

## Blessings and Curses

Some Background from Ancient Near Eastern Covenants

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When we read the Scriptures, it is immediately clear that we are reading ancient literature. We are taken into a world of past millennia where language and culture differed dramatically from our own. And if we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that often the greatest difficulty in understanding the biblical text is this chasm of time: we are very far removed from the world in which the sacred text took shape. I don't mean to suggest that the words of the Bible are somehow without relevance to us—far from it! Because what distinguishes the Bible from other ancient literature is the fact that it is invested with the very breath of God. The Spirit brings the words and their meaning alive to the one who entrusts himself by faith to the Divine Author of the Scriptures.

But still, the Bible is written in ancient themes and concepts. That is why we must work hard to understand the historical setting into which the Scriptures were born. This is all the more true for a book like Devarim (Deuteronomy). For it has been recognized as cast in the legal form of a covenant—a covenant patterned after the Ancient Near Eastern treaties between a Great King (called a Suzerain) and his Vassal. Understanding the literary form in which Deuteronomy is written will help us understand its overall message. Conversely, to neglect the form in which it is written will inevitably detract from grasping its divinely intended meaning. So come with me, just for a moment, back into the world of the Ancient Near East, as we discover the Suzerain-Vassal treaty and see how it was used by God Himself to reveal His covenant with Israel.

In the civilizations of the Ancient Near East, it was common for nations to expand their territories through conquest. A Great King was one who had command of a well equipped and trained army, able to conquer smaller, weaker nations, and annex their lands to his. When the Great King would conquer a neighboring nation, he would most often enthrone a lesser King, called a Vassal, over the conquered region. The Vassal was obligated to rule in the absence of the Great King, and to do so in such a way as to give glory and honor to the Great King. The Vassal was to be, in every way, a representative of the Great King. It was in light of this governing relationship that the Great King would enact a covenant with the Vassal that would insure his faithfulness. This is because it was always possible that the Vassal might consider his own strength sufficient to eventually rebel against the Great King, and attempt to establish his own, sovereign rule. The covenant, or treaty, between the Great King and his Vassal, was therefore written in language that would remind the Vassal of his obligation to the Great King, and even instill fear in him if ever he should entertain the idea of rebellion.

These Suzerain-Vassal treaties usually followed a set literary form (though the order of the various sections was sometimes varied). They began with the identification of the Great King (called the "Preamble") followed by a recap of his previous relationship to the Vassal (the Historical Prologue). Next would come stipulations, which often included the duties required of the Vassal, including allegiance to the Suzerain, payment of taxes or tribute, the requirement to join as an ally in times of war, and the return of criminals who might seek safe haven in his jurisdiction. Following the stipulations was an oath ceremony in which the Vassal would take a solemn oath to uphold the covenant, and witnesses to the oath were named. Then were listed blessings and curses: blessings if the Vassal discharged his duties faithfully, and curses if he did not. It was here that a true incentive existed for the Vassal to remain faithful, for the blessings afforded by the Great King would maintain the Vassal's rule and power, but the curses envisioned his sure demise in the worst possible scenarios. Finally, the treaty would conclude with the requirement for the Vassal to deposit a copy of the treaty in the public

archives.

A good number of written examples of the Suzerain-Vassal treaty have been discovered by archaeologists, witnessing to the fact that the literary form of the treaties was more or less standard in the Ancient Near East, and that such arrangements between a Great King and his Vassals were common. Many of these have been found in the remains of the Hittite nation.

It is therefore significant that each of these elements of the Suzerain-Vassal treaty are found in the text and structure of Devarim. Note this general outline of the book:

Preamble: 1:1–5 (identifying the Great King)

Historical Prologue: 1:6–4:43 (relationship between the Great King and his Vassal)

Stipulations: 4:44–26:19 (specific requirements for the Vassal)

Ratification/Oath: 27:1–26 (ceremony to enact the covenant)

Blessings and Curses (with some additional stipulations): 28:1–30:20 (consequences for obedience or rebellion)

Deposition of the Covenant: 31:1–29 (the legally binding nature of the covenant)

The fact that Devarim is given to Moses in the form of a Suzerain-Vassal treaty speaks volumes as to its meaning and interpretation. God is the Great King, and Israel is His Vassal. Thus, Israel is to govern and rule upon the earth as His representative, constantly upholding His glory and ultimate rule. It is in this context that Israel is to be a “light to the nations.” When the nations see Israel, they are to recognize that God is the Great King, and marvel at His greatness. Moreover, as Israel discharges her allotted authority, she will receive the blessings promised by the Suzerain.

However, if we look more closely at the manner in which the curses are listed, we discover that they are never considered final or irrevocable on a national scale. If Israel is disobedient to the covenant, and if she rebels against the Great King, she will feel the sting of the curses. However, if she repents of her sin and returns in faithfulness to the Lord, she will be restored in the covenant and the blessings will be reinstated (Deuteronomy 30:1–5). Thus, in the final analysis, repentance and obedience (or lack thereof) are the bedrock issues that determine the administration of the covenant curses or blessings.

