

CHARLES UNIVERSITY IN PRAGUE  
PROTESTANT THEOLOGICAL FACULTY

Dissertation

**Rhetoric and Hermeneutics of  
Blessing and Curse in the Pentateuch**

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## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is the product of my own efforts, that it was composed by me with the use of my own terminology and phraseology. The academic opinions can be found in the footnotes.

I agree that the work would have been published for the purposes of research and private study.

Prague February 6, 2015

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## **Abstract**

Blessings and curses are complex notions suggesting the close relationship between verbal activity and reality.

The speeches on blessings and curses in the Pentateuch are uttered by God or human beings on different occasions. The study of the rhetoric of these speeches reveals that the blessings and curses are caused by a number of factors, and they are supposed to be fulfilled in some way or other. The speeches of blessings and curses in extra-biblical texts provide us with a general idea of how people in ancient times understood blessings and curses and used them to their advantage. The study of blessings and curses as cross-cultural and religious phenomena shows that people perceived blessings and curses as powerful levers for affecting people on different occasions.

The study of blessings and curses – i.e., on what grounds does someone (who is it?) say something (what is it?) to somebody (who is it?), causing something (what is it and when is it going to materialize?), and more importantly: *how* does he or she say it – enables us to derive a special *grammar* of curses and blessings, which contributes to a better understanding of the mechanism of blessings and curses in the Pentateuch and in extra-biblical sources.

In the Pentateuch blessings and curses appear as an engagement of divine will and presuppose objective reality. They represent two alternatives or two modes of existence, as rhetorically underlined in Deut 28. The blessings and curses come directly from God, and in some cases they are administered by human figures, endowed with divine power. In extra-biblical sources blessings and curses appear primarily as human wishes of well-being or ill-being, and some even look like magical incantations. The deities function as *executors* of blessings and curses invoked by human figures.

The particular stylistics of blessing and curse in both materials (biblical/extra-biblical) reflect a certain kind of theology and anthropology.

**The key words:** blessing, curse, promise, threat, sanction.

## Anotace

Požehnání a kletby představují komplexní fenomény, jež předpokládají blízký vztah mezi jazykovou aktivitou a skutečností.

Žehnající a proklínající řeči, jež se nacházejí v Pentateuchu, jsou prosloveny Bohem nebo lidmi při různých příležitostech. Analýza rétoriky těchto řečí ukazuje, že požehnání a kletby závisejí na několika faktorech a předpokládá se, že dojdou nějakého naplnění. Na základě požehnání a kleteb obsažených v nebiblických textech si můžeme utvořit obecnou představu o tom, jak starověcí lidé chápali požehnání a kletby a jak se je snažili používat ve svůj prospěch. Studium požehnání a kleteb jako náboženských jevů existujících v rozmanitých kulturách ukazuje, že tyto řečové akty byly chápány jako účinné prostředky umožňující různým způsobem ovlivnit lidský život.

Analýza různých aspektů požehnání a kleteb, tj. z jakého důvodu někdo (kdo?) říká něco (co?) někomu (komu?), aby tak něco způsobil (co a kdy se to uskuteční?), a také *jak* to daná osoba říká, umožňuje odvodit specifickou *gramatiku* požehnání a kleteb, která přispívá k lepšímu pochopení mechanismů a funkce požehnání a kleteb v Pentateuchu i nebiblických textech.

V Pentateuchu se požehnání a kletby objevují jako závazky Boží vůle a předpokládají objektivní realitu. Požehnání a prokletí představují dvě základní alternativy nebo dva mody existence, jak rétoricky podtrhuje Dt 28. Požehnání a kletby pocházejí přímo od Boha, ale v některých případech jsou spravovány lidmi, jimž je udělena Boží moc. V nebiblických pramenech mají požehnání a kletby především podobu lidských přání dobrého nebo špatného prospívání, v některých případech mají dokonce blízko k magickým zařikáváním. Božstva zde fungují jako *vykonavatelé* požehnání a kleteb vyhlášených lidmi.

Specifické stylistické rysy požehnání a kleteb v obou typech materiálů (biblickém i nebiblickém) odrážejí určitou teologii a antropologii.

**Klíčová slova:** požehnání, kletba, zaslíbení, hrozba, sankce.

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## Abbreviations

<i>AM</i>	<i>Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologische Instituts</i>
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANE	Ancient Near East
<i>ANET</i>	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts</i> . Ed. J. B. Pritchard. 3d ed. Princeton, 1969
b	blessing/blessings
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
<i>BBR</i>	<i>Bulletin for Biblical Research</i>
<i>BHS</i>	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> . Ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph. Stuttgart, 1983
<i>Bib. Or.</i>	<i>Bibliotheca Orientalis</i>
BM	British Museum
<i>BN</i>	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
c	curse/curses
<i>CAD</i>	<i>Chicago Assyrian Dictionary</i> . Ed. Martha T. Roth, Ignace J. Gelb and others. 21 vols. Chicago, 1956-2011
CC	Continental Commentaries

<i>COS</i>	<i>The Context of Scripture</i> . Ed. W. W. Hallo - K. L. Jr. Younger. Leiden - New York, 1997-2002
<i>DT</i>	<i>Defixionum Tabellae</i>
<i>DTA</i>	Defixionum Tabellae with Appendix
<i>FAT</i>	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
<i>GRBS</i>	<i>Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies</i>
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
<i>HUGA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>IBC</i>	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
<i>JAH</i>	<i>Journal of African History</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
<i>JPSTC</i>	Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSOTSup</i>	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
<i>KAI</i>	<i>Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften</i>
<i>KJV</i>	King James Version
<i>LA</i>	<i>Liber Annuus</i>

LXX	Septuagint
LXE	LXX English Translation
MT	Masoretic text
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OLA	Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta
OTL	Old Testament Library
<i>OTS</i>	<i>Oudtestamentische Studien</i>
OTT	Old Testament Theology
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
REB	Revised English Bible
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SCS	Septuagint Commentary Series
<i>SEL</i>	<i>Studi epigrafici e linguistic</i>

SGD	Survey of Greek Defixiones
<i>SHT</i>	<i>Studia Humaniora Tartuensia</i>
<i>Targ. Onq.</i>	<i>Targum Onqelos</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament.</i> Ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Transl. J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 15 vols. Grand Rapids, 1973-2006
TNK	The Jewish Bible: Torah, Neviim, Kethuvim
<i>TynB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>VTE</i>	<i>Vassal Treaties of Esarhaddon</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
<i>ZA</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Assyriologie</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

## General introduction, problematic and significance

The words of blessing and curse, being incorporated into human speech, have a tremendous impact on human life. Sometimes people don't realize the power which the spoken word brings with itself. The blessings and curses in the Pentateuch are of great importance for understanding how this power works.

Biblical concepts of blessing (ברכה) and curse (קללה) were studied in a number of works. Scholars often demonstrate their interest in the problematics of either blessings or curses in biblical texts. This is true for works of the following researchers. Herbert C. Brichto fully focused on studying texts related to the curse in the Bible.<sup>1</sup> His study of the texts on curses and terminology was a milestone and contributed to a general understanding of curses in the Hebrew Bible. Claus Westermann in his work was focused on blessing, studying the tradition of blessing in the Scripture and Church practice.<sup>2</sup> Christopher W. Mitchell, in his doctoral dissertation explored the meaning of the word *brk* in different texts of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>3</sup> A linguistic approach to blessing and curse was demonstrated in the recent works of James Aitken and Keith N. Grüneberg. Aitken focused on the semantical study of blessing and cursing in Ancient Hebrew.<sup>4</sup> Grüneberg concentrated on Gen 12,3, and his book can serve as a kind of manual to the terminology of blessing.<sup>5</sup> A study of the rhetorical pattern of Deut 28,69-30,20 was done by Timothy A. Lenchak.<sup>6</sup> William D. Barrick focused on an investigation of Lev 26, taking this text as a prophetic revelation of the concept of covenant.<sup>7</sup> Hans W. Wolff, studying Amos' oracles, discovered some affinities between the covenantal form of curses and prophetic speech.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> H. C. Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse" in the Hebrew Bible* (Philadelphia: SBL, 1963).

<sup>2</sup> C. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (OBT; trans. Keith Crim; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> C. W. Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "To Bless" in the Old Testament* (SBLDS 95; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

<sup>4</sup> J. Aitken, *Semantics of Blessing and Cursing in Ancient Hebrew* (Louvain, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> K. N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in its Narrative Context* (BZAW 332; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> T. A. Lenchak, "Choose Life!" *A Rhetorical-Critical Investigation of Deuteronomy 28,69 - 30,20* (AnBib 129; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> W. D. Barrick, *Leviticus 26: Its Relationships to Covenant Context and Concepts* (ThD Dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1981).

<sup>8</sup> H. W. Wolf, *Joel and Amos: a Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1977).

Relevance to our subject matter is demonstrated in works devoted to the comparative study of biblical material against the texts of ANE, for instance: George E. Mendenhall,<sup>9</sup> Delbert Hillers,<sup>10</sup> Dennis McCarthy,<sup>11</sup> Moshe Weinfeld,<sup>12</sup> F. Charles Fensham<sup>13</sup> and others. In particular, Mendenhall, whose study is recognized as a classic, discovered that blessings and curses in the Pentateuch have much in common with the Hittite treaties of the second millennium BCE. Weinfeld, who compared the curse material in Deut 28 and in the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon, concluded, on the basis of the correspondence of the sequence of curses in Deut 28,26-33 to the list of deities in the treaty of Esarhaddon, that Deuteronomy borrowed from the Assyrian sources of the first millennium BCE. This view was recently challenged by S. L. Allen.<sup>14</sup> Fensham, who in his study of the vassal treaties and *kudurru*-stones drew a comparison with the Hebrew prophets, discovered some common features between these kinds of texts.

Approaching the problematic of blessing and curse in the Bible, such an issue as the power of the word cannot be neglected. There is no consensus on such a notion as the power of the word. Some scholars hold to the view of so-called ‘automatic fulfillment’ of a particular blessing or curse utterance. This means that the word itself has the power to fulfill what it conveys. Sheldon H. Blank, for instance, considers the spoken word sufficient in order “to be the effective agent.”<sup>15</sup> Josef Scharbert, who is a strong defender of the magic view of the power of the curse, still warns of application of “a purely magic understanding of the curse formula” to the religion of ancient Israel.<sup>16</sup> Sigmund Mowinckel advances the principle *ex opera operato* taking a curse utterance as

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<sup>9</sup> G. E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburg: 1955).

<sup>10</sup> D. R. Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets* (*Bib. Or.* 16; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (2nd rev. ed; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1981).

<sup>12</sup> M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972; repr., Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> F. C. Fensham, “Common Trends in Curses of the Near Eastern Treaties and Kudurru-Inscriptions Compared with Maledictions of Amos and Isaiah,” *ZAW* 75 (1963): 155-175.

<sup>14</sup> S. L. Allen, “Rearranging the Curses and Gods in Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty,” Paper presented at SBL Annual Meeting 2012, Chicago, IL, November 19.

<sup>15</sup> S. H. Blank, “The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath,” *HUCA* 23 (1950–51): 73-95, here 78.

<sup>16</sup> J. Scharbert, “a-r-r,” *TDOT* 1:405-418, here 412.

possessive of destructive power.<sup>17</sup> Johannes Pedersen shifts the accent from the word as such to what he calls the *soul power*: according to his opinion, there is a mysterious link between participants, and somehow the evil substance, inherited in the curse, is transmitted to the person against whom it was uttered.<sup>18</sup>

In recent years the theory of the so-called *speech act*, advocated by Mitchell, received considerable weight. According to that approach, the word, as an act of speech, is not to be alienated from its present social and cultural context, and such factors as the proper form and the proper person are needed for an utterance to be effective. Mitchell asserts, “When the speech act is performed properly in the appropriate context, society accepts the illocutionary utterance as an accomplished act.”<sup>19</sup> In general, the proponents of this view pay attention to the form of a particular utterance, considering such factors as the authority of the announcer and receptivity of the addressee to be crucial.

There is an alternative view where the power of the word is fully ascribed to the divinity, which possesses the ultimate force to turn the spoken word into reality. Brichto, one of the proponents of the non-magical approach, maintains that the evidence for magical concepts, underlying the biblical phenomena of blessing and curse, has been grossly overvalued.<sup>20</sup> In his view, God is responsible for both fortune and misfortune, and a prayer of imprecation is addressed to the Deity.<sup>21</sup> Grüneberg states that the word of blessing, in particular, even declared by humans, was never independent of deities.<sup>22</sup>

The author’s position is that there is a reality behind blessing and curse in the Pentateuch, and ברכות and קללות in Deut 28, in particular, can be understood as *energetic working-effecting* words that shape people’s identity and destiny.

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<sup>17</sup> S. Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien, V, Segen und Fluch in Israels Kult und Psalmdichtung* (Amsterdam: P. Schippers, 1966), 74.

<sup>18</sup> J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture, I-II, trans. Mrs. Aslaug Moller* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), 441.

<sup>19</sup> Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK “To Bless” in the Old Testament*, 174.

<sup>20</sup> Brichto, *The Problem of “Curse” in the Hebrew Bible*, 215.

<sup>21</sup> Brichto, *The Problem of “Curse” in the Hebrew Bible*, 218.

<sup>22</sup> Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and Nations*, 113.

## Objectives, approach, research methods

The present research is a work aiming in three directions or stages. At the outset, it is important to study the *grammar* of blessing and curse as such.

1) The research in the first stage will focus on study of texts with a blessing/curse thematic in the Pentateuch. Several texts from Genesis, Numbers, Leviticus and Deuteronomy will be examined. The objective is to analyze the functioning of blessing and curse in different literary contexts. As each and every biblical text is examined research questions will be asked with the help of an *eightfold rubric pattern*: 1. who is the *initiator* of a blessing or curse (someone who wants the action of a blessing or curse to take place); 2. who is the *addressee* of a blessing or curse (perhaps in some cases it is reasonable to distinguish between the addressee, and the target, as an impersonal object); 3. who is the *source* (someone who provides the power for a blessing or curse to be materialized); 4. who is the *administrator* of a blessing or curse (someone who mediates a blessing or curse and without whom it would not work); 5. who or what is the *executor* of a blessing or curse (a person, a type of godhead, a type of natural phenomenon or some impersonal object); 6. what is the *condition* under which a blessing or curse takes place (ground, reason); 7. what is the *effect* of a blessing or curse, i.e., what kind of reality stands behind the divine or human words of a blessing or curse; 8. what is the *time span* between an utterance of a blessing or curse and its materialization (is it stated or supposed in the text when it is going to materialize and how long it lasts?).

The principal biblical passage for this research is Deut 28. The work with the text will focus on study of the rhetorical pattern of this speech of Moses. An attempt will be undertaken to analyze the formal blessing-curse structure and discover unique features that underline the structure. Several questions should be asked: What kind of rhetorical technique was used by Moses? Which rhetorical means are employed in the speech to persuade the audience? What is the didactic purpose of the warnings embedded in Moses' blessing-curse speeches and what are their functions? Within the canon of the Old Testament, the words of blessing and curse of Deut 28 are implied to be fulfilled. The search for their fulfillment requires going beyond the literary context of the Pentateuch and looking at some texts from former and classical prophets, and writings.



2) In the second stage of this work we shall focus on blessing and curse as cross-cultural *phenomena*. The research at this stage presupposes an engagement in the study of blessing and curse in ANE, Graeco-Roman and Indian religion and culture. The biblical world is part of the Ancient Near Eastern religio-cultural milieu which can serve as the background for an understanding of the idea of blessing and curse in the Pentateuch. Here two steps should be taken.

The first is getting informed by specialists in the areas of how blessing and curse operate in *divine-human* and *human-human* realms, being multi-relational activity. The second is working with the texts, mostly with translated texts, which are of two types: *formal texts* (legal contracts, tablets, inscriptions) and *epic literature*. In particular, such texts as the Hittite treaties, the vassal treaties of Esarhaddon, *kudurru* stones, Syrian Semitic inscriptions, and the curse tablets (*defixiones*) will be examined. Research questions will be similar to those asked in the first stage. Several texts from the second group – epic literature – with a blessing/curse thematic will be examined: some passages from *The Iliad* of Homer, *The curse of Agade* and a passage from the Indian epic of *Mahābhārata*. In working with these texts the essential question will be how blessing and curse concepts reflect the idea of human fate. The eightfold pattern will be applied to the texts which are dealt with.

3) The third stage presupposes *theological-anthropological synthesis* of what was studied during the first two stages. The objective is to investigate the theological and anthropological significance of blessing and curse, i.e., what kind of theology and anthropology – an idea of God and man – these blessing/curse concepts suggest, both biblical and extra-biblical.

Methodology presupposes the use of such methods as *analytical*, *descriptive* and *synthetic*. A methodological approach requires first-hand exegetical analysis and work with the texts in original language during the first stage; work with secondary literature and translated texts during the second stage; and comparative analysis and synthesis during the third stage. Research in each stage should result in a description of different *patterns* or *models* of blessing and curse.

The synchronic approach will be employed in dealing with the biblical texts. The author's deliberate choice is to be confined to the treatment of the blessing and curse material in the Pentateuch on a synchronical level. While the author of the present research is generally acquainted with the data of a literary-critical study of the Pentateuch and aware of recent trends and current

discussion in the field – represented in works of Erhard Blum,<sup>23</sup> Eckart Otto,<sup>24</sup> Konrad Schmid,<sup>25</sup> Thomas Römer,<sup>26</sup> Christophe Nihan,<sup>27</sup> John Van Seters,<sup>28</sup> Israel Knohl<sup>29</sup> and others – she herself chooses not to go to source-critical analysis and problems involved in it. The value and importance of a literary critical methodology for the study of the Pentateuch is recognized, however. This decision to work with the *Endkomposition* of the Pentateuch is mainly based on two factors. First of all, literary criticism is not homogenous in itself, and some problems are still not solved, for example there is no consensus as to where exactly the P layer ends; or taking, for instance, the so-called Deuteronomistic History (DtrH): this theory is complex and also raises many questions. So consideration of the concepts of blessings and curses within various sources, or more aptly, layers, is in some way problematic. Secondly, it seems that approaching the blessings and curses synchronically will allow us to have a whole picture of blessings and curses and to draw consistent theology, whereas approaching them diachronically would provide us with a rather fragmentary picture. The author's preliminary position is that blessings and curses, dispersed throughout the Pentateuch, work in a certain sequence, and particular trajectories and lines can converge together precisely due to a synchronic approach.

