

BLESSINGS FOR OBEDIENCE AND CURSES FOR DISOBEDIENCE IN DEUTERONOMY 28

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Abstract

This essay examines the contents of the blessings and curses pronounced in Deuteronomy 28 and their significance for the later history of Israel together with their implications for the contemporary community of believers. The blessings are given for obedience to Yahweh's law while the curses are pronounced for disobedience. All these reflect the traditional morality which is founded on the principle of retributive justice. This states that if you do good, good things will follow you, and if you do evil, bad things will follow you. Although modern worldview is very critical of such traditional mindset, the idea is widely diffused in the Bible and forms the moral and religious consciousness of a majority of people. But one may ask, How were these blessings and curses realised in the life of the Israelite people? The paper will go further to explain the theological import of the blessings and curses together with their relevance to the contemporary African society. As a matter of fact, the consciousness of being under a blessing or under a curse looms large in the African society. Many fortunes and misfortunes are attributed as either signs of divine blessing or divine curse.

Keywords: Blessings, Curses, Obedience, Disobedience, Deuteronomy 28, Bible

1. Introduction

The two phenomena of blessings and curses are topical in every age. In the face of repeated misfortunes or failures, many Africans characteristically begin to entertain the fear of being under a curse. Behind this fear is the desire to always live a life of blessing. Everyone wants to remain ever blessed. People everywhere pray for blessings and dread the reality of curses. Both in the Bible and in contemporary times,

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one hears of people being under a blessing and sometimes of others being under a curse. The Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN) devoted its 11th annual Conference in 2018 to the theme, published in 2019 with the title, *Blessings and Curses in the Bible*.² The volume contains the treatment of the theme by biblical experts from a wide range of Old Testament and New Testament biblical texts together with their resonances in the African context.³ The joy of being under divine blessing is immeasurable, but it is most terrible when one is perceived to be under divine curse. Both reflect the nature of interpersonal relationships either between human beings themselves or between God and human beings or between God and other aspects of creation. As a matter of fact, the idea of blessing points to a harmony in relationship while curse expresses a rupture in relationship. Traditional morality is founded on the principle of retributive justice. This states that if you do good, good things will follow you, and if you do evil, bad things will follow you. The book of Deuteronomy provides the curses and blessings that will follow Israel depending on how she keeps the divine commands and covenantal stipulations. These are spelt out in Deuteronomy 27-28 which open the last address of Moses to the Israelites. The lists of the curses and blessings serve to explain what happened to Israel in their later history as the people were devastated as a result of their infidelity to the laws given through Moses.

The present essay examines the content of the blessings and curses in the relevant sections of chapter 28 and their underlying reasons and wider theological import. The blessings are pronounced in 28:1-14 while the curses are pronounced in 28:15-68. The emphasis in the present discussion is on 28:1-46, with the blessings in vv. 1-14 and the curses in vv. 15-46. Interestingly, the curses far outnumber the blessings. How does one explain this? This raises the question of when the text was written and the situations that provoked its writing. Most likely, it was

² See the publication: B. Ukwuegbu, M. J. Obiorah, A. Ewherido, J. Mamman (eds), *Blessings and Curses in the Bible* (Acts of CABAN 11; Port Harcourt: CABAN Publication, 2019).

³ The present essay actually started life as one of the papers presented at the said CABAN Conference in 2018 but could not be made available for publication in the final publication.

written in a period of crisis when Israel found itself to be living under a curse. From this perspective, one can better understand the text.

2. Definition of Terms: Blessing and Curse

Blessing

The term blessing generally refers to the bestowal of the power to succeed. Its content varies in each context. The Hebrew term usually used for blessing is connected with the root *brk* together with its nominal form *beraka* occurs about 398 times in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, most of which are found in the Pentateuch and the Psalms.⁴ It usually refers to the power to succeed. It is said to have the basic sense of “benevolent power, health-creating power”.⁵ Thus, to be blessed (*bārûk*) basically means to experience health-creating power or to be endowed with health-creating power.⁶ The blessings in the Old Testament are mainly presented as rewards for heeding the voice of the LORD and keeping the commandments and covenantal requirements.