The fact that Israel’s relationship to her God is cast in a covenant or treaty relationship explains the sending of the prophets to Israel. In the Ancient Near East, it was common for a Great King to send officials to the lands of his Vassals to assess their compliance with the covenant. In the same way, God sends His prophets to Israel to remind her of the covenant obligations, and to rebuke her for her rebellion. Note, for example, the words of Hosea:

Listen to the word of the LORD, O sons of Israel, for the LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land, because there is no faithfulness or kindness or knowledge of God in the land. (Hosea 4:1)

Hosea, speaking the word of the Lord, and acting as the Great King’s ambassador, brings the legal case against Israel: she has been unfaithful to the covenant. The three terms used, “faithfulness” (אֱמֶת, *emet*), “kindness” (רַחֲמִים, *chesed*) and “knowledge” (דַּעַת, *da‘at*) are all covenant terms, signifying loyalty and faithfulness of a Vassal to the Great King. When the prophet proclaims that there is no “knowledge of God in the land,” he is not suggesting that Israel is unaware of God’s existence, or of her relationship with Him as a covenant partner. Rather, in covenant contexts (such as this), “knowledge” should be understood as a term of relationship (Hosea 2:20). To say that there is no knowledge of God in the Land means that there is no intimate, covenant relationship displayed by the nation of Israel. She has rather

“known” other gods (cf Hosea 13:4). Thus, in the covenant language of the Prophets, to “know” God is to be loyal to Him and to obey His commandments. Conversely, to “not know God” is to be disloyal to Him and to disregard His commandments. Note this example, again from Hosea:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being My priest. Since you have forgotten the Torah of your God, I also will forget your children.  
(Hosea 4:6)

Notice how the poetic parallelism helps us identify the meaning and use of the words “knowledge” and “forgotten”:

Because you have rejected knowledge                      I also rejected you from being My priest  
Since you have forgotten the Torah of God            I also will forget your children.

To “reject knowledge” is further amplified by the parallel phrase “forgotten the Torah of God.” In a positive sense, to “know” God means to “keep His covenant.” To “reject knowledge” is to despise His covenant—to disobey His Torah. Thus, in a covenant sense “to know God” means to remain faithful to Him, whereas “to forget the Torah of God” means to disregard the covenant and act in rebellion against God.

The whole matter of blessings and curses may seem foreign to the thinking of many modern-day believers. Actually, I should say that curses may seem foreign—everyone is more than ready for blessings! In an era where God is thought of as a benevolent grandfather intent on spoiling His grandchildren, it hardly seems appropriate to believe that He would send curses to those He calls His family. In fact, since the emergence of the Christian Church in the 2nd and 3rd Centuries CE, there have always been those who considered the God of the “Old Testament” to be harsh and unloving, in contrast with the God Yeshua revealed, Who is loving and merciful. An early heretic by the name of Marcion felt this so strongly that he actually suggested cutting the bible down to include only a reworked Gospel of Luke (in which all references to the God of the “Old Testament” were expunged) and ten of Paul’s epistles. He hoped this would forever erase the harsh God of Israel, and replace Him with the benevolent God of forgiveness and mercy.

But such a perspective misses the whole point of the covenant curses in the first place: they were given to warn Israel away from rebellion, and as an incentive to return in repentance if she did disobey. In other words, the curses were not designed as an unloving or otherwise uncaring condemnation, but as a means of bringing back a wayward Vassal. The words of Yeshua express this:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.  
(Matthew 23:37)

But why would Israel be unwilling to return, to seek repentance, and be restored to her covenant blessings? The answer lies in the deception of sin, and the need for a new heart. This is demonstrated in Israel’s history, and her almost constant desire to rely upon foreign powers rather than upon God. Against the warning of the prophets, Israel regularly allied herself with foreign nations whom she thought would protect her. Such alliances often required acceptance of foreign gods as well: God’s Vassal acted unfaithfully and entered into covenants with other Kings. Yet in the moment, Israel thought she would be saved by her foreign alliances. She was deceived into thinking that the power of a foreign

nation was more sure than the promise of her God.

The prophet Ezekiel, speaking to God's chosen people at a time when they were about to experience the coming curses of the covenant for their unfaithfulness, looks ahead to a time when God would give the nation a new heart:

“And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God. (Ezekiel 11:19–20)

The heart of stone is stubborn, unable to be moved to love God in covenant fidelity. In other words, the heart of stone is unable to be circumcised. Conversely, the heart of flesh is pliable, a heart circumcised for faithfulness. The new heart is able to repent, and to return in obedience. But this can only come about by a sovereign act of God. Left to herself, Israel is without hope.

This reality demonstrates the primary purpose for the blessings and curses: they indicate God's assessment of His covenant partner. When Israel labored under the curses of the covenant, she was constantly reminded that she had acted in disobedience. Thus, the curses were the Great King's call for her to return—to repent. “Whom the Father loves, He reproveth” (Proverbs 3:12, cf. Hebrews 12:5–6). When, however, the blessings of the covenant were evident, this was a call for Israel to praise her God, by Whose covenant faithfulness the blessings were given.