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<sup>23</sup> E. Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (BZAW 189; Berlin/New-York: de Gruyter, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> E. Otto, *Das Deuteronomium in Pentateuch und Hexateuch. Studien zur Literaturgeschichte von Pentateuch und Hexateuch im Lichte des Deuteronomiumrahmens* (FAT 30; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> K. Schmid, "The So-Called Yahwist and the Literary Gap Between Genesis and Exodus," in *A Farewell to the Yahwist?: The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation* (ed. T. B. Dozeman and K. Schmid; SBLSymS 34; Atlanta: SBL, 2006), 29-50.

<sup>26</sup> T. C. Römer, *The so-called Deuteronomistic History: A Sociological, Historical and Literary Introduction* (London: T & Clark, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> C. Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch: A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus* (FAT II/25; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> J. Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> I. Knohl, *The Divine Symphony: The Bible's Many Voices* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2003).

## CHAPTER 1

### Concepts of blessing and curse in the Pentateuch

#### 1.1. Meaning of blessings and curses in Genesis

In this section several texts in Genesis with a blessing/curse thematic will be studied. We shall pay attention to such elements as participants of the blessing/curse process, category (action/verbal utterance, terminology), and materialization (what happens). In addition, we will register how categories such as *time* (when and how long) and *space* (locality, place) are involved in these texts.

##### 1.1.1. Primeval Story

Blessing and curse motifs are incorporated into stories about the very beginning of mankind signifying divine primary intention and human deviation from the ideal.

##### 1.1.1.1. In the beginning: blessing of creation in Gen 1-2,3

God's first blessing in the Torah takes place in the context of divine creational activity. The account in Gen 1 testifies that the work of the Creator is good *par excellence*, and all created things are good and in perfect harmony. The Creator enables His creatures to participate actively in the process of creation establishing the mechanism of reproduction for *flora* and *fauna*.<sup>30</sup> Some acts of God's creative program include an invocation of blessing while others, surprisingly, do not. For example, it was not necessary to give a blessing upon the ground. God's command, as verse 11 reads, "let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind," is sufficient to force the ground and trees to produce and be fruitful.<sup>31</sup>

The first two occurrences of the word *brk* in the creation story (and in the Bible as a whole) take place in vv. 22 and 28. God is represented here as the

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<sup>30</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (CC; trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 124, speaks about *creative power*, which has been handed to all that was created.

<sup>31</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 9, states that "God's word directly effectuates the desired product." The phrase תדשא הארץ דשא ("let the earth bring forth grass") is striking. In Hebrew such a construction is called cognate accusative. It serves as a reference to the ability of the ground to sprout vegetation by itself.

*Initiator* and the *Source* of the creational blessing which is unconditional. Only His initiative and will, and no other factors, become decisive in the creational drama of the blessing.

In v. 22 the *addressees* of the very first divine blessing are the living creatures of the water and heavenly spheres. Here the blessing as God's action – ויברך אתם אלהים (“God blessed them”) – is accompanied by the essential verbal command פרו ורבו (“be fruitful and multiply”). The effect of this first blessing is fertility. The living creatures are commanded to fulfill the task of procreation and multiplication, and this becomes an ongoing mechanism. The same formula with the imperative then occurs only in v. 28, while it is absent in vv. 24-25 in relation to earthly animals, who do not receive God's direct blessing.

Verses 26-28 are an apogee of the divine program of creation. Human beings, created in the image of God, become *addressees* of God's direct blessing and command to be fruitful and multiply. Through this blessing, God allocates to humans the ability to *generate* other human beings. In other words, humans are created with a potency to procreate, but to realize that vocation is impossible apart from the divine blessing which empowers them to fulfill this task. Fulfillment or materialization of the creational blessing is in Hebrew terms ‘toledot.’ The section of generations of Adam (תולדת אדם) in Gen 5 is structurally governed by the verb ילד (“beget”) in the Hiphil. In v. 3 it is said that Adam begat a son in his own likeness, after his image. Remarkably, בדמותו כצלמו (“in his own likeness, after his image”) is opposed to the creation of Adam בדמות אלהים (“in the likeness of God”) in v. 1. Here is the beginning of generations. The time aspect is envisaged since generations persist throughout time. Thus, the blessing with the effect of fertility extends into the future and becomes an ongoing mechanism. The second effect is dominion. It is interesting to consider the third imperative ‘to fill the earth’ in v. 28 as it relates to the category of space.<sup>32</sup> It can be observed that living creatures, birds and beasts, by implication, are called to fill *water-air-earth* (*aqua-aero-terra*) space while humans are empowered with a power to rule over all kinds of creatures, thus extending their dominion into the spatial sphere. Procreation and dominion are two essential aspects of human vocation. In some sense

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<sup>32</sup> In the LXX the imperative πληρώσατε powerfully evokes the idea of fullness. In other words, it can be taken as the command ‘to fill the space.’

human beings share the functions of God Creator: they are created with a potency to beget (יָלַד) and rule over all living creatures (הָרָבָה).

The blessing of Sabbath in Gen 2,3 is the next blessing initiated by the Lord, and it is significant in the sense that the divine blessing extends into *time domain*: the seventh day is blessed by the Creator after the work of creation is completed. The Sabbath is a blessed gift in its own right. In v. 3 God's act of blessing the Sabbath is balanced by another action, namely sanctification. The Hebrew root שָׁבַת evokes the idea of separation and consecration. The particular period of time is blessed and sanctified by the Creator in the sense that it has potential in itself.<sup>33</sup> This act is a visible manifestation of the special favor of the Creator toward human beings, resulting in temporal ordering of human life in such a way that a period of rest becomes a blessed time. "The divine act of blessing the Sabbath is an unspoken report of God's act of giving power and potentiality to a particular temporal order, in the sense that human honoring of the work/rest rhythm has the capacity of deeply affecting life itself."<sup>34</sup> The aspect of temporality is more than relevant. The blessing of the Sabbath has an enduring effect. Human life, being modeled circularly – after the divine pattern of work/rest – will have a kind of *temporal sanctuary* through which divine goodness will become available continually, every seventh day of the week.

To sum up, the primordial divine blessing contains the divine command of procreation and the divine act of consecration of the Sabbath.

#### **1.1.1.2. Post-creational drama: curses in Genesis 3**

Gen 3 contains the account which is traditionally called the fall story. Eating from the tree placed in the middle of the garden leads to tremendous consequences and radical change of the initial state of things. The creational harmony of Eden is gone. The curse interrupts the life of the first human beings and affects their surroundings.

The story begins with the description of the serpent as the craftiest creature of the field in v. 1. The situation is a dialogue between woman and serpent, initiated by the latter (vv. 1-5). The seeds of doubt on the validity of a divine order are sowed, and first Eve, and then Adam, overstep God's prohibition (vv. 6-7).

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<sup>33</sup> Westermann, *Genesis*, 172, thinks of it as "fruitful to human existence."

<sup>34</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, "The Book of Genesis," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol.1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 319-674, here 347.

After God's investigation of the case, the first curse is pronounced (v. 14). The Lord is the *Initiator* of the curse utterance, and the snake is the *addressee*. The reason for cursing of הַנָּחָשׁ ("the snake") is made clear in God's verdict: אַתָּה אָרֹר כִּי עָשִׂיתָ זֹאת אָרֹר אַתָּה ("because you have done this cursed are you"). The particle כִּי ("because") with what follows indicates that this curse is a direct outcome of what was done. The effect of the curse is the descent of the serpent from the highest position (עָרוֹם מִכָּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה, "more crafty than any beast of the field," v. 1) to the extremely low position (אָרֹר אַתָּה מִכָּל־הַבְּהֵמָה וּמִכָּל חַיַּת הַשָּׂדֶה, "cursed are you more than all cattle and more than every beast of the field," v. 14).<sup>35</sup> The sharp contrast between these two positions is ironically stressed through a kind of wordplay of עָרוֹם ("crafty") and אָרֹר ("cursed") in a sense of paradox: the craftiest creature becomes the cursed creature. It is likely that the idea of banishment, total alienation from the community of the animal kingdom is implied here.<sup>36</sup> Concreteness of the curse effect in terms of materialization is seen in the living conditions of the snake who is reduced to crawling on his belly and eating dust: עַל־גִּהְנוֹךְ תֵּלֵךְ וְעֹפָר תֹּאכַל ("on your belly you will go and dust you will eat"). If the *a-r-r* formula refers more to status here, in this sentence the serpent's fate comes in view. The time frame – כָּל־יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ ("all the days of your life") – in the end is significant because it points to the continuity of this experience: it becomes everyday reality. Thus, both status and experience are interconnected in this curse pronouncement: the serpent's state of existence speaks to its low (cursed) status. Interestingly, it is not specified who will bring the curse into effect; it appears as some kind of *mechanism of deterrent* which takes place in the midst of the divine order of creation causing change in the gradation of creatures.<sup>37</sup>

The sentence of divine punishment has a continuation in relation to Adam and Eve in further verses. The divine speech is eloquent. The first couple is addressed with several negative sentences, but neither Adam nor Eve appears

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<sup>35</sup> Two possible explanations of the meaning of the sentence pronounced upon the serpent may be offered. It depends on how we understand this combination מִי ("from," "out of," "more than") and the noun כָּל ("each," "every," "all," "the whole"). It can be taken either as *comparative* "more than" (NASB) or as *exclusive* "from all" or "out of every beast."

<sup>36</sup> M. Kessler, K. A. Deurloo, *A Commentary on Genesis: the Book of Beginnings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 54-55.

<sup>37</sup> Some commentators say that the sentence on the snake is intended to diminish the evil and harm, since the snake, put in a position of crawling on the belly, represents less of a threat to human beings.

as an *addressee* of a divine curse. First, the Creator addresses Eve with some explicit negativity concerning her feminine vocation:

הרבה ארבה עצבונך והרנך בעצב תלדי בנים (“I will greatly multiply your sorrow in childbirth, in pain you will bring forth children,” 16a).

Eve is informed that the Lord, Who appears here as the *Source* of punishment, will increase her sorrow. The synonyms עצבון (“sorrow”) and עצב (“pain”)<sup>38</sup> emphatically stress the idea that woman’s vocation to *generate* as God’s initial blessing is now affected by hardships. Though the time is not specified, this experience is meant to become constant reality.

Then, in v. 17 Adam is directly addressed by God. It is worth noting that, as in the case with the serpent, the reason for the curse is clearly stated,<sup>38</sup> preceding the curse formula. Interestingly, the *addressee* of the utterance and the *target* of the curse are not identical. With regard to the structure, Adam appears as the *addressee* of the utterance, but the *target* of the curse is an impersonal object, namely *adamah* (“the ground”). Adam is guilty, but the curse is brought upon *adamah*; Adam is simply informed of it by the Lord. The formula ארורה האדמה בעבורך (“cursed is the ground because of you”) embraces the guilt of Adam and the sentence brought upon *adamah*. Adam’s disobedience becomes the ground for *adamah*’s curse. The concrete effect of the curse – infertility of the soil – is specified in v. 18: וקוצ ודרדר תצמיח לך (“both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you”). This *adamah* curse is a kind of reversal of the divine decree for the field in Gen 1,11 in the sense that the potency of the soil is being diminished. The curse here signifies the brokenness of the link between the ground and man, and it greatly impacts human life: hard labor and eating in sorrow is the future fate of Adam and all humanity. The notion of ‘eating,’<sup>39</sup> is emphatically stressed in verses 17-19: בעצבון תאכלנה (“in sorrow you will eat of it”), ואכלת את־עשב השדה (“and you will eat the plants of the field”) and בזעת אפריך תאכל לחם (“in the sweat of your face you will eat bread”). The aspect of time can easily be traced in this pericope. It is worth noting that the parallel expressions in vv. 17 and 19 on eating from the ground are followed by temporal markers to stress the idea of continuity or definite

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<sup>38</sup> Two aspects – audio (“you have listened to the voice”) and act (“you have eaten”) – characteristically underline the disobedience on the part of Adam who preferred his wife’s voice to that of God.

<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, the contrast between God’s command “you shall not eat from it” (from the tree) and God’s predicament “in toil you will eat of it” (from the ground) is vivid.

end. The first one – כל־ימי חיֶיךָ (“all the days of your life”) – in v. 17, being equal to the serpent’s, indicates the constancy of painful effects of the *adamah* curse which start working from now on, while in v. 19 the expression עַד שׁוֹבֵךְ אֶל־הָאֲדָמָה (“till you return unto the ground”) serves as an indicator of the final point of Adam’s life (death), which is not easy due to such hard labor. In the last clause of v. 19, introduced by the conjunction כִּי (“because”), Adam is referred to as עֶפֶר (“dust”).<sup>40</sup> A man as such is destined to return to the ground. Again this close link between *Adam* and *adamah* is hinted here in the sense that the place of Adam’s origin becomes the place of his final repose.

To sum up, the curse caused by disobedience is going to affect human existence and destiny in a negative way. The story clearly shows that Adam and Eve, the blessed ones, are not cursed, but their behavior causes the curse, which, in turn, affects human existence on the level of *generating* and *labor*. The whole structure of post-creational curses is marked by a strong sense of inner causality: the incident with the serpent causes the cursing of the ground, and Adam and Eve reap the consequences.

#### 1.1.1.3. Family drama: cursing of Cain in Gen 4

In Genesis 4 the story of the first *homo sapiens* continues with a dramatic incident between two brothers. The situation, which precedes the divine cursing of Cain, is a kind of competition, an attempt to win God’s favor. Brothers bring offerings to the Lord – Cain from the fruit of the ground and Abel from the firstlings of his flock (vv. 3-4). The Lord’s preference for Abel’s gift<sup>41</sup> creates a problem for Cain who, being moved by jealousy, commits fratricide (vv. 4b-8).

After divine investigation of the case, the curse utterance is pronounced (v. 11a). It is impressive that, in this story of murder, God’s interrogation (vv. 9 and 10a) precedes the curse pronouncement and enforces it in such a way that, sounding as a note of accusation, it forms the basis for cursing. The motif of brother’s blood in vv. 10b and 11 frames the sentence of the curse. Structurally these verses can be presented as follows:

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<sup>40</sup> The motif of dust is recurrent in the curse utterances – in relation to the snake when it is referred as snake’s food, and in relation to Adam who himself is qualified as *dust*. This metonymy hardly implies simple humiliation, rather it points to the fragility of human beings in their existence.

<sup>41</sup> It is difficult to rationalize divine preference, but it is quite possible that the cursed condition of the ground became a reason for non-acceptance of the fruit of the ground.



קול דמי אחיך צעקים אלי מן־האדמה    **A** *case* (blood ↑ *from* adamah)  
("the voice of your brother's blood is crying to Me from the ground,")

ועתה ארור אתה מן־האדמה    **B** *a-r-r sentence* (Cain → *away from* adamah)  
("now you are cursed from the ground,")

אשר פצתה את־פיה לקחת את־דמי אחיך מידך  
("which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand")  
**A'** *case* (blood ↓ *to* adamah)

Here the motif of the ground – מן־האדמה ("from the ground") – appears twice, introducing *adamah* as a kind of 'actor.' The ground receives Cain's brother's blood (↓), then his brother's blood cries unto God from the ground (↑), and eventually in some sense the ground rejects Cain who is sent away (→). With regard to the structure of actors, the Lord is the *Initiator* of the curse utterance, Cain is the *addressee* of the curse, whereas *adamah* seems to play the role of the third party, being a kind of *executor*. The sense of the *a-r-r* sentence is logically linked to the *adamah* motif: the ground rejects what is unnatural – namely, blood – and rejects Cain who shed the blood.<sup>42</sup> The effects of the curse imply the ideas of alienation and banishment. The materialization of "being cursed away from *adamah*" is concretized in v. 12. In the first place, the curse significantly affects Cain's vocation, because the soil becomes infertile for him: כי תעבד את־האדמה לא־תספך לא־תִכַּח ( "when you cultivate the ground it will no longer give its strength to you"). The second effect of being sent from *adamah* is wandering: נע ונד תהיה בארץ ( "you will be a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth"). Cain is going to be identified as a person who, being expelled from his native land, has no permanent and secure place for living. The category of space is meaningful. It seems, that Cain becomes *placeless* ('without roots'), rather than *landless* since he eventually settles in the land of Nod.<sup>43</sup> God's verdict of being נע ונד בארץ is pronounced by Cain himself in v. 14, so Cain

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Isa 26,21. Kessler, *A Commentary on Genesis*, 64-65, proposes an interesting view on 'adamah-adam' relationships disturbed because of the spilling of blood.

<sup>43</sup> The etymology of this place reflects the idea of wandering which is masterfully stressed by the narrator who employs the Hebrew words נד and נג, both conveying the meaning of wandering. S. A. Brayford rightly points out that the LXX stresses the physical aspect of Cain's emotional response - groaning (στένων), referring to a static condition, while the MT implies that the spatial aspect is very strong (S. A. Brayford, *Genesis* [SCS; ed. S. E. Porter, R. S. Hess, J. Jarick; Leiden: Brill, 2007 ], 253-254). Wandering can also be understood in terms of "division within the self-wherein spatial settledness accompanies a troubled spirit" (Fretheim, "Genesis," 375).

does not resist anymore and accepts his fate. In Cain's response in v. 14 his banishment is twofold: from the face of the ground (מעל פני האדמה) and from God's face (ומפניך). The category of time is interplayed in quite an interesting way. The curse of Cain comes to immediate fulfillment. The temporal mark עתה ("now"), which points to the present moment, precedes the curse formula in God's verdict in v. 11, and Cain himself recognizes the *immediacy* of God's punishment in terms of היום ("today") in v. 14. To sum up, the cursing of Cain affects his vocation and defines his identity. He will not succeed in his profession, experiencing failure in agriculture (the infertile ground refuses to give its strength to him as *adamah toiler*), and his future lifestyle will reflect his identity (he is sent away from the land, becoming *eretz wanderer*).

