life, as illustrated by traditional Arminianism<sup>2</sup> and open theism.<sup>3</sup> Based upon these pervasive human-centered approaches to life, we might expect at first blush to find passages in the Bible that read: “Our god is in the heavens; he works so that Man can be supreme” (cf. Ps 115:3). Or, “Whatever Man pleases, god guarantees that Man’s desires will be fully satisfied in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps” (cf. Ps 135:6). Though neither secular nor “Christian” sources usually treat either passage in such a cavalier manner, these types of passages are often either glossed over or ignored in treatments of God’s absolute sovereignty. In actuality, Psalm 115:3 reads, “Our God is in the heavens; He does all that He pleases.”<sup>4</sup> And, Psalm 135:6 says, “Whatever the LORD pleases, He does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.” Rather than allowing for any anthropocentric view of life, these texts have a strong theocentric perspective that expresses each psalmist’s response of praise to their sovereign Lord.

Moreover, the God-focused substance of both verses is consistent with the rest of Old Testament theology. The whole tenor of this revelation affirms time and again God’s absolute sovereignty. Further, this high view of God not only brought a worshipful confession but had a profound impact on other areas of life for God’s people. The purpose of this essay is to explicate what the Old Testament teaches about divine sovereignty and the influence that this doctrine had on two

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<sup>2</sup>For example, Jack Cottrell provides thorough support for this theological perspective (*What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* [Joplin, MO: College Press, 1984]).

<sup>3</sup>Such as Richard Rice, John Sanders, Clark Pinnock, and William Hasker, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994) and Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Openness of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

<sup>4</sup>All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the 2001 ESV.

particular prophets.

## GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament portrays God as absolutely sovereign. To be sure, this is a contested claim, especially when discussing God's relationship with sin and other evils. Therefore, after a brief definition of what is meant by *sovereign*, three proofs for the initial assertion will be given in some detail.<sup>5</sup>

### God's Sovereignty Defined

In English the noun *sovereign* refers to "a person who possesses sovereign authority or power;" "a monarch or ruler."<sup>6</sup> Human rulers, however, cannot exercise their authority absolutely because of finite limitations such as their mortality, fragile health, and limited knowledge. God does not have these limitations. He is infinite and thus his rule is one of absolute supremacy over all things under his control, namely the entire created realm. Not only, therefore, does God's sovereignty mean his "rule and authority over all things,"<sup>7</sup> but it means that he exercises this rule in accord with his own nature and decrees. Thus, being neither dependent nor limited in any way by anything outside himself, God rules absolutely.<sup>8</sup>

### God's Sovereignty over All Things

The first piece of evidence supporting this view of God's sovereignty is the handful of texts explicitly affirming the universal extent of

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<sup>5</sup>It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into all the Old Testament material on divine sovereignty. For a constructive overview of the Old Testament material covering divine sovereignty, as well as human responsibility, see D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), pp. 18–38. Raymond C. Ortlund's "The Sovereignty of God: Case Studies in the Old Testament" beneficially examines a Calvinistic understanding of divine sovereignty in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), pp. 25–46.

<sup>6</sup>*Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), p. 1363.

<sup>7</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), p. 157.

<sup>8</sup>See also John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), pp. 44–45 and John Murray, *The Sovereignty of God* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1943), pp. 5–8. John S. Feinberg concisely defines God's sovereignty as "God's power of absolute self-determination" (*No One Like Him* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001], p. 294). When Feinberg uses "absolute," he means God's decisions and control that govern all things; and with "self-determination," he means that "God does his own actions, and that they are in accord with his choices" (*ibid.*).

God's rule. Chief among these are those that describe God's work in creation. He is the one who created the heavens and the earth and all things in them (Exod 20:11; 31:15–17; Neh 9:6). He is the one who made all things "very good" (Gen 1:31). God's work of creation is a recurring motif, often used to highlight his sovereign majesty. He is the self-existent God of creation (Job 38:4–11; Pss 19:1–6; 104) and Lord of Israel (Pss 121:2; 124:8). In addition to being the Creator, he is also the sustainer of all things (Gen 14:19–22; Job 38:12–41:34). From this it follows that all creation belongs to the LORD (Exod 19:5; Deut 10:14; Job 41:3). Along with creating and sustaining all things, God also moves creation to its appointed end (Amos 9:11–15; Mic 4–5; Zech 13–14; Isa 65–66) according to his own good pleasure (Pss 115:3; 135:6). As one psalm puts it, "The Lord has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all" (Ps 103:19).<sup>9</sup> This rule includes, among other things, his judgment against nations (Isa 13–23; Amos 1–2) and his final judgment of every individual's deeds, including those things done in secret, whether good or bad (Eccl 12:14; Dan 12:2).

Such sovereignty is precisely the burden of the book of Job. Job's message is that God sovereignly brought extreme suffering into Job's life solely because of his own good pleasure, not (as Job's friends and Elihu insist) because of Job's sin (cf. Job 1:1–5, 8). This emphasis is especially clear in Job's final chapters where God responds to Job's impetuous subpoena. While Job's suffering was innocent suffering, this did not give him the right to treat God as a peer. He had no right to challenge God, something God proves through a series of rhetorical questions regarding Job's lack of involvement in creating and managing the universe (38:1–41:34). Job's response to these questions once more highlights the nature of God's sovereignty: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted (42:2)."

### **God's Sovereignty in Individual Lives**

If God's sovereign rule comprises all things, this necessarily entails that he is sovereign in the details of individual lives.<sup>10</sup> It is, therefore,

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<sup>9</sup>Other passages affirming God's sovereignty over all things are Prov 19:21; 21:30; Isa 14:24–27; 46:10; Jer 23:20; Dan 4:35.