Curse

A curse is usually the invocation of evil or misfortune upon another. It can be directed to a person, place or thing. The words mostly used in the OT are *'arar*, *'alal* and *qillel*. Some of these verbs can have diverse meanings in contexts, but they are all employed in the pronouncement of curses. The more frequent terminology *'rr* which occurs frequently in the passive form *'arûr* meaning to be cursed, accursed. It is used in opposition to *bārûk* (blessed).⁷ The accursed person is seen as “one stricken by misfortune and afflicted, whose existence is disastrous and whose presence brings misfortune.”⁸ Curses are of different types, and the ancient and traditional belief is that they are usually very efficacious.

⁴ See C. A. Keller, “*brk* to bless,” *TLOT* 1, 267-268; see also J. McKeown, “Blessings and Curses,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker; Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003) 83.

⁵ Keller, *TLOT* 1, 268.

⁶ Keller, *TLOT* 1, 268.

⁷ See C. A. Keller, “*'rr* to curse,” *TLOT* 1, 179-182.

⁸ Keller, *TLOT* 1, 180.

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One may ask: What conditions can make a curse effective? Can a curse fall on somebody who is innocent? It is widely believed that a curse's effectiveness depends very much on who pronounces it and on whom it is pronounced.⁹ Robert P. Gordon puts it thus: "For a curse to be effective it had to have divine authority and to be properly directed. OT is clear as to the second point: An undeserved curse will not alight upon its intended victim [Prov 26:2], and an unwarranted curse may recoil upon its originator [Ps 109:17-20]."¹⁰

3. The Text of Deuteronomy 28

The text of Deuteronomy 28 concludes the series of curses and blessings started in chapter 27, which is within the third speech of Moses, according to the structure of Deuteronomy. The book is structured into four speeches of Moses: 1:6–4:40; 5:1–26:19; 27:1–28:68; 29:1–30:20 with introductory and concluding sections in 1:1-5 and 31:1–34:12 respectively. All these speeches are aimed at letting the people of Israel gain the blessings that are linked to the observance of the laws and commandments and warning them of the dire consequences of transgressing the rules. The curses in Chapter 27 are presented as calamities that will follow those who will break the covenant made at Moab which will be periodically renewed at Shechem. Moshe Weinfeld argues that the text of Deuteronomy 27 preserved a very old tradition of the establishment of the nation at Shechem connected with the house of Joseph.¹¹ The further list of curses and blessings in Chapter 28 are added later to reinforce the list in Chapter 27. According to Weinfeld, Deut 27 and 28 combine two different traditions: 27:1-26; 28:3-6,16-19 constitute an ancient Shechemite tradition of the premonarchic period with much reworking by the Deuteronomic author, while 28:7-14,20-68 can be traced to the neo-Assyrian period.¹² While only curses are listed in Chapter 27, one finds lists of both blessings and curses in Chapter 28. Scholars have often pointed out the resemblance of these curses to the

⁹ See R. P. Gordon, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis (NIDOTTE)*, Vol 1 (ed. W. A. Van Gemeren; Grand Rapids 1997) 525

¹⁰ R. P. Gordon, "Curse, Malediction," *NIDOTTE* 4, 493

¹¹ M. Weinfeld, "Deuteronomy, Book of," *ABD* 2, 171.

¹² Weinfeld, "Deuteronomy," 173.

list of threats and curses in the vassal treaties of the ancient Near East.¹³ The probability is that the authors of Deuteronomy depended to a certain extent on the ancient Near Eastern texts. The nature of the list of blessings and curses in Chapter 28 makes it appear to be of late origin. Roland E. Clements buttresses the argument thus:

It seems highly probable that the addition of the blessings and curses in this chapter was made at a relatively later stage in the composition of the book. They do not fit the nature and content of the laws that have occupied the central part of the book since these laws prescribe their own punishments and penalties where necessary and do not need additional reinforcement by a further series of punitive threats. It is primarily the setting of the law code within the larger context of a review of Israel's history and its experience as a nation that has occasioned the inclusion of these curses.¹⁴

Blessings in Deuteronomy 28:1-14

The blessings in 28:1-14 are really overwhelming, and the text may be structured as follows:

- vv. 1-2: Reasons for the blessings
- vv. 3-5: Blessings of towns, family and Agriculture
- v. 6: Blessing of every action
- v. 7: Blessing of victory against enemies
- v. 8: Blessing of work and land
- vv. 9-14: Summary of the Blessings and their Reasons

Analysis of the Text

vv. 1-2: Reasons for the blessings

The primary word in Deut 28:1-2 is "obey" (*shema* ' *b^ekôl*), which literally means to hearken to the voice. Obeying is not just hearing (*shema* ') but being committed to what is heard. If the people obey YHWH and His commands, all the good things will be theirs. Israel's

¹³ See R. E. Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 2 (ed. L. E. Keck et al.; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 500.