In general terms, this is the message of the prophets to Israel. When one studies the history of Israel, and the message of the prophets who were sent to her, one is struck by the fact that Israel's “troubles” are all connected to the covenant curses. She is subdued by her enemies, overcome with disease and plague, impoverished, and bewildered. She experiences draught and famine, her families are torn apart, her children taken from her, and she is exiled from the Land, subdued in the land of her enemies. The words of the prophets constantly utilize the very terms found in Deuteronomy 28 when they remind Israel that her troubles are the result of her covenant unfaithfulness. Conversely, the prophets hold out to Israel the promise of covenant blessings if she would repent of her disobedience and return in faithfulness to her God.

So far I have given a brief overview of the covenant curses and blessings as they pertain to the nation of Israel as a whole. But what application is there for the curses and blessings to the individual? Are the covenant curses and blessings only national in scope, or do they also obtain at the personal level? When we investigate this question, an interesting phenomenon emerges. Whereas on a national level, Israel will never be entirely “cut off” from the covenant, individuals within Israel may indeed be “cut off” and entirely removed from covenant relationship with the Great King.<sup>1</sup> The offenses for which an individual is cut off from his people generally revolve around a disregard for the *moedim* (appointed times or festivals including the weekly Sabbath), a willful defilement of the Tabernacle or Temple, participation in idolatry, sexual sins, and high-handed rebellion against God. Thus, on an individual level, the curses and blessings form the distinguishing mark between those who are true covenant members and those who are not. As Paul wrote: “They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel” (Romans 9:6). Those who are truly members of the covenant will demonstrate their covenant position by their obedience to God and repentance for disobedience (Romans 2:13). Whereas the covenant relationship between God and the nation of Israel is secure and eternal, based as it is upon the faithfulness of God alone, one's individual participation within this eternal covenant is dependent upon

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1. Genesis 17:14; Exodus 12:15,19; 30:33,38; 31:14; Leviticus 7:20ff; 17:4ff; 18:29; 19:8; 20:5,17; 22:3; 23:29; Numbers 9:13; 15:30; 19:13.

one's own faith in God, a faith that always issues in obedience or faithfulness.

Yet surely the individual has the same “heart problem” as the nation of Israel—a heart of stone must be taken out, and a heart of flesh put in its place. This is the sovereign and gracious act of God toward His chosen ones. In calling them to faith, He brings about a new birth in which the “old man” is crucified, and the “new man” recreated after the image of Messiah, Who is the example *par excellence* of covenant faithfulness. It was this distinction between the covenant on a national versus individual level that Nicodemus had overlooked (John 3). He thought that since he participated in the national covenant of Israel, he was in right-standing with God. Yeshua, however, presses the need for covenant faithfulness at the individual level, something that required a new birth, brought about by the work of the Spirit. “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

But what individual is there who has not entered into those sins which bring the penalty of being “cut off?” In light of the covenant curses, who could ever hope to find a secure place in the covenant? It is to this issue that Paul addresses himself in Galatians 3:10–14:

10 For as many as are of the works of the Torah are under a curse; for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE TORAH, TO PERFORM THEM.” 11 Now that no one is justified by the Torah before God is evident; for, “THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.” 12 However, the Torah is not of faith; on the contrary, “HE WHO PRACTICES THEM SHALL LIVE BY THEM.” 13 Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the Torah, having become a curse for us—for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE”— 14 in order that in Messiah Yeshua the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.

Paul's point is clear: if only those who have never transgressed the Torah's commandments are received as covenant members, then surely no one would be received. Everyone has acted in willful rebellion against God, and thus everyone deserves the covenant curses of being cut off. But the Tanach itself teaches that right-standing before God is not obtained through obedience to the Torah, but through faith (Habakkuk 2:4). Thus, the Torah does not produce faith, on the contrary, the one who practices Torah demonstrates that he already has faith (Leviticus 18:5). It is not obedience to Torah that can overcome the penalty of the curses, but rather the curses of the Torah were taken from us and placed upon Yeshua as our substitute. With insightful midrashic commentary, Paul notes that Deuteronomy 21:23 (“for he who is hanged is cursed of God”) prescribes hanging as a clear indication that the covenant curses have befallen a person. Since Yeshua was put to death by being hung on a tree,<sup>2</sup> it is clear that He was cursed of God on behalf of those for whom He died. In this way He took the curses of the Torah which rightfully belonged to those He would save. And so the blessings come to us rather than the curses, for we are “in Messiah Yeshua” Who acted as our substitute, taking the curses of the Torah upon Himself and giving us the blessings instead. “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Messiah Yeshua” (Romans 8:1).

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2. “Hung on a tree” means “hung on a cross. Remember that the Hebrew word עץ, *'etz*, can mean “tree” as well as “something made of wood.” Thus the cross upon which Yeshua was crucified was commonly referred to as a “tree,” i.e., that which was made from wood of a tree.