<sup>10</sup>In approaching the Old Testament material on divine sovereignty in individual lives, I have chosen not to address this motif as it relates to the divine initiative in choosing individuals for personal salvation. I avoid this topic because no specific Old Testament text explicates the issue of divine sovereignty and individual election, though to be sure a proper synthesis of germane biblical texts requires God's election of individuals. In the Old Testament, God explicitly teaches that his corporate election of Israel was according to his unconditional love and sovereign choice and for his theocratic purposes. Paul in Romans 9 authoritatively synthesizes the ramifications from the Old Testament subject of God's unconditional, sovereign choice of the nation Israel for his theocratic purposes and the impact that God's unconditional, sovereign choice has on individuals. While some have maintained that Paul exclusively develops the subject of God's corporate election of the church in Rom 9, this approach undermines Paul's argument: "But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all

not surprising to find David affirming the following:

<sup>13</sup>For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. <sup>14</sup>I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. <sup>15</sup>My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. <sup>16</sup>Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them (Ps 139:13–16).

Verses 13–16 describe the formation of David as an unborn baby and the predestination of the days of his life. While David was undoubtedly conversant with the process of procreation, he recognizes in v. 13 that God was the ultimate cause for his very existence. God's formation of David's "inward parts" may refer to his inner physical makeup that grew in his mother's womb<sup>11</sup>—vv. 15–16 clearly do.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, not only did God shape David in his mother's womb, but v. 16 indicates that he planned the details of David's life. Raymond C. Ortlund summarizes the thought of v. 16:

David is affirming that God wrote the script of his life in the great book of God's intentions before the actual events began to unfold, indeed, before David was even born. And, mixing his metaphors, David also says that the days of his life were formed or shaped, suggesting the action of a potter shaping clay. He means that his life, considered not only as a whole but also right down to his daily experience, was determined (what other words fits?) ahead of time.<sup>13</sup>

Another passage that affirms God's control of the details of an individual's life is Jeremiah 1:5: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed

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who are descended from Israel belong to Israel" (Rom 9:6). This is to say, not everyone from the elect nation of Israel was elect as an individual Israelite to personal salvation. In developing his argument, Paul then uses individual examples to prove his point. In particular, he uses the example of Pharaoh in Rom 9:14–18 to demonstrate that God has compassion on whomever he chooses and his hardening of individuals is also according to God's own sovereign choice: "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.' So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.' So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills" (see the effective article by Thomas R. Schreiner "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election Unto Salvation?" in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce Ware [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000], pp. 89–106).

<sup>11</sup>John Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), p. 633.

<sup>12</sup>See, e.g., Donald R. Glenn, "An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Psalm 139," in *Tradition and Testament*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), pp. 175–76.

<sup>13</sup>Ortlund, "The Sovereignty of God," p. 32.

you a prophet to the nations.” This passage strongly affirms that God’s sovereign control of Jeremiah’s life started prior to his conception and included the specifics of his prophetic role to the nations.

Perhaps someone might suggest that this sort of control applies only to prophets and others specially chosen by God. The text in Jeremiah, however, suggests more than this. As John Frame notes, “If God knew Jeremiah before his conception, then he must have arranged for each of Jeremiah’s ancestors to be born, and then Jeremiah himself. So God is in control of all the ‘accidents’ of history to create the precise person he seeks to employ as his prophet.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the ultimate cause (i.e., God) worked through secondary causes, such as the conception of Jeremiah by his parents and his parents’ conceptions by their parents, as well as all the other details of their lives, both great and small. God’s sovereignty of necessity must include the details in individual lives.

### God’s Sovereignty over Sin

If God’s sovereign rule comprises all things, it further follows that God controls the moral evil committed by humanity.<sup>15</sup> However, to say that God controls man’s evil acts does not mean that God is the immediate cause of sinful actions. Scripture never presents God exerting his own divine energy to accomplish a sinful action. In addition, Scripture never portrays God taking pleasure in the sinful pursuits of moral agents. Moreover, Scripture everywhere presents moral agents as fully culpable for their own wicked choices.<sup>16</sup> Thus, to assert that sinful actions are controlled by God means only that God uses moral agents, acting according to their own willing choices, and directs their activities to accomplish his purposes.<sup>17</sup> While it is true that God stands

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<sup>14</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 59.

<sup>15</sup>Though my discussion about divine sovereignty over sin focuses on humanity’s moral evil, the Bible describes other forms of evil which may be classified as physical or natural evil. For example, in Job 2:10 Job attributes the removal of his wealth, family and health to God and he describes this loss as “evil” (עָרָב; so also 42:11). In Amos 3:6, the LORD sends “disaster,” or “evil” (עָרָב), on cities. Neither of these examples is classified as moral evil because God is the ultimate cause in each case. As found in Scripture, the problem of evil can be categorized either as moral (the sinful activity of moral beings) or physical/natural (activities that bring suffering and destruction). For a thorough discussion of the various facets of evil from a theological and philosophical perspective, see John Feinberg (*The Many Faces of Evil: Theological Systems and the Problem of Evil* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994]).

<sup>16</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 323.

<sup>17</sup>This discussion relates to the theological concept known as concurrence. Concurrence is an aspect of divine providence (see Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2 vols. in 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966], 2:165–78 and Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, pp. 274–88). Concurrence may be defined as God’s working with created things in such a way that God directs the created things, according to the distinctive properties of the created things, to cause them to act precisely as they do (see Grudem’s beneficial discussion [*Systematic Theology*, pp. 315–31]). Concurrence is an explanation of how God works all things after the council of his will (Frame, *The Doctrine of God*,

behind good in a different manner than he stands behind evil, it is, nevertheless, also true that God “bring[s] about evil deeds through the willing action of moral creatures.”<sup>18</sup>

Three biblical examples demonstrate God’s control of sinful actions.