#### 1.1.1.4. Flood and Post-flood blessing in Gen 6-9

The next case with regard to blessing and cursing is the blessing uttered upon Noah. The context is the world after the catastrophe when a new chance for humanity was initiated by the Lord. The story of flood can essentially be understood as a cosmic drama of divine judgment. Through this ultimate destruction, the absolute annihilation of humanity and living creatures, only the remnant – Noah with his family and the representatives of the animal kingdom – survives, being preserved due to God's mercy. When the judgment of water is over, and the passengers of the ark go out of it, Noah brings a burnt offering (Gen 8,18-20). This solemn moment precedes the act of God's blessing upon Noah and his sons. V. 21b contains amazing statements on this divine heart-decision:

... ויאמר יהוה אל־לבו לא־אסֶף לקלל עוד את־האדמה בעבור האדם ... (“...and the Lord said to Himself, I will never again curse the ground on account of man...”).<sup>44</sup>

This statement, which can be understood as an abolishing of curses upon *adamah* (never again in such a way), is significant in the sense that *human*

<sup>44</sup> Grammatically, the combination of the verbs יסֶף (“do again”) and קלל (“to curse”) with the negative particle לא gives a sense of repudiation of an act of cursing in the future. It seems that the act of cursing here relates to the recent event, which is the flood, and the Lord is presented as the decisive *Initiator* of the curse. In Gen 6,5-7 the phrase וכל־יִצֵר מחשבת לבו רק רע (“every intent of the thoughts of his [man's] heart was evil”) is synonymic to the expression in Gen 8,21: כי יצר לב האדם רע (“the intent of man's heart is evil”); and both signify a human factor which is negated by a divine factor, i.e., intention of His heart (!).

*factor* is not going to be decisive since man's behavior ceases to be the cause for cursing *adamah*. V. 22 contains a new decree for earth and humanity. The Lord establishes a firm or stable decree on the circular order of seasons:

זרע וקציר וקר והם וקיץ וחרף ויום ולילה  
("seedtime and harvest, and a cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night").

These rhythmical cycles operate within a time span which is עד כלימי הארץ ("while the earth remains"), and they לא ישבתו ("shall not cease").

Divine initiation of new conditions for the earth is logically linked to Noah's blessing in Gen 9,1. The ground for the new blessing is divine initiative. The Lord is the *Initiator* of the blessing with a command to multiply, and Noah and his sons appear as the *addressees*. This family-blessing echoes the creational blessing in Gen 1,28. The formal structure with the threefold imperative – פרו ורבו ומלאו את-הארץ ("be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth") – is identical to the creational formula of propagation. The idea of a threefold spatial dominion in *terra–aero–aqua* realms is stressed as well in v. 2, with a remark that all living creatures will be fearful and trembling before man. This striking similarity of the effects of the blessing (fertility and dominion) with that of the account of creation leads to the possibility of looking at Noah as a key figure, as a kind of 'new Adam,' who embodies in himself a new beginning of humanity. This after-flood blessing has its effect on originating new humanity through Noachid's line due to the power of begetting (ילד), which is granted in the blessing. Noah impacts as well on the renewal of conditions of human work (מעשה). It turns out that due to Noah, who in v. 20 is called איש האדמה ("a tiller of the soil"), the consequences of the *adamah* curse will be diminished. In the end of the 'toledot' of *Adam* in Gen 5,29 his name is greatly associated with human hope. In other words, the very fact that Lamech names his son Noah reflects human aspirations. Noah is depicted as the one who brings comfort:

זה ינחמנו ממעשנו ומעצבון ידינו מין-חאדמה אשר אררה יהוה  
("this one will comfort us at our work and from the pain [toil] of our hands from *the ground which the Lord inflicted with a curse*").<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Grammatically, the sentence consists of two clauses. The subjects – זה and יהוה with two predicates in the Piel – ינחמנו and אררה – symmetrically frame the sentence.

In Lamech's wording the Lord is the *Source* of the curse, and the ground (*adamah*) is the *target* of the divine curse, while Noah appears as a person who is expected to diminish its effects, some kind of a *source* of comfort. It is legitimate to ask what kind of comfort he is going to supply. The text makes it clear that the positive impact, associated with the figure of Noah, extends into the domain of human labor. Human work as such is a train of resulting consequences: labor (מעשה) is characterized by pain (עצבון), which arises from the ground, being inflicted with a curse.<sup>46</sup> The sense is that comfort or some kind of relief will be experienced when עצבון at cultivating the ground will be somehow overcome, and infertility of the soil will decrease.

To sum up, Noah's blessing is crucial for a new start of humanity after the world catastrophe. The notes on human aspirations in Gen 5,29 and God's promise in Gen 8,21 which frame the flood story, are meaningful. Diminishing of עצבון ("pain") in human labor is due to God's grace that initiates new conditions for Noah and subsequent generations. Precisely in this sense Noah becomes a source of comfort. God's promise not to curse the ground in Gen 8,21 and the divine decree in Gen 8,22 can be considered an implicit *adamah* blessing which is of long-term duration.

#### 1.1.1.5. New family drama: cursing of Canaan in Gen 9

The curse of Canaan in Gen 9,20-27<sup>47</sup> is the first case in the Torah when a human figure pronounces a curse.

The story tells that after the flood, new humanity, represented by Noah and his three sons, begin to inhabit the earth. Noah plants a vineyard, makes wine and gets drunk once. V. 21 specifies details: וישת מנ־היין וישכר ויתגל בתוך אהלה: ("He drank of the vine, and became drunk, and uncovered himself inside his tent"). Vv. 22-23 read that Ham, the youngest one, sees his father's nakedness (ערוה אביו) and tells his brothers – Shem and Japheth – who, in contrast, try to cover their father's nakedness (ויכסו את ערוה אביהם). After Noah discovers the case, as recorded in v. 25, he immediately utters the curse directed upon Canaan: ארור כנען ("cursed be Canaan"). It appears that the inadequate reaction of Ham and his inappropriate behavior in such a delicate situation became the ground for the cursing of his own offspring. Interestingly, Noah is the *initiator*

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<sup>46</sup> The problem of עצבון ("sorrow") arises due to the primeval curse of the ground.

<sup>47</sup> On this topic and an unconventional approach, see F. W. Bassett, "Noah's Nakedness and the Curse of Canaan: a Case of Incest?" *VT* 21 (1971): 232-237.

of the utterance, but the actual *addressee* of the curse is not Ham himself, but rather Canaan, who is not at the scene yet. Neither the source nor the executor of the curse is specified; the effect of the curse is largely associated with slavery. The idea of servitude is rhetorically stressed three times in vv. 25-27. The superlative עבד עבדים (“a servant of servants”) in v. 25 rhetorically emphasizes the lower status of Canaan in relation to his brothers, and vv. 26-27 concretize the matter. The phrase ויהי כנען עבד למו (“and Canaan will be a servant of his”), repeated twice, emphasizes the relational links between Canaan and his brothers Shem and Japheth. The gradation of positions of the brothers is further specified. Thus, in v. 26 the blessing, uttered by Noah, with the Lord as its *Addressee* – ברוך יהוה אלהי שם (“blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem) – implicitly confirms the status of Shem as a blessed person, from whom Japheth, who is supposed to be enlarged and dwell in באהלי־שם (“the tents of Shem”), will benefit.

Interestingly, the time of fulfillment of the curse is not specified here. The context itself makes it definite that the curse crosses its own temporal border in the sense that it goes beyond the person who commits the crime. Perhaps, it can be admitted that this *behaviorist model*, revealed by Ham, will be adopted by his descendants. In view of the fact that the verdict is heard by the criminal (it is implicit in the text), but incrimination is passed on beyond him, it would not be legitimate to apply this curse to the descendants of Ham; rather this curse is to be limited exclusively to Canaan’s offspring.<sup>48</sup> It is important to point out the distinction between the addressee of the utterance and the actual addressee of the curse here. To resume, the curse of Canaan results from family conflict and signifies alienation and division between members of the family which will become an ongoing reality on a generational level. It seems that, while a human figure acts here as the initiator of the curse utterance, *the real Source of misfortune*, the Lord, is hidden behind *the impersonal moral law of cause and effect* governed by the principle that the style of human behavior defines future destiny.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> On this topic, see Edith R. Sanders, “The Hamitic Hypothesis: Its Origin and Functions in Time Perspective,” *JAH*, 10 (1969): 521-532.

<sup>49</sup> Perhaps, in that curse, in relation to its fulfillment, we can find a kind of *rationale* of the conquest of Canaan which in a large sense is divine judgment for the iniquity of Canaanites; and if it is a legitimate supposition, the Lord can be discovered as the true *Initiator* of the curse, and Israelites as *executors*.

### 1.1.1.6. Summary and preliminary conclusions

Study of Gen 1-11 leads to several preliminary conclusions concerning the overall structure of blessings/curses and the model which can be discovered behind it.

The context of blessings and curses in the primeval story is cosmic and family realms. The structure in relation to the setting of blessings and curses is striking:

**A** cosmic drama of *creation* (blessing) **B** post-creational human drama (curse)

**C** family drama (curse of Cain)

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**A1** cosmic drama of *anti-creation* (curse) **B1** post-flood human drama (blessing)

**C1** family drama (curse of Canaan)

It is interesting that two great cosmic events – creation and flood (a kind of anti-creation) – are asymmetrically featured by a blessing and curse, both followed by family dramas<sup>50</sup>, and conversely – post-creational drama and post-flood creation (a kind of renewing of creation) – are featured by a curse and blessing respectively.

The structure of actors in the drama of blessing and cursing is striking. The God of primeval history is portrayed as the decisive *Initiator* of blessings, their sole *Source*. He guarantees His blessing to the *addressees* (humans, creatures). The structure of actors in the curse drama is more complex. It is curious that the Lord is not represented as the *Source* of the curse in the beginning of the primeval story (only in the Eve affair is the Lord depicted as the *Source* of sorrow). The curse is not His direct action, as in the case of the blessing. Despite the fact that, formally, the Lord is the *Initiator* of the *a-r-r* utterances, the curse is not His original initiative or desire, but a signal that the divine order has been violated. God's role is essentially informative: Adam is informed about the cursing of *adamah*; then Cain is informed that he is accursed, being sent away from *adamah*. Conversely, in divine self-wording and Lamech's speech, the Lord is depicted as the *Source* of the curse. It is

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<sup>50</sup> Two global dramas are followed by two family dramas when a curse interrupts the family sphere, and both times the conflict, which leads to cursing, takes place in the first human family (Adam's/Noah's), but continues on the level of generations (!).

intriguing that the third party (מַדְמֵד) becomes involved in the tragic chain of misfortunes. Interestingly, *adamah* functions as a silent *executor* standing between God and Cain, and more strikingly, as an impersonal *target* of the curse inflicted because (בַּעֲבוּר) of אָדָם (as a person) and אֲדָמָה (as a human being).

The aspect of condition is interplayed in a striking way. The texts on blessings and curses in the primeval story are evidently imbalanced in favor of cursing. There is a strong sense of *causality*, and it becomes evident that an act of cursing can be rationally explained: there is ground for the curse, a reason behind it (human factor). The working principle in relation to the cause of the curse can be understood in terms of כִּי עָשִׂיתָ זֹאת (“because you have done this”) or בַּעֲבוּרְךָ / בַּעֲבוּר הָאָדָם (“on account of man”/“because of you”). There is a kind of *continuum* of cause and effect in a circular movement: the curse may be seen as an outcome of action (it is an effect) and the curse results in some things (it causes).

The effect of blessings and curses can be understood in several ways. Blessings upon human beings and creatures can be essentially understood in terms of propagation. God’s creatures receive force, energy, and power for reproduction due to the act of divine blessing (*generating* operates as some kind of ongoing mechanism). The curse can be understood in terms of isolation and degradation (snake), banishment and wandering (Cain), trouble (Adam/Eve). The curse brings estrangement and lowers the status (Canaan). The effect of *adamah* curse (infertility) presupposes weakening of the relationships between soil and man (Gen 3) or a radical break (Gen 4).

The time aspect is elaborated in quite interesting way. Though time frames of the blessing of procreation (blessing upon the first human pair, animals, Noah) are not specified, it becomes clear that its effect involves an ongoing mechanism. As for curses in Gen 3, time frames can be rigidly defined: the curse on creature (the serpent) or effects of the primeval curse on human destiny start from the moment when the addressee hears the verdict and may last as long as entire lifetime. In the case of Cain the immediacy of the curse effect is clearly indicated, and in the case of Canaan there is temporal delay. It is amazing that in Lord’s creative activity there was a blessing of time itself, so every seventh day of the week becomes a blessed period of time. *In general, from the point of view of time, blessings and some curses in the primeval story assume constantly operating reality.*

The following chart summarizes the results of this study:

<i>Rubric</i>	<i>Passages on blessings</i>			
	<b>Gen 1,22</b>	<b>Gen 1,28</b>	<b>Gen 2,3</b>	<b>Gen 9,1</b>
Initiator	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord
Addressee/ target	creatures of the water and heavenly spheres	the first human couple	the Sabbath	Noah and his sons
Source	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord
Administrator	-	-	-	-
Executor	-	-	-	-
Condition	divine initiative	divine initiative	divine initiative	divine initiative
Effect	fertility	fertility, dominion	‘temporal sanctuary’	fertility, dominion
Time	ongoing	ongoing	every seventh day of the week	ongoing

<i>Rubric</i>	<i>Passages on curses</i>				
	<b>Gen 3,14</b>	<b>Gen 3,16</b>	<b>Gen 3,17</b>	<b>Gen 4,9-14</b>	<b>Gen 9,20-27</b>
Initiator	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	Noah
Addressee/ target	the snake	Eve	Adam/ <i>adamah</i>	Cain	Canaan
Source	-	the Lord	-	-	-
Administrator	-	-	-	-	-
Executor	-	-	<i>adamah</i>	<i>adamah</i>	-
Condition	bad action	guilt	guilt	crime	bad action
Effect	isolation, degradation, low status	trouble in childbirth	trouble in labor/ infertility of the soil	banishment, wandering, infertility of the soil/ failure in agriculture	alienation, servitude, low status
Time	constantly: “all the days of life”	ongoing	constantly: “all the days of life”	immediate	-

We can now ask: what kind of *model* of blessing/cursing does the primordial story provide us with? It might be understood in terms of a



*mechanism* introduced to operate in the realm of God's goodness (blessing) and human corruptness (cursing). Thus, the post-creational curse can be essentially understood as a mechanism instituted by God as an 'unfortunate alternative' to blessing (creation+post-flood as new creation). The story of creation reveals that there is order implanted in creation and sanctioned by the Creator. It can be seen as a general universal rule which works within God's cosmos.<sup>51</sup> Inconformity with this cosmic order entails a curse which becomes operative in the realm of evil forces.

To conclude, the primordial story shows that the blessing, as the initial divine plan for humanity, is challenged by curses. The blessing of Creation presupposes the integration and connection of all created elements into a harmonic whole, in contrast, curses result in disintegration and alienation, disharmony and enmity. Generally speaking, the primordial story can be taken as *etiological*. It describes how human beings came to existence through God's blessing and were gifted with a power of *generating*, and how they become vulnerable to curses due to disturbances of God's order. It reveals that blessings and curses operate as '**guardians of divine order.**'

### **1.1.2. Patriarchal narratives**

The theme of blessing runs through Gen 12-49 being largely associated with patriarchs, and it is developed in quite an interesting way: the blessing becomes God's promise, and some people appear as initiators of blessing. It is important to analyze several passages, paying attention to general aspects and the whole structure of this overall patriarchal blessing in Genesis.

#### **1.1.2.1. Blessing of patriarchs in different contexts**

The account of Gen 12,1-3 introduces the first promise of blessing which is given to Abraham. The promise takes place at a moment of transition, and the occasion here is God's call, addressed to Abraham, to move from his native land to an unknown place.

The divine ordering of Abraham's future life in a cardinally new context is connected to the blessing speech in vv. 2 and 3. Abraham is a passive participant, and all he must do is obey and make a transitional move to an unknown and strange land. The Lord is the *Initiator* of the blessing which is

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<sup>51</sup> Interestingly, the Greek term *κόσμος* includes such connotation as "order."

altogether unconditional, and no rational explanation is proposed. God's promise seems to work as a *multi-leveled* blessing. It is enveloped in *I-you-they* language and refers to three levels of addressees of the blessing:

*Abraham personally – those who bless Abraham – families of the earth*

On the first level Abraham is the *addressee* of the blessing, and the Lord appears as its primal *Source*. God addresses Abraham in v. 2a with a promise to make him a great nation and bless him: ואעשך לגוי גדול (“I will make you”) and ואברכך (“I will bless you”).<sup>52</sup> Abraham here appears as a progenitor of the new people, a great nation. The second part of this utterance in v. 2b includes a promise that God will make his name great, so greatness is the effect of Abraham's personal blessing. Then the Lord promises that Abraham himself will be turned into a blessing (ברכה), a person who embodies blessing in himself. On this level of that promissory blessing Abraham is transformed from a passive *addressee* to a kind of *executor* with a more or less active role, somewhat *beneficent*: to be a blessing means that others will benefit from Abraham.<sup>53</sup> On the second level there is a change in roles of participants. V. 3 introduces a formula of blessing and cursing with the Lord as the sole *Initiator* and *Source* of the blessing or curse, and the people who interact with Abraham (we may call them ‘outsiders’) as *addressees*. The formula, elaborated in Hebrew chiastically, is the following:

ואברכה מברכיך ומקללך אאר (“And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse”).