¹⁴ Clements, "The Book of Deuteronomy," 500.

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success in life is anchored on its obedience to the law. It is the key to all blessings. This is already stressed in 26:19 and reinforced here. The high point is that the keeping of the commandments will make Israel to be raised high by all the nations. In other words, it is righteousness that will exalt Israel (cf. Prov 14:34), and righteousness is conventionally understood as obedience to the law.

vv. 3-5: Blessings of towns, family and Agriculture

The principal word in this section is form “blessed”, which is the rendering of the Hebrew Qal passive participle *bārūk*, occurring 4 times in vv. 3-5. As already seen, expresses the power to succeed, which is a health creating power. This health or wellbeing is realized in diverse forms. In the present text, blessing refers to nine forms of good fortune or success: success in the city, in the field, fruit of the womb, fruit of the ground, fruit of cattle, offspring of herd, fertility of flock, basket and kneading bowl. The basic human needs are covered within the areas of social life and agricultural life. In v. 3, the blessing is in the city and in the field. This means both in the inhabited sphere and in the farms. These two blessings are further specified in vv. 4-5 with regards to family increase and agricultural production through crops and livestock: “blessed the offspring of your body, the yield of your soil, the yield of your livestock, the young of your cattle and the increase of your flocks; blessed your basket and your kneading trough” (28:4-5).

vv. 6-7: Blessing of Success and victory against enemies

In vv. 6-7, the blessing is for good fortune in battle. The phrase “going out and coming in” in v. 6 refers to military expeditions.¹⁵ This is clarified in v. 7: “The enemies who attack you, YHWH will defeat before your eyes; they will advance on you from one direction and flee from you in seven.” Israel lived in a very hostile environment and largely survived through periodical battles with neighbouring states. The ancient belief was that the local gods were also involved in the battles. So victory in battle was a special divine blessing.

¹⁵ R. D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy. A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) 329.

vv. 8-14: Summary of the Blessings and their Reasons

All these blessings are summarized in vv. 8-11 as abundance in prosperity, offspring of the body, offspring of beast and the produce of the ground together with success in all other works. Particularly significant are the blessings summarized in vv. 11-14:

The LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your beast and in the produce of your ground, in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you. The LORD will open for you His good storehouse, the heavens, to give rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hand; and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. The LORD will make you the head and not the tail, and you only will be above, and you will not be underneath, if you listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, which I charge you today, to observe them carefully.

These blessings are ever present to all who fear the LORD and walk in his ways. This is what Scripture regards as righteousness. The centrality of the ethic of righteousness is well expressed in Proverbs when the book affirms that righteousness exalts a nation while the contrary, which is sin, is the disgrace of any people (Prov 14:34). Israel's historical misfortunes are linked to the abuse of the ethics of righteousness on all levels. The same is true for every nation. A nation remains under blessing as long as it works in righteousness, which means working in accordance with sound ethical and religious norms.

Curses in Deuteronomy 28

The curses in 28:15-19 correspond to the contents of the blessings in vv. 1-7. They function as reversals of the expected blessings. These reversals can be seen in varying degrees in the rest of the curses in vv. 20-68. In vv. 20-24, various forms of diseases and natural disasters will be the lot of the land because of the infidelity to the laws. In vv. 25-35, the situation is that of war that will afflict the inhabitants of the land. In vv. 36-37, the main calamity is exile to another land. In vv. 38-48, the land will not produce the expected fruit. So it will be a disaster of fruitless labour. The consequence is hunger, thirst, nakedness and utter poverty. The curses are summed up in vv. 49-68 with the themes of invasion and

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siege (vv. 49-57), plagues (vv. 58-62) and exilic catastrophe (vv. 63-68). The language of the curses is devastating, and sometimes one wonders whether they actually happened as threatened. But, as can be seen from both the biblical text and allied historical sources, these curses actually reflect the miserable state of Israel during the exile. It was the darkest moment in the people's history and the experience motivated the writing of many parts of the biblical literature.