### **The Life of Joseph**

A familiar instance is found in the life of Joseph. His brothers hated him, both because of the special attention he received from their father and, not least, his own hubris. Consequently, they planned to kill him. However, after having a change of heart, they decide instead to sell him to a group of Midianite merchants bound for Egypt. God in this instance protects Joseph from his murderous brothers. He would do something similar for Joseph once in Egypt—protection that would eventually result in Joseph’s elevation to the position of vizier, second-in-command to Pharaoh himself by the age of 30 (Gen 41:41–45). In fact, when famine envelopes Egypt and the surrounding areas, Joseph is able to testify of God’s sovereignty over his own brothers, who had come to Egypt looking for food: “Now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life” (Gen 45:5). At a later point, after Joseph’s father dies, his brothers once more fear his vengeance. As before, Joseph instead testifies to God’s sovereignty: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Gen 50:20). Clearly Joseph saw that God used the sinful acts of his brothers and others to accomplish his good purposes.

### **The Use of Satan**

A second example is God’s use of Satan. For instance, God gave Satan permission to kill Job’s family and take away his wealth, something Satan accomplishes in one day through both natural calamity and the moral agency of wicked men (Job 1:10–20). Later God gave Satan permission to take away Job’s health (2:4–7). Interestingly, though Satan was the one who was immediately responsible for the calamity brought upon Job, Job nevertheless recognizes God’s hand in all of it (e.g., 1:21; 2:10). Job recognizes that God was the ultimate cause, apparently having no idea what sort of means (i.e., Satan) God had used to accomplish his purposes. The book’s author is careful to note that it was not wrong for Job to ascribe this evil to God, stating, “In all this Job did not sin with his lips.”<sup>19</sup> In short, God sovereignly

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pp. 287–88; for an extensive treatment of concurrence, see Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1992), 1:505–15.

<sup>18</sup>Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 323.

<sup>19</sup>See Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, p. 298.

gave Satan permission to afflict Job.<sup>20</sup>

### The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

Another well-known case of God controlling the wickedness of men was the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus 4–14. What should not be missed in this text is that God works in such a way that Pharaoh is progressively and irreversibly confirmed in his wickedness, despite a number of obvious displays of God's supernatural power.<sup>21</sup>

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is a primary motif in Exodus 4–14, being mentioned on twenty occasions (see table below). The first two are found prior to the ten plagues, the next fifteen are woven together with the ten plagues, and the final three are connected with the Egyptian army being drowned in the Red Sea. By using the term *heart* (לב),<sup>22</sup> the author refers metaphorically to Pharaoh's "interior" person. In fact, as a metaphor, heart may refer to his intellectual capacities, emotions, or volitional activities and processes, or simply to his personality or character. Primarily, however, the heart denotes the volitional, decision-making part of man.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the author uses three

<sup>20</sup>God's sovereign use of Satan to accomplish his will is also seen in the New Testament. For example, in Luke 22:3 Satan's possession of Judas Iscariot is for the divine purpose of crucifying Christ. It should be further noted that this same type of divine control over evil is demonstrated in Acts 2:23 and 4:27–28. In Acts 2:23, Peter's Israelite audience and wicked men, including Judas, sinfully crucified Jesus Christ, yet this was according to the "definite plan and foreknowledge of God." This type of divine control over evil is stressed again in Acts 4:27–28: "For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place."

<sup>21</sup>God's hardening is never capricious. Though God has no obligation to tell us why he hardens a sinner's heart, in the case of Pharaoh, he states that one of his purposes is to exalt his name in all of the earth: "But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth" (Exod 9:16).

<sup>22</sup>The Hebrew term לב and its counterpart לבב are used 854 times in the Old Testament (*Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, s.v. "לב," by F. Stolz, 2:638).

<sup>23</sup>G. K. Beale, "An Exegetical and Theological Consideration of the Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart in Exodus 4–14 and Romans 9," *Trinity Journal* 5 (Autumn 1984): 184. It is interesting to note from an Egyptian perspective that "heart," *ib*, is the essence of a person, his inner spiritual self (John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997], p. 96). In this regard, the Egyptian word is similar to the Hebrew לב. However, the difference relates to the word "heart" having reference to Pharaoh since his heart had special prominence for Egyptians who believed it was the all-controlling factor in life. Further, because Pharaoh was an incarnation of Ra and Horus who were sovereign over everything, "his heart was thought to be sovereign over creation" (John D. Currid, *A Study Commentary on Exodus, Volume 1: Chapters 1–18* [Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2000], pp. 113–14). Thus, the concept of hardening Pharaoh's heart is a polemic that demonstrates that the Lord was even sovereign over Pharaoh as a deity (for more details, see John D. Currid, "Why Did God Harden Pharaoh's Heart?" *Bible Review* 9 [December 1993]: 48; so also Edwards P. Meadors, *Idolatry and the Hardening of the Heart* [New York: T & T Clark, 2006], p. 23). What should not be overlooked is that Pharaoh's acceptance of

different Hebrew verbs in the twenty references to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart: קָנַח (Qal, to "be strong"; Piel, "to make firm," "harden"),<sup>24</sup> קָשַׁח (Hiphil, to "make hard," "harden"),<sup>25</sup> and כָּבַד (Qal, to "weigh heavily upon," "be heavy"; Hiphil, to "make dull, unresponsive").<sup>26</sup> The semantic domains of each of the verbs significantly overlap, strongly suggesting that they are used synonymously, a reflection of good authorial style.<sup>27</sup> Good support for this comes in the fact that the Septuagint uses σκληρύνω ("harden")<sup>28</sup> to render each of the Hebrew verbs.<sup>29</sup> Further, when the various hardening verbs are conjoined with "heart," it is an idiomatic way of talking about stubbornness. In this case, Pharaoh is so stubbornly opposed to releasing Israel that he is unwilling and unable to respond to God's command.<sup>30</sup>

Prior to the first reference to hardening in 4:21, God seeks to strengthen a reluctant Moses by reminding him of his own absolute sovereign freedom and power: "The LORD said to him, 'Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes *him* mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD?'" (4:11). God's point is to affirm for Moses that he would use his absolute sovereign power to enable Moses

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this type of adulation reflects his own unadulterated, arrogant wickedness even prior to his meeting Moses in Exod 7. God would have been perfectly just in hardening Pharaoh's heart at any point in his life, as God is just in other passages of Scripture that declare his hardening work on rebellious sinners (for example, see Josh 11:18–20; 2 Chr 25:20; Isa 6:9–10; 63:17; Rom 1:24–32).