The Lord specifies the way He is going to deal with ‘outsiders.’ His treatment of these people is based on the principle of equal compensation: those who bless are blessed; one who curses is cursed.<sup>54</sup> It turns out that an attitude toward Abraham becomes the condition for either a blessing or curse. The effect of a blessing or curse brought upon ‘outsiders’ is not specified, the time

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<sup>52</sup> These imperfect verbs can be grammatically taken as cohortatives in meaning.

<sup>53</sup> Patrick D. Miller, “Syntax and Theology in Genesis XII 3a,” *VT* 34/4 (October 1984): 472-476 (here 474), emphasizes the role of Abraham as a person who may effect blessing. C. J. H. Wright considers this idiom exactly in this sense of benefit with the object unspecified (C. J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* [Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity, 2006], 201).

<sup>54</sup> The addressee of the divine blessing as reward is referred to in the plural participial form (מברכיך), and the addressee of the divine retributive curse in the singular participial form (מקללך) respectively.

is not indicated either, but it can be assumed that the blessing is attainable after some benedictory activity, and the curse, as an alternative, will come in some immediate future after a verbal malediction is pronounced.

In v. 3b, on the third level, there is a new change in the structure of the blessing which is of universal character. The all-embracing blessing is going to be attained through Abraham, who exercises a role of an *executor*, and בך (“in you”) is a key phrase in this part of the divine utterance. The large unit – the families of the earth (משפחת האדמה) – is intended to be a *beneficiary* of the blessing, i.e., to be enriched through him. There is a sudden change into the passive mode, the Niphal form – נברכו.<sup>55</sup> This implies that the beneficiaries, represented as collective units, are passive receptors of the divine blessing, granted through Abraham, who plays an outstanding role supplying the divine blessing. On this third level the effect of the blessing is not specified. It is curious that the time indicator is totally absent, so the blessing is ‘hanging,’ i.e., open for the future, and the promise as such requires further specification.

Some concrete details on how the blessing of Abraham was going to be realized on the personal level can be found in Gen 13,14-17, Gen 15,1-7 and Gen 17,1-8. The promises of land (inheritance) and numerous offspring (heirs) become the main gifts of the blessing. In the account of Gen 17 the Lord addresses Abraham with new words of blessing, and here new participants are introduced into the scene. In vv. 15 and 16 Sarah and in v. 20 Ishmael are referred to as the *addressees* of a divine blessing, although indirect. The blessing of Sarah is unconditional, it rests altogether on divine initiative, and it

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<sup>55</sup> There is no scholarly agreement on how to translate the Niphal form נברכו in v. 3b. For a detailed and profound study of the root ברך in different stems, see K. N. Grüneberg, *Abraham, Blessing and The Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context* (BZAW 332; New York: de Gruyter, 2003). As an alternative to the passive rendering (for example, Sarna, *Genesis*, 89), the following scholars translate it as the reflexive: Robert B. Chisholm, *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 85; Benno Jacob, *Genesis: The first book of the Bible* (trans. Ernst I. Jacob and Walter Jacob; New York: Ktav, 2007), 339. Westermann, *Genesis*, 151-152, maintains that such forms as the reflexive and the passive are interchangeable, and in his opinion, if this verb is rendered as the reflexive, it means that the nations, who bless themselves invoking the name of Abraham, are automatically blessed. Emphasizing that the nations will gain the blessing for themselves, the following scholars translate it as the middle voice: Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1; Dallas: WordBooks, 1987), 277; Mitchell, *The meaning of BRK “To Bless” in the Old Testament*, 31-36. In different Bible versions the Niphal is translated either as reflexive, indicating that the families of the earth bless themselves by Abraham (NJB) or passive, indicating that they will be blessed in or through Abraham (KJV, NIV, NASB). The REB translates this in terms of an example: “All the people on earth will wish to be blessed as you are blessed.”

is made effective through divine intervention, somewhat of a miracle. The Lord assures Abraham that He will give him offspring through her, and surprisingly, Sarah will also be an outstanding person, that is the mother of nations: וברכתי וגם נתתי ממנה לך בן וברכתי והיתה לגוים (“I will bless her and indeed I will give you a son by her, then I will bless her and she shall be [a mother of] nations,” v. 16). In v. 20 a new addressee of the blessing is in view, that is Ishmael, who is to be blessed with a gift of fruitfulness, begetting twelve princes. V. 21 makes it clear that not Ishmael, but Isaac as an heir is going to be a key figure in making the covenant, so not blessing as such, which is available to Ishmael as well, becomes a decisive factor here, but divine choice.

In Gen 18,17-19 God’s promise to Abraham is again confirmed through divine reassurance. This confirmation takes place at the moment when Abraham and Sarah are visited by three men, who come on a mission to proclaim that Sarah will give birth to an heir. In v. 14 the time indicators – מועד (“appointed time”) and עת (“time”) – imply that the fulfillment of the blessing is near, and it is declared that in one year the effect is going to become visible. The situation is clearly a kind of *crisis moment*, and in that time of doubt the Lord confirms His earlier promises by a new proclaiming of blessings. The Lord is presented as the sole *Initiator*, and here Abraham, as an *addressee*, is referred to in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person. V. 17 contains a rhetorical question intended to stress God’s role in this matter and the certainty of God’s intention. V. 18 emphasizes the greatness of Abraham, who is to be the father of a great and mighty nation, as an effect of the blessing. The idea of certainty of God’s action is stressed through the technique of *figura etymologica* – יהיו יהיה (“[Abraham] will surely become”). V. 18b is a reaffirmation of the earlier promise in Gen 12,3b on the beneficent role of Abraham through whom the nations of the earth (גויי הארץ), i.e., *beneficiaries*, will attain divine blessing. V. 19 makes it clear that the condition for the blessing is in the first place, divine preference: כי ידעתיו (“for I have chosen him,” NASB). The faithfulness of Abraham, whose spiritual task is to command his offspring to keep the way of the Lord, is also important, so that all will come true,<sup>56</sup> so here Abraham’s obedience becomes a precondition for the blessing. The exact time for this global blessing with the beneficent goal is not specified, and it seems that its fulfillment is directed in the distant future.

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<sup>56</sup> Here the word למען (“in order that”), used twice, helps us to understand that election (divine recognition) of Abraham serves its goal – to command his offspring to keep God’s way, which in its turn will result in fulfillment of all (blessings) that the Lord is going to bestow.

In Gen 22,16-18 the promise of blessing to Abraham is confirmed on the highest level of certainty, through God's swearing. The occasion is the time after Abraham was tested by the Lord by asking him to bring Isaac ('a blessed heir') as an offering. The Lord is introduced as the *Initiator* of the blessing in the highest sense of the word, and Abraham is the *addressee*. It seems that Abraham's passing the test faithfully becomes the ground for future blessings, so in some sense the divine intention to bless Abraham gets *extra credit* due to his obedience, as vv. 16 and 18 make implicit.<sup>57</sup> In v. 16a it is emphatically stressed that the promise of blessing is sealed by an oath: the phrase *בִּי נִשְׁבַּעְתִּי* ("By Myself I have sworn") follows by a typical prophetic formula *נֹאמֵי־יְהוָה* ("declares the Lord"). In v. 17 twice the literary device *figura etymologica*, with verbs *בָּרַךְ* ("to bless") and *רָבָה* ("to multiply"), is used to stress God's high decision to bless Abraham personally and multiply his seed. In the utterance there is a shift from Abraham to seed. The promise now extends to Abraham's seed, the *addressee* of the divine blessing: in v. 17 Abraham's posterity is ensured by future victory over enemies, which is a clear sign of the blessing. Thus, fertility and victory are the main effects of the blessing here. In v. 18 the seed is transformed from the *addressee* to an *executor* through which the nations are going to gain blessing for themselves. The time is unspecified, so the 'door' remains open, and the blessing seems to become a process, being in the course of fulfillment, since the birth of descendants becomes a reality.

In Gen 25,11 the statement that after Abraham's death God blessed his son Isaac (*וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי מוֹת אַבְרָהָם וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים אֶת־יִצְחָק בְּנוֹ*) is a clear indication that, while Abraham is gone from the scene, God's program of blessing has its continuation in his heir, a new *addressee* of the divine blessing. Gen 26 provides the reader with some details on how the power of the divine blessing becomes active in the life of the patriarch. Gen 26,3 and 4 contains a standard promise of God's blessing similar to that of the Abrahamic, so the blessing is transferred to Isaac, the next chosen one in the line of election. It is clear from v. 1 that the uttering of the blessing takes place at a moment of *crisis*: Isaac goes to the foreign country because of famine, but the Lord urges him to sojourn (*גָּוַר*) in his native land. There is a clear affinity to the Abrahamic blessing with regard to circumstances: Isaac, who is on the way, is addressed with the blessing, as was Abraham earlier, when he was about to move. The

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<sup>57</sup> The divine reasoning - "because you have done this" in v. 16 and "because you have obeyed my voice" in v. 18 - is a striking reversal of 'negative' causality in the case of the primeval curses (cf. Gen 3,14 and 17).

divine speech in vv. 3 and 4 is expressive. The effect of the blessing is accurately designated, and the spatial aspect receives a strong ascent. The first part of v. 3 makes it clear that the Lord voluntarily grants the land, as a permanent heritage:

גור בארץ הזאת ואהיה עמך ואברכך כִּי־לך ולזרעך אתן את כל־הארצות האל  
("sojourn in this land, and I will be with you, and I will bless you, for to  
you and to your seed I will give all these lands").

Here the Lord is portrayed as the *Initiator* of the blessing and the *Source* of donation, and the *addressees* are Isaac and his seed. The land is intended to be a spatial dimension in the personal blessing of Isaac and his posterity. The second part of v. 3 makes it clear, that the blessing is unconditional, and strikingly, it rests on the Lord's faithfulness to Abraham:

והקמתי את־השבועה אשר נשבעתי לאברהם אביך ("and I will perform the oath I  
swore to Abraham, your father").

In v. 4 all three items – the *posterity* (heirs), the *land* (inheritance) and *blessed nations* (beneficiaries) – are brought together, forming a kind of *conglomerate* of the blessing in God's plan. Plurality of participants is strongly emphasized. It is quite interesting that in this verse three times (in each item) the term זרע ("seed") is used. The point is that the seed, which functions primarily as the *addressee* of God's blessing and which is intended to become an owner of the heritage, is eventually appointed to be an *executor* for the sake of others. Surprisingly, Abraham's faithfulness, in its turn, becomes the basis for realization of this plan, as v. 5 explicitly states. Again the time is not specified, and it can be supposed that the blessing becomes a process in which multiple *executors* and innumerable *beneficiaries* become involved.

Gen 26,12-14 contains some details on how Isaac's personal blessing is realized. The occasion is Isaac's sojourning in Gerar. He becomes the beneficiary of divine favor and care. The effects of the blessing in his life become visible. His blessedness can be understood in terms of abundance and wealth. The first effect is success in agricultural enterprise. In v. 12 it is stated that he sowed and in the same year – בשנה ההוא – he reaped a hundredfold which was a direct result of the divine blessing: ויברכהו יהוה ("and the Lord blessed him"). In vv. 13 and 14 it is implied that the effect of his blessing also became visible through his personal wealth which had multiplied to the point

when he became very rich. He had much: *מקנה־צאן ומקנה־בקר ועבדה רבה* (“flocks, herds and great staff of servants”). This visible prosperity caused jealousy on the part of the settlers and entailed a quarrel over the wells, so Isaac was forced to move to another place. As v. 24 tells, in this *situation of crisis* he is again addressed with the word of a blessing which is the divine reaffirmation of the earlier blessing. The occasion is theophany. The Lord, the *Initiator*, directly addresses the patriarch. The divine speech is eloquent and highly positive, including the note of encouragement and the promise of a numerous posterity. The basis for such a blessing is again in close connection with the figure of Abraham: it is for the sake of Abraham (*בעבור אברהם*). Finally, as vv. 28 and 29 tell, the ‘outsiders’ were forced to acknowledge the status of Isaac as the blessed one, stating: *אתה עתה ברוך יהיה* (“you are now the blessed of the Lord”). The time marker *עתה* (“now”) is significant to indicate that the divine blessing in the life of the patriarch is at a stage of realization.

A direct blessing of Jacob, as a new chosen one and the next addressee of the divine blessing, is the theme of Gen 28 and 32. The context of chapter 28 is Jacob’s journey to Harran immediately after he had ‘stolen’ his father’s blessing. Jacob is at a transitory point, on the way to Harran, the land of his fathers. The occasion of his blessing is the great moment of theophany: Jacob sees a ladder and angels ascending and descending on it. V. 13 specifies that the Lord Himself was standing on the ladder, and He introduced Himself as God of Abraham and Isaac. The Lord here appears as the *Initiator* of the blessing, and Jacob, and in his person his offspring, as the *addressees*. According to vv. 13 and 14, numerous posterity and land, which constitutes the material essence of the blessing, are main gifts, so fertility and heritage are the expected effects of the blessing. The sole basis of the blessing and the guarantee of its fulfilment is the initiative of the Lord. His intention shows up in v. 15 through the confirmation that Jacob will not be abandoned until all is fulfilled. The formula of the blessing in v. 14c, a standard form of blessings for Abraham and Isaac, introduces new participants, and again the transformation takes place: Jacob and his seed, as the *addressees* of Lord’s blessing, are now transformed into *executors* of the divine blessing to all families of the earth. This blessing is oriented in the distant future, since it takes time for the birth and multiplication of descendants.

Gen 32,24-32 tells an amazing story of Jacob’s personal struggle for God’s blessing even if it is costly. The event again takes place at a transitory point – in the vicinity of the land, on the banks of Jabbok, when Jacob is on his way

back to his home. Jacob appears as the *initiator* of his own blessing. Though in his struggle with the Man Jacob is somehow disabled (v. 26), he eventually prevails and receives the divine blessing: ויברך אתו שם (“and He blessed him there,” v. 30). The text does not provide us with concrete details on what kind of a blessing Jacob receives, but the ‘struggle’ over the blessing caused some changes in his personality, since he is given a new name, that is ישראל (“Israel”), as v. 29 states (cf. Gen 35,9-10). The name of the location itself is what seems to be revelatory. Peniel is a place of the blessing *par excellence*, because Jacob saw God face to face, and obtained the blessing directly from the *Source*. This meeting with God in Peniel was crucial for his whole life and especially for his meeting with his brother Esau. It seems that due to this blessing Jacob was transformed as a person: having deprived his brother of his blessing, now he is ready to share his own blessing. The phrase קח־נָה אֶת־בְּרַכְתִּי (“please take my blessing”) in Gen 33,11 is amazing in the sense that Jacob proposes his material blessing, which is a real outcome of the divine blessing, as a gift to his brother.

The fact that Jacob was blessed by God is again stressed in Gen 35,9-12 with the oral blessing added. The context is Jacob’s settlement in the promised land after his personal *galut*. It is striking that God’s blessing finds him on the way out of his native land (Gen 28) and when he returns to the land (Gen 35), and both time in theophany at the same location! The program of the blessing here is largely similar to that of which Jacob was informed on his way to Haran, but God now addresses his elected one in a slightly different manner. God’s benedictory speech in vv. 11 and 12 contains divine self-introduction, the direct command to be fruitful and multiply, and the promise that a company of nations and kings will come forth from him, so the intended effects of the blessing are fertility, heritage and greatness. It would be interesting to look at these effects more closely. It is curious enough that the whole passage is strikingly reminiscent of Isaac’s benedictory speech in Gen 28,3.4. Thus, the divine self-introduction as El Shaddai in Gen 35,11 is identical to that in Isaac’s benediction in Gen 28,3. The divine command פרה ורבה (“be fruitful and multiply”) in Gen 35,11, which is reminiscent of the formula of procreation in the account of creation (Gen 1,28), corresponds to Isaac’s wish in Gen 28,3. The next item is also shared in both accounts: Jacob is depicted as an originator of a nation and a company of nations (גוי וקהל גוים) in v. 11 and as a multitude of people (קהל עמים) in his father’s benediction in Gen 28,3. The blessing in Gen 35,11 adds the divine promise of royalty: the kings will issue



from Jacob's loins. However, the key blessing is constantly the land. In v. 12 the land, which is promised to Jacob and his seed, is referred as the territory, which was already given to Abraham and Isaac, so it appears that the land, as a partly *realized* blessing for his fathers, becomes a highly *desired* blessing for Jacob and his posterity. Strikingly, in Gen 28,4 in Isaac's wish the land seems to be equal to ברכה אברהם ("blessing of Abraham"), and such blessing is to be transferred to Jacob and his seed in heritage (לרשתך). Interestingly, there is no temporal reference in the blessing of Jacob in Gen 35,12, but a sense of temporality is not totally absent, since there is reference to the past (the land was already given to his fathers), and it is hinted in the word אחריו ("after you") as a definite reference to the future. The blessing upon Jacob has its continuation in future with new participants in God's program of the blessing.

### 1.1.2.2. The role of patriarchs in Gen 12, 22, 26, 28

The role of patriarchs and especially that of Abraham in God's plan to extend His blessing to all people of the earth is a matter of debate. Some scholars stress the universality of God's promise to Abraham.<sup>58</sup> In the history of scholarly interpretation Abraham is usually considered as a source<sup>59</sup> of blessing or as a model<sup>60</sup>. The question remains: can Abraham be taken as the source or model of a true blessing, or does he function as an executor by whom others receive access to a divine blessing?