Nature of the Curses

Curses are very abundant in both Deuteronomy 27 and 28, and these are of two types. The first has to do with misfortunes that will befall individuals who commit ethical offenses while the second type of curses are woes that will affect the whole Israelite nation in the event of their collective transgression of the covenant laws. The first curses are twelve in number, as listed in Deut 27:15-26: 1. Curse on the one who gives in to idolatry; 2. Curse on the one who dishonours father or mother; 3. Curse on the one who moves a neighbour's landmarks; 4. Curse on the one who misleads a blind person; 5. Curse on the one who denies justice to an alien, orphan or widow; 6. Curse on the one who lies with his father's wife; 7. Curse on the one who lies with any animal; 8. Curse on the one who lies with his own sister; 9. Curse on the one who lies with his mother-in-law; 10. Curse on the one who strikes a neighbor in secret; 11. Curse on the one who takes a bribe to strike down the innocent; 12. Curse on the one who refuses to keep the words of the Mosaic law.

All the offences in the first group may be seen as social and moral taboos. The curses do not always say what the particular misfortune will be in each case. The terrible thing is that one is under a curse. The significant thing is that one does not need to be caught in the act to incur the curse. The curses automatically affect the culprit even when the act remains secret. This is akin to what Canon law today calls *latae sententiae*. The very act or misdemeanor itself imposes the curse. That is why unexplained misfortunes in the ancient times were often suspected as consequences of a curse emanating from one old transgression or the other. Many people still hold such beliefs today. The point is that evil follows the evil doer. There is, however, always the room for repentance and divine forgiveness and healing.

The second type of curses is linked to idolatry and transgression of the covenant laws. The curses in this category are terrible ones for the whole nation. These involve: terrible sickness and defeat by the enemy, unproductive labour, loss of the land, exile into enemy territory and miserable death. The text of Deut 28:20-22 articulates some of these terrible curses:

The LORD will send upon you curses, confusion, and rebuke, in all you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and until you perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken Me. The LORD will make the pestilence cling to you until He has consumed you from the land where you are entering to possess it. The LORD will smite you with consumption and with fever and with inflammation and with fiery heat and with the sword and with blight and with mildew, and they will pursue you until you perish.

4. Theological Functions of the Curses and Blessings

The curses and blessings raise many theological questions that can agitate the mind of the reader of the text. One may ask, What theological functions can be attributed to these curses and blessings in the text? Does God take pleasure in cursing His people? How long do the curses last? Can the curses be broken under some conditions? These curses function as theological justifications and explanations of the later catastrophic exilic experiences of the two sister states of Israel and Judah. Deuteronomy is based on the theology of history that God directs all affairs and, consequently, progress and misfortune are linked to the observance of the divine laws. Since the people of Israel refused to serve the Lord who brought them out from Egypt and gave them the land, they are forced to serve other masters in a foreign land. This is retributive justice. The curses are anchored on this idea of retributive justice. The idea is that people suffer because of the evil they do. Modern theology and philosophy, however, have more critical approaches to this ancient worldview. There are many complex cases that the old theology of history may not explain adequately. It is a fact that many good people suffer for no fault of theirs. But one thing is clear: God directs the affairs of history in many mysterious ways.

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The consoling thing is that repentance and grace enter the picture to change everything. Even when one is under a curse, one's repentance can change the course of history. God is always a God of mercy and compassion. He forgives and turns away wrath when a wicked person turns away from evil. Another theme is that of grace. This is unmerited favour from God. Sometimes, God in his magnanimity cancels the punishment and the curse whether the people involved are repentant or not. This is seen in the mystery of salvation.

The fear of being under a curse was usually strong among many in Israel in periods of national crisis, and it motivated the writers of Deuteronomy 28 to articulate their ideas. This fear is found in a similar fashion in every age and culture. Many Africans today are crippled by the fear of being under a curse. Many modern-day pastors and evangelists spend much effort convincing people that they are under ancestral curses and consequently need deliverance from such curses. Many prayer sessions are, consequently, devoted to the breaking of ancestral curses. One thing these religious experts forget is the power of God's blessing in the life of the believer. Teresa Okure addresses this issue but sees faith in God's blessing as the proper antidote to the fear of curses. Basing herself on the text of Eph 3:1-13 and 6:11-20, she argues: "For Paul, the individuals in Christ are to break the curses and overcome the demonic powers. They do this, not by commanding and ordering these powers, but by making every effort to live and grow in the new life God has freely given to them, that is, by living according to the Christ they have received [3:1-13]."¹⁶ The emphasis on God's blessing is very important. It is always good to underline the fact that blessings are more powerful than curses.