<sup>24</sup>Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. W. Baumgartner and J. J. Stamm, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:302–3.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 2:1151–52.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 1:455–56. As cited above, the three Hebrew verbs are used in various stems in the Hebrew text of Exod 4–14. קָנַח is used in two different stems: the Qal—the foundational stem for other verb stems, approximately 70 percent of the Hebrew verbs are in this stem—and Piel—generally a factitive sense, such as causing a state or producing the result of an action. קָשַׁח is used in the Hiphil stem—generally considered a causative stem. כָּבַד is found in both the Qal and Hiphil stems. For further discussion of these verbs, see Meadors, *Idolatry and the Hardening of the Heart*, pp. 20–21.

<sup>27</sup>Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), p. 149.

<sup>28</sup>Walter Bauer, Frederick W. Danker, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. rev. and ed. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 930. Σκληρύνω is also used as a metaphor, to "cause to be unyielding in resisting information."

<sup>29</sup>John William Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Exodus* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), pp. 52–53. Σκληρύνω is used at Exod 4:21; 7:3, 22; 8:19 (Heb v. 15); 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 13:15; 14:4, 8, 17.

<sup>30</sup>See Beale, "The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart," pp. 147–48; cf. John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pp. 160–62.

to speak and guide Israel out of Egypt and into the promised land of Canaan (3:7–17), to confront Pharaoh (3:18–21), to move the Egyptians to financially provide for Israel (3:21–22), and to enable Moses to perform miraculous signs in Egypt (4:2–9, 17). But God’s point was to say more than this.

As Moses was returning to Egypt, God makes a further prediction:

And the LORD said to Moses, “When you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles that I have put in your power. But I will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go. <sup>22</sup>Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, <sup>23</sup>and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me.’ If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son” (4:21–23).

Verses 21–23 are a telescopic prophecy whose fulfillment encompasses all the references to the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart up to the announcement of the final plague about the death of the firstborn in 11:1–8.<sup>31</sup>

The following table includes the twenty references to Pharaoh’s hardening, along with the specific Hebrew verb used, its stem, and its subject. What is especially important to note is that God is the subject of the verb and thus the cause of the hardening in half of the references, while Pharaoh is the subject in only four instances. As for the remaining six instances, the subject is the heart of Pharaoh and two different Qal stative verbs are used (חִזַּק and כָּבַד).

Reference	Verb	Stem	Subject/Agent
4:21	חִזַּק	Piel	God
7:3	קָשָׁה	Hiphil	God
7:13	חִזַּק	Qal	heart/undefined
7:14	כָּבַד	Qal	heart/undefined
7:22	חִזַּק	Qal	heart/undefined
8:15 (Heb v. 11)	כָּבַד	Hiphil	Pharaoh
8:19 (Heb v. 15)	חִזַּק	Qal	heart/undefined
8:32 (Heb v. 28)	כָּבַד	Hiphil	Pharaoh
9:7	כָּבַד	Qal	heart/undefined
9:12	חִזַּק	Piel	God
9:34	כָּבַד	Hiphil	Pharaoh

<sup>31</sup>Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Divine Hardening in the Old Testament,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 153 (October–December 1996): 415, n. 19.

9:35	חזק	Qal	heart/undefined
10:1	כבד	Hiphil	God
10:20	חזק	Piel	God
10:27	חזק	Piel	God
11:10	חזק	Piel	God
13:15	קשה	Hiphil	Pharaoh
14:4	חזק	Piel	God
14:8	חזק	Piel	God
14:17	חזק	Piel	God

As the table indicates, the six places where *heart* (with the agent categorized as undefined) is the subject of a verb are labeled as being in the Qal stem. More specifically, the six examples are stative verbs, which expresses a state or condition. The stative may be translated into English either with a passive nuance—“The heart [of Pharaoh] was hardened” (7:13)—or as a predicate adjective—“The heart [of Pharaoh] is hard” (7:14). In either case, the verbal form indicates that Pharaoh’s heart was in a state of hardness. Neither the subject, “heart,” nor stative verb, “was hardened” or an equivalent, however, provide any explicit information that identifies the agent of the hardening. Since an explicit agent is not given in any of the immediate clauses where the stative verbs appear, there is some ambiguity involved. Who is the primary agent of Pharaoh’s hardening when a Qal stative is used?

Some argue that Pharaoh is the primary agent (Pharaoh’s self-hardening view),<sup>32</sup> while others contend that God is the primary cause hardening Pharaoh’s heart (the divine-hardening view).<sup>33</sup> Since God is

<sup>32</sup>Often, these interpreters gloss over or ignore 7:13c (“as the LORD had said”), and argue that God does not harden Pharaoh’s heart until after the sixth plague. These writers hold what can be labeled as a self-hardening view. Those taking this view include R. T. Forster and V. P. Marston (*God’s Strategy in Human History* [Wheaton: Tyndale, 1973], p. 72), J. D. Strauss (“God’s Promise and Universal History,” in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark Pinnock [reprint ed., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1999], pp. 197–98), Victor P. Hamilton (*Handbook on the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], pp. 164–65), Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. (*Toward Old Testament Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], p. 255), John L. Mackay (*Exodus* [Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2001], p. 132), and Layton Talbert (*Not By Chance: Learning to Trust a Sovereign God* [Greenville, SC: BJU Press, 2001], p. 88).

