Divine Hardening in the Old Testament

Robert B. Chisholm Jr.

The Old Testament sometimes pictures God as "hardening" the human heart or spirit. The plague narratives recorded in the Book of Exodus attribute Pharaoh’s obstinacy, at least in part, to divine hardening. Deuteronomy 2:30 and Joshua 11:20 speak of divine hardening in the context of Israel’s conquest of the Promised Land, and Isaiah 6:9–10 and 63:17 seem to indicate that God hardened His own covenant people.

These passages disturb many people, for they raise questions about God’s fairness and goodness. Why would God cause someone to resist His will and then hold that person accountable for the sin He prompted? In an effort to preserve human moral responsibility and to avoid the conclusion that God would override the human will or manipulate free moral agents like puppets, some argue that the objects of divine hardening first hardened themselves. Others say the biblical statements, because they reflect ancient Hebrew idiom, cannot be taken at face value. According to this latter explanation, the biblical text replaces the immediate agent (the individual himself) with the ultimate agent (God). God simply allowed individuals to resist His will, but the Old Testament idiom bypasses the human subject and describes what God allowed as if He actually initiated and directly caused the action.

A close reading of the texts, a reading that includes being sensitive to literary features and genre considerations, allows one, however, to give the biblical references to divine hardening their full force, while preserving human moral responsibility. Divine hardening took either a direct form, in which God supernaturally overrode the human will, or an indirect form, in which He used intermediate causes to “harden” the object. Whether accomplished directly or indirectly, this hardening was an element of divine judgment whereby God exhibited His justice and sovereignty. The objects of such judgment were never morally righteous or neutral, but were rebels against God’s authority. Divine hardening was never arbitrarily implemented, but was in response to rejection of God’s authoritative word or standards.

The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart

Introductory Remarks and Representative Viewpoints

Four times in Exodus...