It is important to analyze a standard blessing formula, which appears in four passages, from a grammatical point of view, in order to understand the role of the participants. Strikingly, four instances, which contain the divine promise of *global blessing* on nations, taken together, form a concentric structure with equal parts in the middle:

Gen 12,3	ונברכו בך כל משפחת האדמה	A
Gen 22,18	והתברכו בזרעך כל גויי הארץ	B
Gen 26,4	והתברכו בזרעך כל גויי הארץ	B
Gen 28,14	ונברכו בך כל-משפחת האדמה ובזרעך	A <sup>1</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Gerhard von Rad interprets Gen 12,1-3 in terms of universal salvation saying that the promise goes beyond Abraham and His seed (Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* [rev. ed.; trans. John H. Marks; OTL; London: SCM, 1972], 160-161). Wright similarly holds on Christological interpretation (Wright, *The Mission of God*, 194).

<sup>59</sup> Rad, *Genesis*, 160; Westermann, *Genesis*, 152.

<sup>60</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 276; R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis* (OTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 154-155.

Here we have the verb *brk* twice in the Niphal and twice in the Hitpael form.<sup>61</sup> From this chart it is clearly seen that the Niphal form is followed by the preposition כּ (“in,” through”) referring personally to Abraham or Jacob, while the Hitpael form appears with a collective noun זרע (“seed”) which is less concrete. In the middle of this structure the *beneficiary* of the blessing is a bigger unit (nations of the earth), not a sub-unit (families of the earth).<sup>62</sup> It appears that in all cases the *Initiator* or *Source* of blessing is omitted; only *executor* and *beneficiary* are mentioned. The Niphal construction, which is the case of Gen 12,3 and 28,14, presupposes that the *beneficiary* (families of the earth) is affected through an *executor* (Abraham/Jacob/even seed). The Niphal implies the state of blessedness: nations are blessed (blessing reached them). The Hitpael form, which is the case of Gen 22,18 and 26,4, can be translated as reflexive or reciprocal. The reflexive presupposes that *beneficiaries* (nations of the earth) play an active role (they bless themselves in some sense), but they are still affected by a collective *executor* (seed). The reciprocal implies that *beneficiaries* (nations, individuals) invoke a blessing, which is attained through an *executor* (seed), upon each other, and in this case their function is somewhat administrative. Probably, the Hitpael form in these two occurrences can be interpreted as a conscious recognition of the role of the third party (seed). This form emphasizes the attitude of those who are blessed: they actively reflect upon their state of being blessed. It is interesting that the Hitpael is not used in reference to a person, but exclusively to an abstract “seed,” thus pointing beyond the patriarchs. It appears finely, that the *seed*, not Abraham or Jacob, is the core of this promissory blessing, functioning as a decisive *executor* to bring the blessing to numerous beneficiaries. To answer the question posed in the beginning of the section, Abraham, as a key figure in a *global* blessing, seems to be taken as less than source and more than model, emerging as the head of a true channel of the divine blessing.

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<sup>61</sup> Some still seek new possibilities for an adequate translation of these stems. Thus, B. J. Noonan argues for the *medio-passive* diathesis for the Niphal (“to be blessed” or “to become blessed”) and *reflexive* for the Hitpael, when a subject considers, makes or declares himself “to be blessed.” In this case “the source of blessing is located outside of that person, and one must look to another person or object that is an instrument – not simply an example – of blessing.” As he concludes, the Niphal relates to “the general state of being blessed,” while the Hitpael relates to “the process by which the state of blessing is achieved, declared or estimated.” See the remarkable article of B. J. Noonan, “Abraham, Blessing, and the nations: A reexamination of the Niphal and Hitpael of בָּרַךְ in the Patriarchal Narratives,” *HS* 51 (2010): 73-93, here 79, 83, 92, 93.

<sup>62</sup> Taking these expressions as paralleled seems to be plausible.

### 1.1.2.3. Blessing of Melchizedek in Gen 14

In Gen 14,18-20 Abraham, a bearer of the divine promise, intended to become an executor of the divine blessing, is represented as the *addressee* of a priestly benediction. In v. 18 Melchizedek is referred as the king of Salem and the priest of the highest God. Despite such designation, this person remains *incognito*, a mysterious figure.

The context of the blessing is the war conflict between two coalitions of kings in which Abraham takes an active role. He delivers his people, including his relative Lot, from the hands of enemies, taking them and their possessions back. V. 17 specifies the moment when a ceremony of benediction upon Abraham takes place: ... אהרי שובו מהכות... (“after his return from the slaughter...”).

It is recorded that Melchizedek met Abraham with bread and wine and then uttered a blessing: ויברכהו ויאמר (he blessed him and said...). This utterance, a kind of *post-factum blessing-praise*, includes two formulaic statements:

ברוך אברם לאל עליון קנה שמים וארץ (“blessed be Abram by the most High God, possessor of heaven and earth,” v. 19)

וברוך אל עליון אשר־מגן צריך בידך (“and blessed be God the most High who has delivered your enemies into your hand,” v. 20).

Melchizedek’s benediction is double: over Abraham and the Lord. Both blessings, uttered in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person address, are intertwined as a kind of ‘tandem.’ First, Melchizedek pronounces the blessing over Abraham in a declarative manner, confirming his status as *the blessed one* before or by the Lord. Then, in the form of praise, he blesses the most High God, affirming His status as *the Blessed One*, Possessor of heaven and earth. On the one hand, there is fusion of the status and experience in relation to Abraham, who is declared as the blessed one and the one who experiences victory as God’s blessing; on the other hand there is fusion of the status and action in relation to God Who is declared as the Blessed One and the One Who delivered enemies into Abraham’s hands.

The victory as such becomes the ground for pronouncement of the blessing upon the winner. The effect of this blessing is recognizable: Abraham’s victory is a visible materialization of the divine blessing which precedes its utterance. The time aspect is peculiar: it is a present moment when manifestation of the divine blessing has taken place.

Melchizedek, the *initiator* of benediction, plays a role of the third party, certifying the reality of divine blessing in the life of Abraham, its *addressee*. Being a royal-priestly figure, he functions as an *administrator*, performing the ceremony of benediction. His function is twofold: confirmation and authorization of the Abrahamic blessing which comes from the Lord, the very *Source* of the blessing. The structure of the blessing is tripartite, and the role of the parties can be presented as follows:

<b>God</b> ( <i>Blessed One</i> ) is the Addressee of benediction and the Source of blessing
<b>Melchizedek</b> ( <i>the priest</i> ) is the initiator and administrator of benediction
<b>Abraham</b> ( <i>blessed one</i> ) is the addressee of benediction and divine blessing

To conclude, Melchizedek’s priestly benediction is two-sided: the first is the declaration of a person as “baruch,” and the second is the affirmation of God as “Baruch” and the acknowledgement of the real Source through praise.

#### 1.1.2.4. Paternal blessing of Isaak in Gen 27

The paternal blessing in Gen 27 is one of the most intriguing passages on blessings in Genesis.

The occasion is *family intrigue* in which members of a family are involved, trying to direct the situation in accordance with personal objectives because of a desire to gain the maximal benefit. Thus, the chief ‘conductor’ of the situation is Rebekah who, being motivated to gain a blessing for Jacob at all cost, even being ready to receive a curse,<sup>63</sup> pushes his son to deliberate deceit of his father. The scene resembles theater: Jacob is ‘transformed’ to Esau, dinner is prepared, and everything is ready for a solemn moment (vv. 6-17). When Isaac fails to identify his son, taking him for the oldest one, the path to the blessing is cleared out (vv. 18-27).

The sole basis for the blessing of Esau is the goodwill of his father, and it can be rationally justified because the blessing of the oldest one was a common custom. Isaac’s intention to bless his older son is expressed by a quite enigmatic leitmotif – בעבור תברכך נפשי – (“so that my soul may bless you”) – in v. 4. The blessing-utterance in vv. 28 and 29 is made in the form of a wish. Isaac

<sup>63</sup> Being aware of a possible negative outcome of this trick Rebekah invokes a curse upon herself. This self-imprecation in v. 13 serves as a note of full recognition of a consequence of this deliberate deceit: עלי קללתך (“your curse be on me”).

is the *initiator* of the benediction, while the intended *addressee* is substituted. The Lord is invoked as the *Source* of a specific blessing, namely abundance. The effects of the blessing are, first of all, abundance and dominion. Abundance is associated with natural resources: טל השמים (“the dew of heaven”) and שמני הארץ (“the fatness of the earth”). The second part of the blessing contains a wish for the high status of his son (intentionally Esau, but mistakenly Jacob) who is wished to be גביר (“master”) over his brothers, and a person whom nations will serve (יעבדוך) and to whom the sons of his mother will bow (וישתחוור). As a part of the utterance, the standard formula for ‘outsiders,’ delivered in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person address, which is an echo of Gen 12,3, concludes the paternal blessing.

The story relates that, when Esau learns what has happened, he begins to plead for another blessing which he thinks is still reserved for him. Instead, Isaac confirms the status of Jacob as the blessed one (v. 33). Finally the father blesses his older son (without invocation of the Lord) with the same blessing of abundance (v. 39),<sup>64</sup> but it appears now that there is an element of the curse in this paternal blessing, since Esau is sentenced to servitude, which is a sign of the curse. There is a tragic nuance in that, since Esau, who was supposed to rule over his brothers, is now reduced to a servant, so the ‘mistaken’ blessing (that of Jacob) changes his own status forever. It turns out that, although the father’s blessing becomes available for the oldest son, intended as the initial *addressee* of the benediction, it has no exclusive status such as Jacob’s.<sup>65</sup> Ironically, it turns out that Jacob, who substituted for the right addressee, does not receive a proper blessing. In this connection, Gen 28,3-4 can be understood

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<sup>64</sup> Some scholars interpret this as a kind of *anti-blessing* considering the particle preposition מן preceded the words “dew” and “fat” as signifying in this case the opposite to Jacob’s blessing: “far away.” See, for example, Rad, *Genesis*, 279; Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, 443; Victor. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 228. On some arguments for privative understanding of מן, see Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 46. For arguments of those who regard the words of Isaac in Gen 27,39 in a positive light, see, for example, W. Brueggemann, *Genesis* (IBC; Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 234; Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 143. For an interesting position on this subject, see Terence E. Fretheim, “Which Blessing Does Isaac Give Jacob?” in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures* (ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky; SBLSymS 8; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 279-292.

<sup>65</sup> It is possible to interpret this story in terms of a natural or common blessing which is available, but the low status of the oldest son, confirmed in the blessing, becomes unchangeable.

as a kind of correction of the ‘mistaken’ blessing: Isaac pronounces the blessing over Jacob, who now functions as the right *addressee* of the paternal blessing. Isaac, who appears as the *initiator* of a new blessing, invokes the Lord, El Shaddai, as its *Source*, and Jacob and his seed are referred to as *addressees* who are going to inherit את־ברכת אברהם (“the blessing of Abraham”). This blessing is of another kind, it is associated with the specific promise given to Abraham, so the highest blessing – with the great gifts of posterity and land – ‘finds’ his intended addressee who is planned to become a company of peoples. The time is not indicated, the story goes on, and the fulfillment of the blessing is still ahead.

#### 1.1.2.5. Paternal blessing of Jacob in Gen 48-49

Gen 48-49 testify to the continuity of a traditional oral blessing which is passed from the elected one to new participants; now it is the turn of Jacob to pass blessings on to his offspring. Surprisingly, Jacob, who was richly blessed by the Lord in Canaan after his return from Haran, eventually finds himself in Egypt. It appears to be the will of the Lord, who commands Jacob to go there and promises His support, as stated in Gen 46,2-4. It is curious that one significant segment of the earlier blessing – making Jacob a great nation – receives a spatial dimension, that is שם (“there”). Egypt, not Canaan, is intended to become the geographical context for partial fulfillment of God’s promissory blessing. Again the patriarch is confirmed of a future blessing (even if it is just one segment) through theophany at a transitory point: on the way from Canaan to Egypt. Later Jacob is personally welcomed in the country of Egypt by the pharaoh, who appears as the *addressee* of Jacob’s blessing of greeting, as related in Gen 47,7.10.

It turns out that Egypt becomes the spatial context for Jacob’s deathbed blessing over his sons and grandsons. In the account of Genesis the personal blessing of Joseph’s sons by Jacob, their grandfather, recorded in Gen 48, precedes Jacob’s blessing over his own sons, which is the theme of Gen 49. The occasion is Jacob’s illness and Joseph’s visitation of his father (Gen 48,1.2). In a private conversation with his son, Jacob recollects the moment of his own blessing and the essence of the divine promise (vv. 3 and 4). As v. 9 reads, when he sees Joseph’s sons, he delivers a direct command: קהם־נא אלי ואברכם (“bring them to me, that I may bless them”). The ground for this blessing is his favorable disposition and good will. Jacob functions as the

*initiator* of the blessing, and Ephraim and Manasseh (even Joseph himself) appear as the *addressees*. It seems that the guarantee of their blessing lies in the fact that the Lord acted mightily in the life of the patriarch, so the reality of the future blessing is grounded in the past. The *Source* of the blessing, invoked upon the boys, is God, Whom Jacob encountered personally and Who kept him alive all his life. Jacob summons God or the Angel (a kind of *Executor*) in a threefold invocation (vv. 15 and 16):

לפניו אברהם ויִצְחָק  
האלהים אשר התהלכו אבתי  
("the God before whom my  
fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,")

האלהים הרעה אתי מעודי עד־היום הזה  
("the God who has been my shepherd all  
my life to this day,")

המלאך הגאל אתי מכל־רע  
("the Angel who has redeemed me from all evil").

The wish follows the invocation in v. 16. Jacob wants Ephraim and Manasseh to bear the name of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and grow into a multitude. The words שם ("name") and רב ("multitude") are key words in this utterance to underline the blessing effects: glory (bearing the name of predecessors) and numerical growth. Jacob functions here not only as the person who predicts the future destiny of his grandsons, but as an *initiator* of a specific kind of benediction which is to be practiced in Israel. In v. 20, Ephraim and Manasseh are turned into models of a true blessing.<sup>66</sup> It is a kind of *typological* blessing in the sense that people would wish to have such a blessing as they had, and, by looking at them, the people of Israel would realize what a genuine divine blessing looks like. The wording בך יִבְרַךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל ("by you Israel will pronounce blessing") in the active Piel form is combined with the formula delivered in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person address: יִשְׁמַךְ אֱלֹהִים כְּאַפְרַיִם וְכַמְנַשֶּׁה ("May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh"). Jacob's blessing upon his grandsons, which does not involve temporality directly, seems to have an enduring effect, and its realization is in service of the 'indicative' model of a genuine blessing.

Genesis 49 contains Jacob's speech addressed to his sons in order to let them know his last will.<sup>67</sup> It can be said that this speech contains both *pluses*

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<sup>66</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 329, calls them "paradigms of a glorious destiny."

<sup>67</sup> Traditionally Gen 49 is called the "Testament of Jacob." The speech as the whole is predictive in its character. The temporal framework in v.1 – באַהֲרִית הַיָּמִים ("in the latter days") – clearly points to the future (see, for example, Harold G. Stigers, *A Commentary on Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976], 325). There is no agreement among scholars concerning whether it is legitimate to call the passage "the blessing of Jacob." The

and *minuses*. For our study it is important to focus on two formulaic curses and blessings: the utterances upon Levi, Simeon and Joseph.

Gen 49,5-7 contains an explicit curse formula, but surprisingly there is no human *addressee* in this utterance. The text makes it clear that improper behavior becomes the ground for a negative will concerning Levi and Simeon. Jacob does not pronounce a curse upon his sons, but utters an indirect curse with the *a-r-r* formula: אָרַר אַפָּם (“cursed be their anger”). Here the curse is shifted from persons as *addressees* of the utterance to emotion – which controls a person’s action – as the *target*. The meaning is that the father dissociates himself from Simeon and Levi and informs them of some negative consequences that will result in territorial disinheritance. The verbs חָלַק (“divide”) and פָּיַץ (“scatter”) in the Piel and the Hiphil respectively presuppose an inevitable effect. The statement conveys the idea of alienation.

Gen 49,22-26 contain the explicit blessing addressed to Joseph. Jacob is the *initiator* of the solemn benediction, and Joseph is the *addressee*.<sup>68</sup> Jacob paints a portrait of his son, representing him as a fruitful bough (v. 22). In vv. 23-24 there is a shift to a description of Joseph’s personal existence which is marked both by anguish and divine help in the midst of his life’s tribulations. Then Jacob expresses the wish that Joseph might be gifted with several בְּרָכָה (“blessings”) which are clearly associated with abundant resources. The effect of these blessings (abundance) is depicted by striking metaphors. A series of construct nouns in vv. 25-26 is used to express *quantity* and *quality* of blessings:

בְּרָכָה שָׁמַיִם מֵעַל בְּרָכָה תְּהוֹם רַבְצָת תַּחַת בְּרָכָה שָׁדַיִם וְרֵחַם  
 (“blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lies underneath, blessings of the breasts and of the womb,”)

בְּרָכָתְךָ אֲבִיךָ גְּבָרוּ עַל־בְּרָכַת הָרִי עַד־תְּאוֹת גְּבַעַת עוֹלָם  
 (“the blessings of your father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills”).

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problem is that most of the speech is not strictly expressed in the form of a blessing, and it even contains negative sayings. For the history of scholarship and interpretation of Gen 49, see K. Jung, *The condemned sons in the blessing of Jacob (Gen 49:3-7). The problem of curses in blessing* (PhD Dissertation, The University of the Free State, 2010).

<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, in Moses’s blessing upon Joseph’s tribe in Deut 33,13-16a the land is the *target* of blessing.