<sup>33</sup>Those who see the significance of the  $\text{כִּשְׁתָּהּ}$  clause in 7:13c as supporting a divine-hardening interpretation of this verse are Piper (*The Justification of God*, pp. 160–62), Beale (“The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Exodus 4–14 and Romans 9,” pp. 147–48), Chisholm (“Divine Hardening in the Old Testament,” pp. 418–19), Currid (*Exodus 1–18*, pp. 162–63), David M. Gunn (“The ‘Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,’” in *Art and Meaning: Rhetoric in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. David J. A. Clines, David M. Gunn, and Alan J. Hauser [Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press,

the clear subject in 4:21 and 7:3, many who argue for Pharaoh's self-hardening interpret 4:21–23 and 7:3 as only having a prophetic element with no necessary divine causative significance for 7:13, 14, 22, 8:19 and 9:35.<sup>34</sup> If the primary agent is Pharaoh, as Forster and Marston assume,<sup>35</sup> a case could be made that God does not actually harden Pharaoh's heart until after the development of the sixth plague in 9:12. According to this view, God permits Pharaoh to harden his own heart through the six plagues. Based upon Pharaoh's self-hardening, God then judicially acts to harden Pharaoh's heart by intervening and confirming Pharaoh's rebellious decision after the sixth plague. In this sense, as Mackay notes, "the LORD's action may be viewed as a judicial consequence of Pharaoh's rebellion."<sup>36</sup> Though this approach has some capable advocates and laudably desires to defend God's integrity, it is, nevertheless, exegetically deficient in that it does not give adequate attention to the details of the text.

The self-hardening view correctly emphasizes that Pharaoh was culpable for hardening his own heart. This is clearly stated in Exodus 8:15, 32; 9:34; 13:15. For example, 9:34 unmistakably says that Pharaoh was responsible for his sinfulness: "But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants." However, apparently because of theological concerns, such as the desire to protect man's "free will"<sup>37</sup> and/or to defend God from the charge of being "unfair,"<sup>38</sup> the self-hardening view overlooks the contours of the text in two ways. First, an overemphasis on Pharaoh hardening his own heart minimizes the

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1982], pp. 75–76), John H. Sailhamer (*The Pentateuch as Narrative* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], pp. 253–54), John I. Durham (*Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary [Waco, TX: Word, 1987], p. 92) and Philip Graham Ryken (*Exodus* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005], pp. 211–12).

<sup>34</sup>Forster and Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History*, p. 72.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid. So Strauss, "God's Promise and Universal History," pp. 197–98; Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch*, pp. 164–65; and Talbert, *Not By Chance*, pp. 88–89.

<sup>36</sup>*Exodus*, p. 132.

<sup>37</sup>The expression "free will" is an ambiguous expression. It is often used in the sense of man having an unrestrained capacity to choose either good or bad. This type of libertarian "free will" is incompatible with Scripture's overall message that God has a foreordained plan that includes the course and outcome of all events (for a discussion, see Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, pp. 206–9). However, Scripture is equally clear that man is a responsible moral agent who is fully accountable to God for all his thoughts and actions. Man as a free moral agent, in contrast to his having an absolutely "free will," is compatible with God's foreordination (see Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, pp. 135–45).

<sup>38</sup>It is this type of human reasoning that Paul responds to in Romans 9:19: "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" Paul's cogent response is worth noting: "But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?" (9:20–21).

divine causative force of Exodus 4:21–23. As previously noted, this is a telescopic prophecy that predicts that God would be directly involved in hardening Pharaoh’s heart over the course of the Egyptian plagues. In addition to this, it misses the implications of the second reference to God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart in 7:3–5, which confirms the divine-causative force of 4:21–23:

<sup>3</sup>But I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and though I multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt, <sup>4</sup>Pharaoh will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment. <sup>5</sup>The Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them.

While this second reference does not include the mention of the death of Pharaoh’s firstborn, it does clearly indicate that the LORD would harden the heart of Pharaoh and, consequently, that God would display his omnipotent power in judging Egypt.

Second, is it valid to assume that on the six occasions where Pharaoh’s heart is the subject of two Qal stative verbs (קָיַם and קָבַד; 7:13, 14, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35) that Pharaoh is the implied agent? Those contending for Pharaoh’s self-hardening in these six instances minimize or gloss over the כִּשְׁרָתָא clause at the end of 7:13: “Pharaoh’s heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, *as the LORD had said.*” The last clause is used in three of the six references employing a stative verb (7:13, 22; 9:35). What the self-hardening view fails to see is that this clause in 7:13 specifically recalls the hardening described in 4:21 and 7:3–4. To be more precise, the hardening verb in 7:13 recalls the same concept in 4:21 and 7:3, and Pharaoh’s inattentiveness to Moses recalls 7:4. Thus, rather than being an example of Pharaoh’s self-hardening, 7:13 provides another clear example of divine hardening when read in context. The emphasis of 7:13 is that hardening is God’s sovereign right, and it demonstrates his sovereign power.<sup>39</sup>

As a result of this interpretation, one may wonder what it means to say that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart? To restate a point made above, it does not mean that God is doing something that makes Pharaoh no longer responsible<sup>40</sup> or something that takes away his “free will.”<sup>41</sup> This misrepresents how God’s sovereignty works. Rather, God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart means that God, in his sovereignty, withholds

<sup>39</sup>I am making this assessment based upon explicit statement that the LORD hardened Pharaoh’s heart in 7:13. However, it is also possible that, though not stated explicitly, the Lord’s hardening work started back in 5:2, since this is the first specific statement about Pharaoh’s refusal to release the Israelites and 5:2 is in proximity with God’s first prediction about hardening Pharaoh’s heart in 4:21 (so Beale, “Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart,” pp. 135–36 and Piper, *The Justification of God*, pp. 142–43; however, the assessment that God’s hardening work started in 5:2 has been challenged by Chisholm, “Divine Hardening in the Old Testament,” pp. 416–17, n. 20).