The question of the duration of divine curses may be answered in the light of this text from Psalm 30: "For his anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning" (v. 5). The idea of curses is linked to God's anger or wrath. The Psalmist makes it clear that His anger is for a moment, but favour is for a lifetime. A point to glean from this is that God's grace,

¹⁶ T. Okure, "Faith in God's Blessing as Antidote to Fear of Curses: A Perspective from Ephesians 1-2" in *Blessings and Curses in the Bible*, Acts of CABAN 11 (eds. B. Ukwuegbu *et al*) 209.

which is represented here as his favour or goodwill (*rāsôn*), overshadows his anger.

Focused studies on the word show that the term “anger” with God as subject occurs 518 times in the Old Testament, apart from other texts where divine wrath or anger is implied.¹⁷ It is clear, then, that the idea of God getting angry is affirmed in many biblical texts, but its real meaning is rather problematic. A theological understanding of God as goodness itself makes the idea of God’s anger or God’s wrath a theological problem. It is a fact that many people live with the burden that they are literally victims of God’s anger or divine wrath. The belief is both biblical and contemporary. In Ps 78:31, it is clearly stated: “The anger of God rose against them and killed some of their stoutest ones, and subdued the choice men of Israel.” Many forms of suffering are interpreted as consequences of God’s anger. In many of such circumstances, the belief is that God is placated either through sacrifice or related means. Many penitential prayers and lament hymns are pleas to God to sheathe the sword of his anger. For instance, the psalmist cries out in Ps 6:1: “O Lord, do not rebuke me in Your anger, nor chasten me in Your wrath.” In the face of the national catastrophe of exile, the psalmist captures the plaintive cry of the whole community with these words of Ps 74:1: “O God, why have You rejected us forever? Why does Your anger smoke against the sheep of Your pasture?” Despite all these, many Old Testament biblical texts affirm that God is slow to anger and abounding in mercy and loving-kindness (Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; Nah 1:3). But if God’s mercy is so abundant and his love without end, as the Scriptures unanimously affirm, how does one explain the anger?

This problem has continued to be discussed by scholars from the early Church theologians to the present times. Most interpreters see the attribution of the emotion of anger to God as anthropopathism, that is, the use of what is specifically human emotion or pathos to describe God. The Old Testament writers are said to have presented God in a way that makes him very much involved in human affairs different from the

¹⁷ See Bruce Baloian, “Anger,” *NIDOTTE* 4, 380.

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philosophical presuppositions caused by later Greek philosophy.¹⁸ In spite of this explanation, it remains unresolved whether anger can be attributed to God ontologically, that is, as his essential attribute. However, one resolves it, the point of Psalm 30:5 is that in the final analysis the one who trusts in God experiences a reversal of fortune from divine anger to superabundant divine favour both quantitatively and qualitatively.

5. Conclusion

The text of Deuteronomy 28, no doubt, contains the biggest assemblage of blessings and curses in the Bible. The present discussion has been devoted to the examination of the content of the blessings and curses. The blessings are rewards for obedience to the laws while the curses are punishments for transgression. The peculiarity in the curses is that they are presented as reversals of the expected blessings and also made to correspond to the nature of the transgressions. While the curses are strongly worded, they do not have the final say in God's relationship with His people. Even in the face of the greatest curses God has a way of intervening and rescuing His people from total damnation. In the African context, the themes of blessings and curses loom large as people often consider themselves as under a blessing or under a curse. This fear conditions the attitude of many families to social challenges. The surprising thing is that many Christians despite their Christian faith still believe in such curses. The present essay sees a better understanding of God's mercy and greater commitment to Him as adequate approaches to such situations.

¹⁸ See Gary A. Herion, "Wrath of God," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 6 (ed. D. N. Freedman; New York: Doubleday, 1992) 989-996.