It is not entirely clear what kinds of blessings are implied in v. 26. The Hebrew term הוֹרִי, derived from the root הרה, has a connotation of being pregnant, and the whole phrase can be translated either as “the blessings of my ancestors”<sup>69</sup> / “the blessings of my progenitors”<sup>70</sup> or figuratively as “blessings of the eternal mountains”<sup>71</sup> / “lasting mountains.”<sup>72</sup> Blessings are rhetorically gradated as follows:

*the blessings of heaven **above** and the deep that lies **under***  
*the blessings of the breasts and of the womb*  
***the blessings of your father***  
***above** the blessings of the lasting mountains*  
***up to** the blessings of the everlasting hills*

Two characteristics stand out clearly. The first is spatial: the blessing extends from two extremes – from heaven above (מעל שמים) and from underneath (תהום). The second is a qualitative characteristic relating to the essence of the blessing. Joseph’s blessing is supposed to be measured by his father’s blessing which is of superior quality. The particle על (“above”), used as a spatial marker in v. 25 and then as an exceeding marker in v. 26, highlights the idea of the highest type of blessing in its quantity and quality. The language conveys the idea of an abundant or, to say it metaphorically, a ‘pregnant’ blessing, which is highly desired to fall on the head of Joseph. The use of two parallel terms ראש<sup>73</sup> (“head”) and קדקד (“crown of the head”) with a verb נתן (“to give”), which is the jussive in meaning, is significant to emphasize that idea. The high position of the *addressee* of the blessing is stressed by the phrase נזיר אחיו (“one dedicated from among his brothers”<sup>74</sup>).

The ultimate *Source* of such an extremely abundant or unmeasured blessing is Shaddai (שדי), the Lord of blessings *par excellence*. He is depicted as a gracious Donator. Bestowing blessings is of His very nature, or essence. The divine name Shaddai in v. 25 creates a wonderful wordplay with the word שדים (“breast”), which, in pair with the word רחם (“womb”), expresses the idea of

<sup>69</sup> NASB, TNK.

<sup>70</sup> KJV.

<sup>71</sup> NJB.

<sup>72</sup> LXE

<sup>73</sup> This is an example of synecdoche, when a part (head) represents an entire person.

<sup>74</sup> NJB. The rendering of the phrase אביך ברכת in this version as “blessings of the grain and flowers” is consistent with the list of blessings which follows without gradation.

fertility and abundance. The Lord Shaddai is the Source of life and Nurturer of all creatures. Joseph's blessing is a kind of 'pregnant' blessing which flows out from the infinite Source that is the Almighty God Himself.

It is clear that Jacob's blessing upon Joseph constitutes a strong continuity with the Abrahamic blessing.<sup>75</sup> Joseph and his sons appear as elected ones in God's chosen line. In this regard, it is hardly arbitrary that the account in Gen 39-47 is focused on Joseph. It seems that Joseph's story is the case of a partial realization of the divine blessing in the midst of his suffering in Egypt: the blessing comes to him and reaches others through him. Gen 39,5 contains a surprising statement on the blessing upon the household of Potiphar:

ויברך יהוה את־בית המצרי בגלל יוסף ויהי ברכת יהוה בכל־אשר יש־לו בבית ובשדה  
("The Lord blessed the Egyptian house on account of Joseph; so the Lord's blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field").

Here the Lord is the *Source*, Joseph is an *executor*, and the whole household of the Egyptian is the *beneficiary* of the divine blessing. Later it turns out that the whole country of Egypt and Joseph's whole family in Canaan benefited from Joseph who supplied the people with bread. All this serves as an illustration of how the blessing as 'benefit' works in miniature.

#### 1.1.2.6. Summary

The study of the patriarchal blessings permits us to see several peculiar features. Characteristically, the blessing as a promise or divine action takes place at some transitory location (on the way from the native land to foreign or *vice versa*), and these geographical points function as 'witnesses' of the Lord's faithfulness in providing blessings, and as 'stations' of reassurance on the effectiveness of the promissory blessing. The following chart lists these distinctive geographical points of 'patriarchal journeys' accompanied by a blessing:

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<sup>75</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 344, sees in the reference to "God of your father" in v. 25 the unbroken chain of religious tradition making Jacob's blessing effective and meaningful.

Passage on blessings	Addressee	The place ( <i>locus</i> )	Imperative/promise
Gen 12,1-3 <i>God's speech</i>	Abraham	<b>in</b> Paddan-aram, <b>to</b> the land	great לך-לך ("go")
Gen 26,1-6 <i>God's speech</i> (vv. 2-5)	Isaac	on the way <b>to</b> Gerar, <b>(to</b> Egypt?)	אל-תרד מצרימה ("don't go down to Egypt") שכן/גור בארץ ("stay/sojourn in the land") (vv. 2 and 3)
Gen 28,1-4 <i>paternal blessing</i>	Jacob	<b>to</b> Paddan-aram	לך פדנה ארם ("go to Paddan-aram") (v. 2) <i>father's command</i>
Gen 28,10-16 <i>God's speech</i> (vv. 13-14)	Jacob	<b>in Bethel</b> (on the way <b>to</b> Haran)	והשבתיך אליהאדמה הזאת ("and I will bring you back to this land") (v. 15)
Gen 32,23-32 <i>God's act</i> (v. 30)	Jacob	<b>from</b> Paddan-aram, <b>on</b> the banks of Jabbok	צא... ושוב אלי-ארץ ("leave...and return to the land") (Gen 31,13)
Gen 35,9-15 <i>God's speech</i> (vv. 10-12)	Jacob	<b>in Bethel</b>	עלה בית-אל ("go up to Bethel") (Gen 35,1)
Gen 46,1-5 <i>God's speech</i> (vv. 2-4)	Jacob	<b>in</b> Beersheba, on the way <b>to</b> Egypt	אל-תירא מרדה מצרימה ("don't be afraid to go down to Egypt") (v. 3) ואנכי אעלך גם-עלה ("I will surely bring you up again") (v. 4)

Another peculiar feature of patriarchal blessings is that the blessings do not have any conditions, they rest on divine initiative. This is evident, for instance, in the case of Abraham, whose blessing is groundless, and it is a matter of divine choice or election. Election, being a subcategory here, is in service of blessing, which functions as an example of election. Interestingly, some texts presuppose that the human obedience (on the part of Abraham) becomes a precondition for the realization of blessings, but it would be a mistake to consider this a decisive factor. Rather Abraham's faithfulness can be taken as a kind of *extra credit* to his blessing which is already in the course of fulfillment. It is clear that God's faithfulness becomes the decisive factor for the blessing of Isaac and Jacob, who receive *birkat Abraham* as heritage. Conditionality, set as a principle, becomes an important factor in God's dealing with 'outsiders.'

The attitude toward the patriarchs on the part of those who interact with them becomes the condition for either a blessing or curse.

As for the structure of participants – *initiator, addressee/beneficiary, source, executor* – it can be concluded that it is not static. In some cases there is a change of roles of the participants or a transformation from the passive role to the executive, from human to divine addressee (in utterances of praise), and even substitution of the right addressee. There is a sense of continuity: a blessing is transmitted from father to son through a divine authoritative word or paternal benediction.

It can be observed that a *conglomerate* of the patriarchal blessing is essentially threefold including the *posterity* (heirs) – the *land* (inheritance) – the *blessed nations* (beneficiaries). The basic effects of patriarchal blessings are fertility, abundance, greatness, heritage, victory, and dominion.

With regard to the category of time, it becomes evident that the time aspect is constantly omitted in the blessing speeches, and it can be concluded that the very absence of a precise time is telling in itself, in that it points to the promissory character of the patriarchal blessing. In other words, the blessing is oriented to the future, and its fulfillment becomes a process.

The following charts summarize the results of the study of blessings in patriarchal narratives:

<i>Rubric</i>	<i>Passages on direct divine blessings upon patriarchs</i>					
	<b>Gen 12,1-3</b>	<b>Gen 18,17.18</b>	<b>Gen 22,16-18</b>	<b>Gen 26,2-5</b>	<b>Gen 28,13.14</b>	<b>Gen 35,9-12</b>
Initiator	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord
Addressee/ Beneficiary	Abram nations	Abraham nations	Abraham nations	Isaac nations	Jacob nations	Jacob
Source	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord
Administrator	-	-	-	-	-	-
Executor	Abram	Abraham	seed	seed	Jacob/seed	-
Condition	divine initiative	divine initiative	divine initiative and actual obedience on the part of Abraham		divine initiative	divine initiative
Effect	greatness	greatness	fertility, victory	fertility, heritage	fertility, heritage	fertility, heritage, greatness
Time	-	-	-	-	-	-

<i>Rubric</i>	<i>Passages on blessings pronounced by human figures</i>				
	<b>Gen 14,18-20</b>	<b>Gen 27</b>	<b>Gen 28,1-4</b>	<b>Gen 48,9-20</b>	<b>Gen 49,22-26</b>
Initiator	Melchizedek	Isaac	Isaac	Jacob	Jacob
Addressee	Abram	Jacob	Jacob	Ephraim/ Manasseh	Joseph
Source	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord
Administrator	Melchizedek	-	-	-	-
Executor	-	-	-	the Angel	-
Condition	victory (ground)	father's will	father's will	grandfather's will	father's will
Effect	victory	abundance, dominion	fertility, heritage greatness	glory, growth	abundance
Time	present moment	-	-	-	"in the days to come"

#### 1.1.2.7. Some preliminary conclusions

Our study of the patriarchal narratives in Gen 12-49 reveals that they are oriented in blessings, and here the blessing becomes promissory and of a global nature, intended to embrace many people, not just the patriarchs. The patriarchs don't 'accumulate' blessings for themselves, but function as those from whom others benefit.

A particular feature of the blessings in the patriarchal stories is the aspect of beneficence. It implies *an active goodness, a kind of 'sponsorship' of the blessing which is going to be supplied through the patriarchs and their seed to the nations*. Here we can discover a distinct pattern. It can be designated as the '**benefit-blessing**' model, and it is tripartite:

God → **Benefactor**

Patriarchs → **beneficent role**

Nations → **Beneficiaries**

The structure of the blessing is as follows: God, Who promises to provide the blessing, acts as the very *Source* of the blessing or *Benefactor*, the nations appear as the *beneficiaries* of the blessing, and the patriarchs/seed function as

*executors*, who make it possible for the *beneficiaries* to access the *Source*. This model implies that there is no other way for the nations to get the Lord's special blessing, the effect of which has not yet been made known, except through the patriarchs and their posterity.

This model may function *globally* and *in miniature*. In formulaic statements with a direct blessing upon the patriarchs a global perspective is seen, while on some occasions a person is said to be blessed for the sake of a patriarch. As for Abraham, his beneficent role is somewhat global (for all families of the earth),<sup>76</sup> whereas Joseph's beneficent role is on a lesser level – for a particular family or country. This kind of blessing works in such a way that when a person receives a divine blessing (primary effect), it is so abundant that it extends further – beyond this primary addressee who by himself is not capable of bestowing a blessing – and reaches other people (secondary effect) in its power and greatness.

To conclude, our examination of the blessing pattern in the patriarchal narratives helps us to see that the blessing of the patriarchs is closely linked to election. The secret of the 'benefit-blessing' model lies in its enduring effect; blessings flow through the chosen channel, and the 'door' is always open for new participants, beneficiaries of the divine blessing, who attain an access to the highest, genuine blessing from the very Source. The transformation that takes place within this model – an *addressee* (patriarch, seed) turns into an *executor* and actually becomes a *benefactor* for others – represents quite a peculiar feature of the concept of blessing in patriarchal narratives.

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<sup>76</sup> Abraham seems to be a key figure in God's program of blessing with a beneficent goal, and his blessing is transitional. The principle - Abraham is blessed for the sake of others, and others will be blessed for the sake of Abraham - is at work.

## 1.2. Meaning of blessings and curses in Numbers

The picture of blessings and curses in Numbers is, even at first glance, different than that of Genesis. Divinely appointed persons begin to administrate blessings and curses, being active actors in dramatic events in which different personalities, factors and forces are involved. It is important to cast a fresh look at such passages as Num 5,11-31; 6,22-27; 22-24 in order to understand the meaning of these blessings and curses.

### 1.2.1. Drama of 'drinking' woman in Num 5

The first text in Numbers which is relevant to our topic is the 'test of adultery' in Num 5,11-31.<sup>77</sup> The passage is often considered strange and even shocking due to the ritual with the water that induces the curse to which the woman, suspected of adultery, is to be subjected.

The setting is a case when a husband, moved by a spirit of jealousy, is ordered to bring his wife to the priest (vv. 12-14) for a special procedure (vv. 16-26), which is aimed to prove her guilt or the opposite (vv. 27-31). It is clear that the reason for going through the procedure is the man's jealousy, not the woman's guilt, since her guilt has not yet proven.<sup>78</sup> The procedure has two principal stages. The first is the charging of the woman with the oath, the second is the water ritual. In v. 21a it is stated that the priest has to charge the woman with the oath of the curse (בשבעת האלה) telling her the two possible

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<sup>77</sup> Scholars dealing with this passage recognize the number of difficulties related to its structure, for instance, repetitions. For a synchronic approach to the text see, for example, Michael Fishbane, "Accusations of Adultery: A Study of Law and Scribal Practice in Numbers 5:11-31," *HUCA* XLV (1974): 25-45; H. C. Brichto, "The Case of the Sotah and A Reconsideration of Biblical Law," *HUCA* 46 (1975): 55-70; T. Frymer-Kensky, "The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah," *VT* 34 (1984): 11-26. For a diachronic approach, see D. B. Stade, "Beiträge zur Pentateuchkritik," *ZAW* 15 (1895): 166-178; R. Press, "Das Ordeal im alten Israel," *ZAW* 51 (1933): 121-141; 227-255 (this scholar sees water ordeal and water ordeal with a ritual as belonging to different sources, namely Quelle A [magic in operation] and Quelle B [ordeal performed by God] respectively); J. Jeon, "Two Laws in the Sotah Passage (Num 5,11-31)," *VT* 57 (2007): 181-207.

<sup>78</sup> The motif of guilt occurs symmetrically: in v. 15 עון ("guilt," "transgression") is to be memorialized by the Lord, and in v. 31 it signifies that the woman will bear עונה ("punishment," "guilt") in contrast with a man who is cleared ("free") from עון ("guilt").

outcomes to which she responds “Amen.”<sup>79</sup> The curse utterance in vv. 21-22 is elaborated as follows:

יתן יהוה אותך לאלה ולשבעה בתוך עמך בתת יהוה את־ירכך נפלת ואת־בטןך צבה  
 (“the Lord make you a curse and an oath among your people by the  
 Lord’s making your thigh waste away and your abdomen swell;”)  
 ובאו המים המאררים האלה במעיד לצבות בטן ולנפל ירך  
 (“and the water that brings the curse shall go into your stomach and make your abdomen  
 swell and your thigh waste away”).

The curse formula, with the twofold invocation of the Lord, is uttered in the form of a wish which specifies the curse’s effects. The first effect relates to the woman’s public status. The metonymy, i.e., becoming the curse (*alah*), is a powerful way to underline the idea that she embodies the curse in herself (in contrast to the metonymy of the blessing in Gen 12,2) and becomes socially isolated. The second effect relates to the physical materialization of the curse. The woman’s feminine organs become the *target* of the curse. The idea is stressed through the use of two direct objects – ירך (“thigh”) and בטן (“belly”) – with a participle נפלה (“to waste away”) and an adjective צבה (“swollen”). There is a large diversity of views on what this actually means.<sup>80</sup> Whatever they mean, these two phrases signify some dysfunctional problems with the woman’s reproductive system that may lead to the impossibility of procreation. The curse operates here as a kind of *anti-blessing* to God’s blessing of fruitfulness, seen in v. 28. The effect of the curse is infertility.

The involvement of the actors and their roles is as follows:

יהוה	האשה	הכהן	המים המאררים
(the Lord)	(the woman)	(the priest)	(the water that induces the curse)
Source	addressee	administrator	executor

The priest functions as the *administrator*, the one who charges the woman with the oath and administers the ritual with the water that induces the curse. It is implied that the *Source* of the curse is the Lord since, due to His power, the

<sup>79</sup> The term אלה (“oath”) has a legal connotation in the sense of placing someone under the efficacy of the curse during the ordeal. See, C. O. Schroeder, *History, Justice and the Agency of God: A hermeneutical and Exegetical Investigation of Isaiah and Psalms* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 135-136.

<sup>80</sup> The pairing could mean: prolapsed uterus (as a sign of sterility), edema, miscarriage etc.



curse is to be materialized by means of the water which functions as the *executor* (punitive instrument). The woman appears as the *addressee* of the oath (*alah*), and she turns into an embodiment of the curse (*alah*) in the case of guilt; and significantly, the woman's guilt becomes a condition for the effectiveness of the curse.

Drinking the water is the pivotal point of the ritual. A mysterious liquid – המים המאררים (“the water of bitterness that brings the curse”)<sup>81</sup> – plays an active role: it goes inside and produces harmful effects. The question is how the water functions in the ritual? It seems that there are two options:

- A. harmless water (turns into) → poisonous in the case of guilt
- B. poisonous water (turns into) → harmless in the case of innocence

Option A reflects the view that the water is harmless and only potentially dangerous: it becomes poisonous in the case of guilt. Option B reflects the view that the water is already poisonous before drinking, and it becomes harmless in the case of innocence. Both possibilities involve the necessity of a miracle and divine intervention. In order to understand what actually happens with the water, it is important to examine the terminology. In vv. 18, 19 and 24a the water is called מי המרים המאררים (“the bitter water that causes the curse”). In v. 22 it is referred to as המים המאררים (“the water that causes the curse”) which goes inside (literally – into מעה) for a purpose – לצבות בטן (“to make the abdomen swell”) and לנפל ירך (“to make the thigh waste away”). Then, in v. 23 it is simply mentioned as מי המרים (“the bitter water”). It is curious that in vv. 24b and 27 the order of the words is different, and it appears as המים המאררים למרים (“the water that causes the curse becomes bitter”).<sup>82</sup> In these two verses there is a hint of the process of transubstantiation. It implies that the water, formally called “the bitter water that causes the curse,” only becomes poisonous (“bitter”) at the moment of drinking. Schematically the process may look as follows: מרים → מאררים → למרים. Thus, a ‘linguistic pun’ helps to reconstruct the intended process of turning neutral holy water – מים

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<sup>81</sup> According to vv. 17 and 23, it is made of such ingredients as מים קדשים (“holy water”), עפר (“dust”) and what is washed from the scroll (the ink) on which the curses are written. The substance seems to be purely symbolic. It is made of such things to stress the holiness of this act and make an aspect of cursing demonstrative: as the physical substance symbolically embodies the curse, so a woman is going to embody the curse physically in case of guilt.