<sup>40</sup>Hamilton, *Pentateuch*, p. 171.

<sup>41</sup>Waldemar Janzen, *Exodus* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2000), p. 141.

mercy<sup>42</sup> (or, as it is often called, *common grace*) from Pharaoh. God's hardening removes the restraining forces used in common grace so that Pharaoh gets exactly what he wants, along with the inevitable (and undesirable) consequences of his choices. God in his sovereign justice withheld his mercy, allowing the wickedness already resident in Pharaoh's heart to have free reign. Pharaoh and his people then reaped the consequences of Pharaoh's evil actions.<sup>43</sup>

In sum, what the Old Testament says about divine sovereignty is well summarized in Daniel 4:35–36 by the response of Nebuchadnezzar, a ruler who had been humbled by God and then restored to power: “His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, ‘What have you done?’” Still, while it is clear that the Old Testament incontrovertibly affirms that God sovereignly rules all things, one may still wonder what effect, if any, this sort of perspective had on God's people. What does it mean to serve a God who is absolutely sovereign?

### THE SANCTIFYING EFFECT OF GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY

As the following shows, God's absolute sovereignty had a significant impact on God's people in the Old Testament. I will use Moses and Jeremiah to exemplify the sanctifying effect that the sovereignty of God had on his people.

#### Moses' Response to God's Sovereignty

When God initially called Moses from the burning bush, Moses was anything but a quintessential servant (Exod 3:1–4:17). In fact, he showed great reluctance and even stubborn disobedience to God, offering five excuses for not following the Lord's instructions. With each excuse Moses reflected his own finite and depraved limitations. However, God graciously countered each excuse by patiently affirming that his infinite resources and flawless control would more than supply what Moses lacked. Throughout the narrative, God reveals his perfect character and absolute sovereign control over all aspects of the world in which Moses lived. And, after one final expression of outright disobedience, Moses gave in to the demands of his sovereign God and agreed to carry out God's mission of deliverance and judgment.

Moses' first excuse in 3:11–12 is that he is incapable of completing God's command. Right before this excuse, God had shown Moses his

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<sup>42</sup>Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 66, n. 23.

<sup>43</sup>When God hardened Pharaoh's heart, he simultaneously directed Pharaoh and all the related circumstances to serve as a grand display of his own sovereign power and freedom.

mighty power in talking to Moses through a burning (though not consumed) bush (3:2–4), his absolute holiness in demanding that Moses remove his sandals (v. 5), his complete knowledge in describing for Moses Egypt's oppressive abuse of Israel (v. 7), his compassionate mercy in his response to the cries of his oppressed people (vv. 7–8), and his unfailing faithfulness in that he would indeed fulfill his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by giving their descendants the promised land of Canaan (vv. 6–9). God's self-revelation is the backdrop for the declaration to Moses in verse 10 that God had chosen him to be his agent for delivering his people. However, rather than rejoicing over his divinely given position, Moses tries to excuse his way out of the task (v. 11): "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" Moses' point is that he is not equal to the task. After all, when Moses would return to Israel and address the elders, they might remember that he had been raised in an Egyptian household rather than an Israelite household, that he had committed murder, and that he was the fugitive who had escaped Pharaoh's sentence of death. While Moses certainly had deficiencies, these were apparently irrelevant from God's perspective. His excuse receives no rebuttal. Rather God simply counters with a promise of his presence and of guaranteed success: "But I will be with you, and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain." In effect, v. 12 indicates that God tells Moses that his presence would override any deficiencies Moses had and that his presence was a guarantee that Israel would leave Egypt and worship God at Horeb.

Moses is still not fully convinced that he wants to be involved with this divinely-given mission so he makes a second excuse that he is unable to answer Israel's questions about the name and identity of the God who sent him to deliver them (3:13–22). Moses anticipates that when he arrives in Egypt and declares to the Israelites that "the God of your fathers has sent me to you," they would respond by asking about God's name: "What is His name?" While Moses projects this question as coming from the lips of his fellow Israelites, Moses' follow-up question reveals his own ignorance: "What shall I say to them?" Since v. 15 clearly indicates that the patriarchs knew God as the LORD, it would be misleading to interpret both of these questions as suggesting that God's name had not previously been used prior to Exodus 3:14.<sup>44</sup> However, taken at face value, these questions reflect that Moses was either ignorant of or not accustomed to using the divine name and that he wanted to make sure that he had the precise identification of the God who was promising to deliver Israel from their Egyptian

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<sup>44</sup>See Martin Noth, *Exodus*, trans. J. S. Bowden, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), pp. 42–44 and William H. C. Propp, *Exodus*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 223. For a discussion of the issues associated with the use of the divine name in this verse, see Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp. 104–6.

bondage.<sup>45</sup>

To correct Moses' ignorance, God more precisely identifies himself as "I AM WHO I AM," אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי אֲנִי (v. 14). The basic component of this phrase relates to the first person singular verb אֲנִי, "I AM."<sup>46</sup> But what does this mean and how does this name relate to Moses' return to Egypt to deliver Israel? This verb form is related to the Hebrew verb הָיָה, "to be."<sup>47</sup> Since a person's name in the Old Testament often reflects something about his character, the semantics of this verb suggest that God's name focuses on his being or existence. This is to say, God is self-existent—dependent of anything outside of himself for existence,<sup>48</sup> which also implies that he is immutable and eternal.<sup>49</sup> Not only does God identify himself as "I AM WHO I AM" in v. 14, he also describes himself as the God of Moses' fathers, "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Twice in vv. 14–15 God informs Moses that he is to be his diplomatic representative to Israel: "I AM has sent me to you" and "the God of your fathers... has sent me to you." The intentions of God in sending Moses to Egypt are stated in the remainder of the narrative: to bring Israel into the land of Canaan as he promised their fathers (vv. 16–17) and to bring judgment on Egypt through a series of supernatural plagues (vv. 19–22). What is only implied in this text, but explicitly stated in 6:1–8, is that this deliverance was correlated with the Abrahamic Covenant. Therefore, Israel's self-existent God counters Moses' claim to be ignorant of his identity with a clear declaration of his name and character. He is the God who would demonstrate his faithfulness by fulfilling his covenant promises. And in accomplishing this, the LORD would demonstrate his sovereign wisdom and covenant faithfulness as a grand display for the entire world.

The third excuse offered by Moses in 4:1–9 is that Israel would not believe his claim that the LORD had appeared to him: "What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say? For they may say, 'The LORD has not appeared to you'" (v. 1). Since God had already told him that Israel would listen to him (3:18), Moses' skepticism reflects his disbelief. In response to this excuse, God gives Moses three

<sup>45</sup>Enns, *Exodus*, pp. 106–7.

<sup>46</sup>Though this could be translated as "I will be" (see 4:14), the context and syntax suggest that this is best rendered as "I AM." This is further supported by the rendering in the Septuagint as Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν, "I am the one who is."

<sup>47</sup>A form of this verb, הָיָה ("the LORD"), is also used in v. 15. It is related to third person singular form of הָיָה, "he is" or "he will be." הָיָה may also be written in a more archaic form as הָיָה, *Yahweh*. When this verb form is used as a reference to God, it is written in the Hebrew Bible as יהוה—the tetragrammaton. In English translations יהוה is rendered as "the LORD."

<sup>48</sup>See, e.g., Currid, *Exodus 1–18*, pp. 90–91 and John J. Davis, *Moses and the Gods of Egypt* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), pp. 64–65.

<sup>49</sup>Currid, *Exodus 1–18*, p. 91.

verifiable signs of his divine calling. While these three miraculous signs would function to establish Moses' credentials with Israel (4:29–31), in the immediate context they initially serve as God's response to Moses' incredulous excuse. With the first sign in vv. 2–5, God gives Moses the ability to change his staff into a snake and then back to a staff. With the second miraculous sign in vv. 6–8, God gives Moses the ability to make his hand diseased and then to restore it to health. Verse 8 indicates that this was a back-up sign in case Israel would not accept Moses' first sign. The third sign (v. 9) is that God would enable Moses to turn water from the Nile into blood. If Israel would not accept Moses' authority after the first two signs, God tells Moses that he should then take water from the Nile River and pour it on the dry ground, with the result that it would turn into blood.<sup>50</sup> As 4:29–31 implies, this “water to blood” sign, as well as both of the preceding signs, would be enacted in the presence of Israel and subsequently used to initiate the ten plagues with which God would judge Pharaoh (7:14–25).

With Moses' fourth excuse, he tells the Lord that he had never been an eloquent speaker (4:10–12). While exactly what Moses means by this has generated some debate,<sup>51</sup> it is, nevertheless, clear from v. 10 that his focus is in the wrong place—his own inabilities and not God's power: “Oh my Lord, I [אֲנִי] am not eloquent, either in the past or since you have spoken to your servant, but I [אֲנִי] am slow of speech and of tongue.” Like his previous excuses, Moses clearly reflects that he, rather than God, is the central figure in this mission of deliverance. Once again, as God's response in vv. 11–12 indicates, Moses' deficiencies are irrelevant from God's perspective: “Who has made man's mouth? Who makes him mute, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I [אֲנִי], the LORD?” Now therefore go, and I [אֲנִי] will be אֲנִי with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak.” It should be noted that the contrast between the “I” of the creation and the “I” of the Creator reflects that God wants Moses to understand that he, not Moses, is the ultimate figure in Israel's deliverance. Further, the statement “I will be” is a translation of אֲנִי and clearly looks back to the use of אֲנִי, “I AM,” in 3:14–15: God affirms that he is in absolute sovereign control over finite man's physical capacities. In its overall context, the LORD's response in vv. 11–12 is that he had absolute sovereign power over Moses, his divinely chosen representative, as well as Egyptian life and government.<sup>52</sup>

While Moses' previous excuses suggest his self-focus, his fifth

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<sup>50</sup>The purpose of this third sign has broader implications than God simply responding to Moses' excuse that Israel would not accept his authority. It focuses on God's sovereign power over the Nile River (Egypt's life), the Nile-god, and ultimately over the Egyptians. See Stuart, *Exodus*, pp. 131–32.

<sup>51</sup>Hamilton, *Pentateuch*, p. 145.

<sup>52</sup>Enns, *Exodus*, p. 111.

excuse reflects unadulterated disobedience (4:13–17). His recalcitrance surfaces in 4:13: “Oh, my Lord, please send someone else.” This verse concisely reflects Moses’ insubordination. Moses neither cares that God’s presence would be with him nor that God has given him credibility with Israel. The long and short of it is that Moses does not want to return to Egypt. In light of Moses’ stubborn defiance, God becomes angry (“the anger of the LORD was kindled against Moses,” v. 14). However, God graciously makes a concession to Moses by providing him with an assistant, his brother Aaron (v. 14), who would share the speaking load. In language that is reminiscent of 4:12, God informs Moses that he will be *with* them and will *teach* them what to do. Verses 15–16 indicate that Moses and Aaron will share the daunting task of speaking on God’s behalf but Moses will be the true prophet and Aaron will be his spokesman: “You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth, and I will be with your mouth and with his mouth and will teach you both what to do. He shall speak for you to the people, and he shall be your mouth, and you shall be as God to him.” Since in the actual content of their speeches preserved in the Pentateuch Moses carries the bulk of the speaking, God apparently provides Aaron as Moses’ spokesman in order to encourage Moses.<sup>53</sup> With God’s provision of Aaron as an aide, Moses is prepared to confront Pharaoh and deliver Israel from Egypt.