<sup>82</sup> The difference in order was noticed by McKane; for an interesting interpretation of the word מרים (“bitter”), see W. McKane, “Poison, Trial by Ordeal and the Cup of Wrath,” *VT* 30 [1980]: 474-492, here 477.

קדשים – to religiously relevant poisonous water that enters for harm (למרים)<sup>83</sup> through the agency of the priest. In fact, this becomes possible only due to the Lord's intervention that releases the mechanism of the curse through an impersonal *executor*. All this points to option A as the most likely answer, however we don't know exactly how it worked in practice.

The function of the curse in this dramatic performance seems to be manifold. First, the curse in this procedure functions in a *revelatory* way. It serves as a kind of 'litmus paper test' to reveal what is hidden. The word נסתרה ("hidden") in v. 13 is of great significance in this regard. The ritual with the curse-bearing water is intended to reveal the woman's true identity, of which only she is conscious.

Second, the curse functions in a *retributive* way in the case of guilt. If the woman is guilty, the curse operates as retribution. The cursing as God's judgment becomes the reality of her life: her status among the people becomes equal to her true identity. The curse extends to her life experience; especially it affects negatively her feminine vocation. In other words, it affects her public status and feminine aspects of her life (relating to experience).

Third, the function of the curse is somewhat *rehabilitative* in the case of innocence. If the jealousy of the woman's husband is groundless, the ritual has a positive outcome for the woman: her reputation is restored and her true identity is affirmed. There is even more: her female vocation is renewed, and she experiences a blessing. The imperative הנקי ממי המרים המאררים האלה ("be free [cleaned] from this bitter water that causes the curse") in v. 19 implies that the procedure can have the opposite effect. V. 28 specifies it: if the woman is not defiled (טהרה), she is set free (נקתה) and she will be fruitful (נורעה).

A few words about the time factor are necessary. Though it is not specified when exactly the visible signs of the curse become recognizable, the logic of the story assumes that the effect is supposed to appear quite soon. Some visible signs or the lack thereof will reveal whether it was 'the cup of curse' or 'the cup of release.'

To resume, this passage is to be interpreted in terms of *Judicium Dei*. The effectiveness of the curse is altogether in the control of God, Who knows the matter perfectly. The actual force of the curse lies in its operation within divine

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<sup>83</sup> It is interesting that in both verses (24b and 27) the Targum renders ללוט as למרים signifying that the water turns to a curse; LXX has here τοῦ ἐλεγμοῦ emphasizing that the curse-bearing water (ἐπικαταρῶμενον) enters for reproach, rebuke, conviction.

law. In this regard, the procedure represents a kind of exemplification of the primeval schema of blessing and curse functioning as *guardians* of divine order. This individual case of marital ethic is an attempt to transfer the rules of the blessing and the curse, operating within God's creation, into everyday life. The function of the priest is to prolong God's ordering into the ordinary life of an individual.

### 1.2.2. Rhetoric of the priestly blessing in Num 6,22-27

The Aaronite blessing formula in Num 6,24-26 addresses the issue of authority. Aaron and his sons, who were appointed to hold responsibility for different sacred activities, receive a privilege to bless the sons of Israel. This command is part of a larger corpus of ordinations concerning specific issues related to the service in the tent and observance of some rituals. The setting of the priestly blessing in Num 6,24-26 is liturgical. The Lord, Who appears as the *Initiator* of blessing, commands priests, who function as *administrators*, to utter the blessing in a specific way (...לאמר כה), not in a free manner with words of their own choosing. They are given somewhat of a fixed form of the blessing formula. It is compact and perfectly balanced rhythmically:

יברכך יהוה וישמרך ("The Lord bless you and keep you,")

יאר יהוה פניו אליך ויחנך  
gracious to you,")

ישא יהוה פניו אליך וישם לך שלום  
and give you peace").

The formula, uttered in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person singular address, takes the form of a solemn wishful declaration with a series of singular imperfects functioning as jussives. The threefold invocation of the name of the Lord is balanced by a sixfold reference to the *addressee*, the collective unit – בני ישראל ("sons of Israel"). There is an impression that the blessing is going to flow from above, from divine countenance, from the Lord as the ultimate *Source* of goodness. The effect of the blessing is a quality of life marked by divine grace. This highly positively-oriented benediction involves divine favor, protection, and all-embracing shalom which are to be materialized in the lives of the addressees of the priestly benediction.

The agency of the authoritative body (clergy), which is in charge of the divinely established order for the blessing, is of great importance. In the mouth

of an Aaronite this benediction becomes an authoritative word, and the invocation of the divine power is crucial for a verbal blessing to turn into material benefits. It is important to understand rightly how this works. The benediction is ordered for the priestly group in the form of an imperative. It is curious that the imperative כה תברכו (“thus you shall bless...”) in v. 23, is balanced by the divine promise ואני אברכם (“and I will bless them”) in v. 27. These verses suggest that the blessing as such implies two stages: verbalization and actualization. It is clear enough that *verbalization* belongs to the priests, whereas *actualization* belongs to the Lord, and there is almost ‘theurgical closeness’ between the two. God’s actual intervention follows a proper blessing formula.<sup>84</sup> It is better to say that the Lord and the priests work in cooperation. God and an authoritative person cooperate in such a way that God’s blessing, invoked by the priest, is poured out on the people as reality in the sense that the desired quality of life becomes real. The priestly invocation of God’s name upon the people becomes a prerequisite of its effectiveness which is altogether in the realm of divine power. The blessing rests on divine initiative; it is unconditional with regard to a human factor. The time of its fulfillment is not specified, and it seems that the blessing can be realized anytime after the right formula is uttered.

To conclude, the priestly blessing in Num 6,24-26 is a clear example of *delegation of power*. The Aaronites were authorized by the Lord to administer a blessing in a public realm. This formula of blessing can be taken as a kind of *fixed canon of benediction* which has divine ‘authorship.’

### 1.2.3. Interplay of curse and blessing in Num 22-24

Num 22-24 is an ambiguous passage which contains the story of a ‘failed’ curse in the sense that an attempt to pronounce the curse willfully is destined to fail. The context is Israel’s journey to the promised land when at a transitory moment the people camp in the plains of Moav (v. 1).

The condition is such that the people’s numerical greatness becomes a problem for the Moabites and causes fear (v. 3). In other words, God’s visible blessing over Israel – the blessing of growth – is turned to the ground for

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<sup>84</sup> In the Babylonian Talmud it is written that R. Aqiva believed in the cooperation of human words and divine action, saying that the priests make the blessing, and God is forced to agree (Hullin 49a), however it seems that this benediction in his view does not fall into the category of a magical performance.

cursing. Balak – the king of Moab – sends messengers to Balaam, who is a diviner, with an urgent request for personal gain, quite definitely expressed, believing that the cursing will enable him to overcome Israel. Balak is introduced as the *initiator* of the curse, the people of Israel appear as the *addressee* of this potential curse, whereas Balaam is the supposed *administrator* through whom the desired result is to be achieved. The king's request is expressed in the form of an imperative. In vv. 11 and 17 the phrase קִבְּה־לִי (“curse [them/this people] for me”) is employed, whereas in v. 6 the phrase אֲרַה־לִי (“curse [this people] for me”), with a stronger verb, is used. The objective becomes clear from vv. 6 and 11: אוֹלֵי אוֹכַל נִכְה־בוּ / אוֹלֵי אוֹכַל לְהִלָּחֵם בּוּ (“perhaps I will be able to defeat them/perhaps I will be able to fight against them”). It seems that the king strongly believes in the power of the word of this particular diviner.<sup>85</sup> V. 6 stresses the idea that the king is aware of Balaam's power to bless and curse:

כִּי יָדַעְתִּי אֶת אֲשֶׁר־תְּבָרֵךְ מִבְּרַךְ וְאֲשֶׁר תֹּאֵר יִוָּאֵר  
 (“for I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse, is cursed”).<sup>86</sup>

V. 8 introduces the Lord, and in the conversation with the diviner the Lord urges Balaam to accountability (9-12). It is implied in v. 12 that the divine *anti-imperative* – לֹא תֹאֵר (“don't curse”) – prevails over the king's command in its authority. Israel's status as בְּרוּךְ (“blessed one”) is affirmed. In spite of a visible submission to the Lord's authority and resistance to Balak's trickery with seductive proposals (vv. 13-21), the hidden motives of Balaam seem to be different, since the Lord tries to break his stubbornness during his journey to Balak through His agents – the Angel of the Lord and Balaam's 'stubborn' donkey (vv. 22-35). A new twist in this intriguing story is described in chapter 23. Balaam, although a hireling of the Moabites' king, is forced to submit to

<sup>85</sup> Scholars have different opinions on the role and ability of Balaam. Mitchell, *The meaning of BRK*, 91-92, argues that Balaam has no power to pronounce effective words of a blessing or a curse; rather he functions as a diviner whose role is to predict the future. He states that “the strength of Balaam's curse is not in the power of the words, but in the accurate discernment of what the gods have in store.” On the different roles of Balaam and the so-called theory of the “intra-role conflict,” see Michael S. Moore, *The Balaam traditions: their character and development* (SBLDS, 113; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 116-121.

<sup>86</sup> Strikingly, the reference to his magical activity and success is embraced in formulaic language which is reminiscent of a standard formula concerning ‘outsiders’ in Gen 12,3. The difference here is the occurrence of the participial of *b-r-k* in the Pual and the use of a strong verb *a-r-r* in describing of diviner's ability of cursing in comparison with a less strong *q-l-l* in Gen 12,3.

the highest authority (vv. 5-10). In his retelling of the incident, he argues for the impossibility of cursing God's people *in principle*. This part of the discourse in vv. 7 and 8 is masterfully elaborated:

Balak's request: לכה ארה-לי יעקב ולכה זעמה ישראל

("come, curse Jacob for me, come, denounce Israel!")

Balaam's response: מה אקב לא קבה אל ומה אזעם לא זעם יהוה

("how shall I curse whom God has not cursed, and how shall I denounce Israel whom the Lord has not denounced?").

Ironically, in his rationale the diviner does not use the verb ארר, employed by Balak and uses the verb קבה which sounds similarly to the name יעקב ("Jacob"). It is curious that in Balak's request the 'potential' addressee of the curse (יעקב/ישראל) is in the center, whereas in Balaam's wording the spotlight is shifted to the Lord (אל/יהוה) Who 'refuses' to curse. V. 20 stresses the idea of a total dependence of the diviner upon God. The sudden change in Balaam's agenda from cursing to blessing – הנה ברך לקחתי וברך ולא אשיבנה – ("behold I have received [*a directive*] to bless, when he has blessed I cannot revoke it") – is caused by the receiving of a divine 'mandate' and the impossibility of revoking a divine blessing. In his speech Balaam represents himself as an appointed *administrator* of the blessing and the Lord as the exclusive *Initiator* of the blessing. This change in turn causes changes in Balak's strategy: having realized that the cursing of Israel is impossible due to factors which are not in his jurisdiction, he tries at least to prevent Balaam from the act of blessing. He addresses Balaam with a different kind of request than in the beginning: גם קב לא תקבנו ("neither curse them at all," v. 25b) / גם-ברך לא תברכנו ("nor bless them at all," v. 25c), still urging him to curse Israel from different localities (v. 27). But things are not turning back: Balaam utters several oracles imbued with the exaltation of Israel. Num 24 contains these utterances, which have a predictive tone and can be considered as prophetic oracles with elements of blessing (abundance and victory over enemies) rather than as classical blessing utterances.<sup>87</sup> The author's introductory statement in Num 24,1 – כי טוב בעיני יהוה – לברך ("it pleased the Lord to bless") – can be taken as a principle of God's

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<sup>87</sup> Num 24 contains a series of blessings in the form of a proverb (משל) and even foretells some future events. Here the time indicator - באחרית הימים - ("in the latter time," v. 14) occurring in patriarchal blessings (Gen 49,1) - points to some distant future.

dealing with Israel and people in general. The interplay of curses and blessings continues into this chapter. Interestingly, Balaam's wording in v. 9 mirrors Balak's statement in Num 22,6. Here the standard formula – מברכיך ברוך וארריך – ארוור (“Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and everyone who curses you is cursed”) – reflects the stable principle of blessings and curses established by the Lord. Ironically, Balak hears this from the mouth of Balaam to whom he applied similar wording earlier, hoping that the principle of cursing would work in his dealings with Israel.<sup>88</sup> He is enraged, because Balaam, his supposed employee, acts now as a divinely appointed *administrator*. In his bitter rebuke he condemns the diviner for overturning the primary agenda (v. 10):

לקב איבי קראתיך והנה ברכת ברוך זה שלש פעמים  
 (“I called you to curse my enemies, but behold you have persisted in blessing them these three times”).

This statement shows that the curse in this story becomes a means for dealing with an enemy, and the desire to curse is conditioned by enmity. The effect of an intended curse and time are nowhere specified, and it can be supposed that in Balak's conviction the urgent verbal cursing of Israel by the diviner would lead to an *immediate* (as soon as possible?) weakening of God's people.

To conclude, this story demonstrates the truth that the power of a human diviner is limited and overturned by the Lord.<sup>89</sup> The peculiar feature of the account is the radical transformation which takes place: Balaam, being a royally appointed *administrator* of the curse, is transformed into a divinely appointed *administrator* of the blessing,<sup>90</sup> and Israel as an *addressee* of a human curse is turned into an *addressee* of a divine blessing.

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<sup>88</sup> Balak's use of the principle “he whom you curse is cursed” (Num 22,6), applied to Israel, is ‘corrected’ by the Lord's principle “everyone who curses you is cursed” (Num 24,9), applied to those who curse Israel, so ironically Balak himself becomes a potential *addressee* of the divine curse.

<sup>89</sup> Ronald Allen rightly asserts that “demonic powers have no sway; supernatural means are ineffective; pagan acts are useless in the face of the objective reality of the blessing of Israel.” See, R. Allen “The Theology of Balaam oracles,” in *Tradition and Testament: essays in honor of Charles Lee Feinberg* (ed. John S Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg; Chicago: Moody, 1981), 79-119, here 85.

<sup>90</sup> Similarly, Martin Noth speaks of the transformation of “the former pagan magician into an Israelite man of God” (M. Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* [trans. Bernhard W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972; repr., Chico, Calif: Scholars Press, 1981], 78).

### 1.2.4. Summary

In the passages studied in this section, a blessing or curse has a three-part structure with regard to the participants: the Lord is the Initiator, the authoritative figure (priest, diviner) is the administrator, and the people (group or individual) are addressees.

The Lord is a leading figure with absolute authority and infinite power: He actualizes the blessing or curse, controls the sphere of human administration of the blessing or curse, and subjugates the magic to His purpose. The role of the priest, who owns part of the divine sovereignty, is prominent: he certifies the blessing (Num 6) or curse (Num 5) as God's directive in the everyday life of the people. The story of the diviner (Num 24) reflects controversy with the divine power which predominates over that of humans, and here we have an example not only of a failed attempt to announce the curse willfully, but a unique case of a miraculous averting of a curse into a blessing which in its nature (unconditional) goes back to the patriarchal promissory blessing.

The following chart summarizes the results of the study:

<i>Rubric</i>	<i>Passage</i>			
	<b>Num 5,11-31</b> ↓ the curse	<b>Num 6,22-27</b> ↓ the blessing	<b>Num 22-24</b> ↓ a “failed” curse → the blessing	
Initiator	the Lord	the Lord	the king	the Lord
Addressee	the woman	sons of Israel	Israel	Israel
Source	the Lord	the Lord	-	the Lord
Administrator	the priest	the priest	the diviner	the diviner
Executor	the water	-	-	-
Condition	guilt	Lord’s initiative	enmity	Lord’s initiative
Effect	social isolation/ infertility	divine favor, protection, peace	-	abundance, victory
Time	immediate?	after the right formula?	as soon as possible?	indefinite: “in the latter days”



### 1.3. Meaning of blessings and curses in Deuteronomy

In this section our study will be primarily focused on a detailed analysis of the pertinent passages of Deut 27,14-26 and Deut 28, then a broader context (Deuteronomy) and perspective (Lev 26) will be taken into consideration.

#### 1.3.1. The curses of Dodecalogue in Deut 27,14-26

The passage Deut 27,14-26 is traditionally called the Dodecalogue, i.e., a kind of analogy to the Decalogue. The text of Deut 27 makes it clear that declaration of the Dodecalogue is part of a solemn antiphonic ceremony of benediction and malediction which is to be performed in the land after the people of Israel cross the Jordan. Though direct commands are delivered by Moses, the implied *Initiator* of Dodecalogue curses is the Lord. V. 14 specifies that the task to utter curses is laid upon the Levites who should pronounce them loudly.<sup>91</sup>

The Dodecalogue contains twelve curses which are structured identically:

אמן response + the mode of action + formula ארור
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Each *a-r-r* sentence contains the description of a crime which forms the ground for cursing. Wrongdoings can be divided into three categories:

1. Mischief toward God (15, 26)
2. Crimes against a neighbor (16, 17, 18, 19, 24, 25)
3. Sexual abnormalities (20, 21, 22, 23).