With God’s gracious response to each of Moses’ excuses, he reveals something of his infinite being. Whether it was God’s enabling presence, his covenant faithfulness, or sovereign wisdom and power, God lucidly communicates to Moses that he is the God of Israel who controls the events and outcomes of nations, governments, and his messengers. This narrative showing God’s patient response to Moses’ five excuses exemplifies how God works at all times to guide his children to willingly surrender to his sovereign rights. After his encounter with God, Moses was emboldened to “take up his staff” and follow his sovereign LORD.

### **Jeremiah’s Response to God’s Sovereignty**

Jeremiah 1 contains an extended account of Jeremiah’s call (ca. 627 B.C.). This account involves a catalogue of Jeremiah’s perceived/real deficiencies and fears. As previously noted in commenting on Jeremiah 1:5, God announces that he had predestined Jeremiah to be a prophet to the nations: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah’s brief response reflects that he was overwhelmed with his prophetic task: “Alas, Sovereign LORD! Behold, I do not know how to speak, because I am a youth” (1:6). Apparently, Jeremiah was well-aware of his human limitations as a youth and was fearful about his prophetic obligation. Besides Judah, the

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<sup>53</sup>Stuart, *Exodus*, pp. 137–38.

reference to “nations” in v. 5 may imply that Jeremiah might need to preach to the major nations of his day, such as Assyria, Babylon and Egypt. Or, it may imply that Jeremiah might be called upon to go to smaller nations, such as Moab, Philistia, Edom, Ammon, and Damascus.<sup>54</sup> Whatever the specific details, God wants Jeremiah to focus on his own sovereign purposes, not on the nations to whom God would send him. Since God would subsequently use Jeremiah’s prophetic proclamations to build up and tear down nations and since this type of ministry would produce much personal turmoil for Jeremiah, God wanted Jeremiah’s foundation firmly set on a God-centered ministry.<sup>55</sup>

What Jeremiah reflects in 1:6 is his own depraved, self-centered perspective of life. However, in response to Jeremiah’s confession of deficiencies, God insists that Jeremiah keep his attention focused, in effect, on divine, unlimited resources: “Do not say, ‘I am a youth,’ because everywhere I send you, you shall go, and all that I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you” (1:7–8). With these words and those following in vv. 9–10, God assures Jeremiah that he will have an effective ministry, for the Sovereign Lord would effectually operate, even through one as weak and and immature as Jeremiah.<sup>56</sup>

With this type of call from God, one might suppose that Jeremiah would carry out his prophetic task without the slightest hint of any personal turmoil. However, this was anything but the case. Jeremiah would be denied a “normal life” under the Mosaic Covenant. He would be forbidden to marry and would not have the privilege of close friends (16:1–9). He would be shunned by his fellow Israelites; even the people of his own hometown would seek to kill him (11:18–23). The message of judgment that Jeremiah would deliver against Judah would result in attempts against his life. On one occasion, in fact, he would be placed in a cistern filled with suffocating mud (38:1–6). On another, after Judah’s defeat and the deportation of many of her citizens by the Babylonians in 597 B.C., God directly communicates to Jeremiah, telling him that he did not want those remaining in Judah to leave their homeland to take up residence in Egypt. Jeremiah then has to deliver this message to the remnant with the result that the rebellious leaders force him to migrate against his will to Egypt (41:16–43:13).

This brief overview reflects the great turmoil and personal struggles that Jeremiah encountered in his prophetic ministry. In fact, these ups and downs of his life are reflected in his various dialogues with the Lord in chapters 11–20. Jeremiah was not called to a life of quietism

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<sup>54</sup>See J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 147.

<sup>55</sup>See Ortlund, “The Sovereignty of God,” p. 37.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

and passivity,<sup>57</sup> but he was called upon to exercise his will by denying himself the normal activities and pleasures of life and by actively engaging as a prophet to the nations. When Jeremiah was called by God, his response in 1:6 suggested that he was beset with fears and insecurities, the sorts of things that would only get worse as a result of the heartaches and physical discomforts bound up with his prophetic ministry. With the call of Jeremiah in 1:4–10, God undoes Jeremiah's insecure and self-absorbed view of life by giving him a "strong dose of security in God's sovereignty."<sup>58</sup>

God's sovereign all-sufficiency captivates Jeremiah and moves him to faithful proclamation of the prophetic word. For instance, in one of Jeremiah's despondent periods, he comforts himself with God's sovereign resources:

O LORD, you have deceived me, and I was deceived; you are stronger than I, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all the day; everyone mocks me. For whenever I speak, I cry out, I shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of the LORD has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot (20:7–9).

For Jeremiah, a biblical understanding of God's sovereignty, one that acknowledges that God is "the effective cause in all things,"<sup>59</sup> captivated him in such a way that God mattered more to him than the personal affairs of his life. Jeremiah could, therefore, persevere in living an arduous life, one running up "against wind and tide."<sup>60</sup> Thus Jeremiah is one more example of how God effectually worked in the lives of Old Testament believers who, while struggling with fear, nevertheless esteemed God's sovereign purposes above all else.

### CONCLUSION

In sum, the purpose of this paper has been to examine the Old Testament teaching about divine sovereignty and to show it had a sanctifying influence on God's people with specific reference to Moses and Jeremiah. God is throughout this literature shown to be the one ruling in absolute sovereign majesty over all aspects of creation, whether good or evil. And it is this sovereign rule that impacted weak, self-centered humans to do what would have otherwise been impossible.

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<sup>57</sup>For examples of Jeremiah's great emotional upheavals, see his "confessions" in 11:18–23; 12:1–4; 15:10–21; 17:12–18; 18:18–23; and 20:7–18); for a discussion of these, see Thompson, *Jeremiah*, pp. 88–92.

<sup>58</sup>Ortlund, "The Sovereignty of God," p. 37.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), p. 7.