It is important to look briefly at each concrete curse-case separately. The first curse (v. 15) is delivered against one who fabricates an image (פסל) and idolizes hand-made objects; such activity is qualified as an abomination (תועבת) to the Lord. The second curse (v. 16) is laid upon one who dishonors his father or mother (מקלה אביו ואמו).<sup>92</sup> The third curse (v. 17) is reserved for one who neglects property rights and moves the boundary mark (מסיג גבול) of a neighbor.<sup>93</sup> The fourth curse (v. 18) awaits a person who misleads a blind

<sup>91</sup> The Hebrew phrase קול רם can be understood as a “loud” or “solemn” speech.

<sup>92</sup> In Prov 30,11 the matter is generalized: דור אביו יקלל ואת־אמו לא יברך (“there is generation which curses their father and does not bless their mother”).

<sup>93</sup> The Hebrew verb סוג in the Hiphil literally means “to displace” and occurs in a number of passages, for example, in Deut 19,14 with a clear commandment to keep boundaries (the

person (משגה עור) on the road, and it is likely that it should be interpreted figuratively.<sup>94</sup> The fifth curse (v. 19) is very serious from the perspective of the biblical concept of justice and strikes a person who perverts judgment (מטה משפט) for the stranger, orphan and widow – people who are socially vulnerable and not able to defend themselves. The next four curses (vv. 20-23) are delivered against those who have improper sexual relations: any person who lies (שכב) with his father's wife, or with his sister, or with his mother-in-law, or with an animal, becomes accursed. The tenth curse (v. 24) is delivered against anyone who secretly strikes (מכה) another person; however the manner is not specified. The eleventh curse (v. 25) presupposes a legal context: a person who receives a bribe (לקח שחד) in order to act against an innocent person (to accuse or kill), deserves a curse.<sup>95</sup> The twelfth curse (v. 26) is a kind of summation: anyone who does not confirm (לא־יקים) the words of the Torah by doing them (who doesn't practice Torah in his life) is under curse.<sup>96</sup>

It is curious that the ground (reason) of each of the twelve curses is concretized, but neither effect nor time of the curse is specified. The roles of participants can be defined as follows: the group of Levites is introduced as a collective *administrator* of the curse, the whole people of Israel (כל־איש ישראל) appears to be a collective *addressee* (audience) of the priestly malediction, whereas the addressee of *a-r-r* sentence, referred to in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular address, is unknown. In other words, a real *addressee* of cursing, declared as accursed, is a criminal, but he (or she) is not identified.

The mechanism of the Dodecalogue suggests two stages – *verbalization* and *actualization*. Two corporate units – clergy and audience – participate in a solemn declaration of the Dodecalogue in the manner of *echo effect*: priests declare *a-r-r* sentence, and the audience responds “Amen.” The clergy function as an authoritative body to which the power to declare curses is delegated (the Lord → Moses → Levites), whereas the audience, being actively involved, confirms the validity of the priestly words by means of a collective “amen.” It is of fundamental importance that each person becomes not only a ‘*listener*’ of

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boundary marker) unchanged. It is interesting that in v. 17 in the LXX the verb μετατίθημι, which literally means “to change” or “pervert” is used.

<sup>94</sup> It is used, for example, in Prov 28,10a with a strong retributive nuance.

<sup>95</sup> The phrase נפש דם נקי (“to spill innocent blood”) occurs in prophetic literature in the context of social ethics of justice.

<sup>96</sup> It is quite curious that in Gal 3,10 in Paul's quotation of that verse the emphasis is slightly different: everyone is cursed (ἐπικατάρατος) since no one is able to be fully obedient to the law.

an authoritative voice, but a 'hearer' of his (her) own voice. Thus, through *a-r-r* sentence, uttered by clergy and confirmed by the people's replica "amen," a guilty person is placed under God's jurisdiction entering a 'zone of misfortune.' Actualization of the curse seems to fit the crime: as the crime is committed secretly (בסתר), but seen by God, so God's dealing with the criminal may be hidden from human sight. Though the Lord is not invoked directly, He is the implied *Source* of the Decalogue curses. It can be concluded that *verbalization* is a stage when the priests function as messengers of the divine word of punishment, while a stage of *actualization* (effect and time) is ultimately under divine control.

The significance of the Decalogue is great. It is clear that twelve *a-r-r* sentences are theologically relevant and ethically colored. Decalogue curses reflect the dynamics of the law (Torah) in such a way that the law becomes relevant for a listener of the curse. The commandments are not given in the form of a prohibition, but dressed in the 'language of curse:' to say that a particular type of behavior is forbidden is one thing, but when a person hears that this way of acting falls under a divine curse, it is altogether different.<sup>97</sup>

The function of the Decalogue curses is threefold: *retributive* (in relation to criminals), *protective* (in relation to victims) and somewhat *revelatory* in the sense that what is hidden from human sight becomes uncovered in the realm of *Judicium Dei*. The curses from the category 'crime against neighbor' (רעהו) function as a kind of *boomerang*: figuratively speaking, an 'arrow' sent against a neighbor returns in the form of a curse.

To resume, Deut 27,14-26 is primarily liturgical in its setting, and here the *a-r-r* sayings, which constitute the Decalogue and are articulated by clergy, are static declarations of Torah's normative prescriptions dressed in the curse language. The peculiar feature of the curse here is that the time and manner of divine visitation are not indicated at all. The curse of the Decalogue, which reflects general moral principles, operates on the level of an individual and addresses the issues of personal responsibility and guilt, and therefore its fulfilment in the life span of an individual is in every case unique.

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<sup>97</sup> See the remarkable article on this topic: E. Bellefontaine, "The curses of Deuteronomy 27: Their Relationship to the Prohibitives," in *No Famine in the Land: Studies on Honor of John L. McKenzie* (ed. J.W. Flanagan and A.W. Robinson; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975), 49-62.

### 1.3.2. Polarity of blessings and curses in Deut 28

Deut 28 contains the speech of Moses delivered at a point of transition (*in the vicinity of the land*), when Israel was staying in the plains of Moav before entering the land. Blessings and curses are set forth as principles for life in a new spatial-temporal dimension. Deut 28 is *historically oriented* in the sense that blessings and curses are to be fulfilled in history. It is important to analyze the overall structure, content and rhetorical features of the passage and consider it in a broader context.

#### 1.3.2.1. Structural organization

Deuteronomy 28 is divided into two parts, and the second is subdivided into three units.<sup>98</sup> Two things are observable in relation to structure. First, there is repetition of topics and motives. This can easily be traced in the curse section: the topic often moves around the motifs of *dispossession* and *futility*. Second, there is a certain thematic development. Thus, the curse section has a clear development from relatively portable to horrific and catastrophic curses. This part can be divided into three units – **three rounds of curses** – each framed by a condition. The structure of the whole discourse can be presented as follows:

I 1-14 (BLESSINGS)

II 15-68 (CURSES)

A. 15-44

B. 45-57

C. 58-68

These blocks of the material can be subdivided into lesser structural units. Here is the overall thematic structure of blessings and curses:

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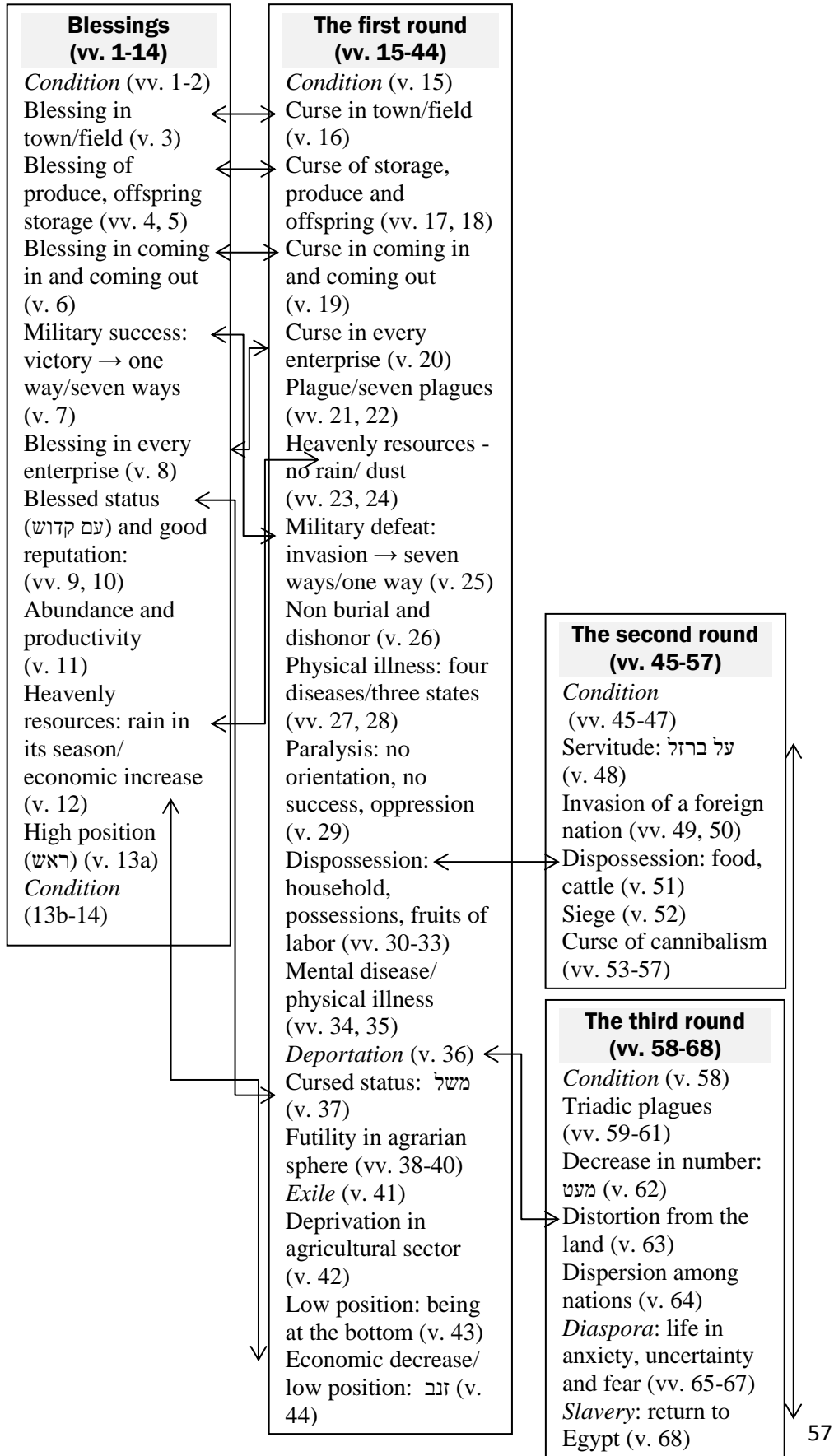
<sup>98</sup> Interesting and quite satisfactory approaches to its structure are demonstrated in the following books: J. H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: Devarim* (JPSTC; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996); D. L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 21:10-34:12* (WBC 6b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002). Tigay suggests that the second (vv. 45-57) and the third (vv. 58-68) sections reflect a sequential order of disasters, whereas in the first one (vv. 15-44) there is no obvious order. He names the section on blessings (vv. 1-14) and the first section on curses (vv. 15-44) ‘catalogues’ arranged in a literary order rather than in natural sequential order (Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 510). Christensen considers the overall structure of Deut 28 as arranged according to what he calls a ‘concentric pattern,’ with a center framed by parallel units (Christensen, vol. 6b, 670-699).

**I BLESSINGS**

(vv. 1-14)

**II CURSES**

(vv. 15-68)



The structure helps us to see the inner dynamics of the text. The symmetry seems to be a feature of the whole discourse on blessings and curses as two polarities or opposite realms: the realm of the blessing (well-being or prosperity) and the realm of the curse (ill-being or gloominess). The following analysis will help to see what blessings and curses are in their effects.

### 1.3.2.2. The realm of blessings

The unit of vv. 3-6 represents a series of formulaic blessings, each introduced by the formula ברוך אתה (“blessed you are”), then in vv. 7-13 the topic develops. The blessings are pronounced by Moses, and the *addressee* is the people of Israel as a corporate unit. There is no direct invocation of the Lord, rather Moses speaks on His behalf presenting Him as the *Source* of goodness.

The blessings, though not numerous, seem to cover all domains of people’s lives, both in the city and field, as v. 3 suggests. Vv. 4 and 5 imply that the blessings result in fertility of the soil and many offspring; they even become visible: the full storage is a sign of prosperity. The blessings extend into the *spatial domain*: the idiom of ‘coming in’ and ‘going out’ in v. 6 implies more than just physical movement, and seems to signify the spatial borders of God’s protection and security.<sup>99</sup> In v. 7 the blessing, extended into the *military domain*, is expressed in terms of an assurance of victory over enemies. The numerical antithesis זרך אחד (“one way”) and שבעה דרכים (“seven ways”) emphasizes the contrast between the tactics of an attack of a well-organized army and the retreat of enemies dispersing in many directions. V. 8 suggests success in all undertakings. The phrase יצו יהוה אתך את-הברכה (“the Lord will command the blessing”) conveys the idea of a *mandatory* blessing showing that the blessing reflects the will of its *Initiator*; that is why success in all enterprises is guaranteed. Vv. 9 and 10 specify two blessing effects relating to the people’s status. The first in v. 9 concerns the people’s unique identity. The Lord promises to set (הקים) His people as עם קדוש (“the holy people”). The ground for such a blessing is the Lord’s faithfulness: <sup>100</sup> כאשר נשבע-לך (“as He swore to you”); at the same time the effectiveness of this blessing is conditional, depending on the people’s faithfulness: כי תשמר את-מצות יהוה (“if you keep the commandments of the Lord”). The second effect in v. 10 concerns the reaction on the part of the people of the earth (כל-עמי הארץ). It is

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<sup>99</sup> The same expression occurs in Psalm 121,8 as a prayer wish.

<sup>100</sup> The Hebrew verb שבע (“to swear”) in the Niphal can be taken as equivalent for “promise.”

implied that the close association of Israel with God's name (שם יהוה) will cause fear in *goyim*. Here the aspects of vision and reaction are brought together through a beautiful wordplay: וראו ("and they will see") and ויראו ("and they will be afraid"). The point is that the people with unique identity become addressees of reverent fear on the part of *goyim*. In times of blessing the reputation of Israel is proportional to their status as a holy nation.

In vv. 11 and 12 the subject returns to productivity. The Lord is portrayed as the *Source* of plenty. The motif of divine goodness toward people is emphasized in v. 11: והותרכ יהוה לטובה ("the Lord will make you abound in prosperity").<sup>101</sup> Prosperity, as a typical feature of blessing, becomes visible in the productiveness of people, flocks and land. It is implied that rich blessings await the people in the land of their forefathers, so this promise is a kind of 'bridge' to the patriarchal blessings. V. 12 implies that the effects of blessings in the agrarian sector depend on such factors as weather conditions. The Lord is portrayed as the *Source* of natural blessings: He opens His heaven treasure (את־אוצרו הטוב) to give rain (בטר) in its season (בעתו).<sup>102</sup> This heavenly storehouse will be at the disposal of the people of the land for a definite purpose: to bless all the work of the people's hand (לברך את כל־מעשה ידך). That blessing further leads to economic stability: the people will be able to supply their own needs and share resources. V. 13 specifies the visible effects of Israel's prevalence over *goyim* through the contrasting images of ראש ("the head") and זנב ("the tail") and spatial dimensions, such as מעלה ("above") and מטה ("underneath"). This description corresponds to that of being עליון על כל־גויי ("high above all the nations of the earth") in v. 1. In both verses the Lord is introduced as the *Initiator* of raising the reputation of His people to the highest possible level. Vv. 13b and 14 stress the conditionality of the blessings. Obedience to the law is necessitated through the triadic exhortation: כִּי־תשמע ("if you listen"), לשמר ("to keep") and לעשות ("to do"). The admonition in vv. 1, 2, and 14 frames the whole section on blessings as a separate unit, and here conditions for blessings to be obtained are articulated.

To sum up, the blessings cover the whole existence of the people of covenant. Their effects suggest fertility, abundance, victory, security, success, high status. God's blessing in Deut 28 is both *mandate*, being an engagement

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<sup>101</sup> The verb יתר, which in the Hiphil form normally means "to leave," here – in a pair with the noun טובה ("good," "welfare") – may be translated as "to pour out abundance."

<sup>102</sup> The two opposite spatial dimensions (sky/earth) are emphatically stressed through a beautiful wordplay of אוצר ("treasure") and ארץ (the land").

of divine will, and *promise*, being an expression of the guarantee of fulfilment. The people of the Lord are destined to live out divine blessings in their land.

### 1.3.2.3. The realm of curses: the first round

The section on curses is large and complex. In vv. 16-19 the curses represent negative poles of the blessings listed in vv. 3-6. From v. 20 onward there is no direct correspondence, and the subject of the curse begins to develop.

The paragraph of vv. 20-24 is focused on disasters, and the Lord is here introduced as the *Initiator* of three horrors, and the *Source* of severe plagues. The triad of horrors in v. 20 – המגפה, המהומה, המארה (“curse,” “confusion,” “rebuke”) – leads to failure in all deeds, and the specific time marker – מהר (“quick”) – signifies imminent death. The rationale is made explicit by God: מפני רע מעלליך אשר עזבתני (“on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me”). Pestilence (הדבר) is literally to cling to the people (v. 21), and seven plagues, as tools of cursing,<sup>103</sup> are going to pursue them being a kind of *executors* (v. 22). The seven plagues possibly can be identified as follows:

שחפת (“consumption”) – wasting disease, <sup>104</sup> tuberculosis <sup>105</sup> = Lev 26,16
קדחת (“fever”) – malaria, infectious hepatitis <sup>106</sup> = Lev 26,16
דלקת (“inflammation”) – malaria’s fever <sup>107</sup>
הרהר (“fiery heat”) – burning, drought, cutaneous inflammation <sup>108</sup>
חרב (“sword”) – drought (?) <sup>109</sup>
שדפון (“blasting”) – sirocco <sup>110</sup>
ירקון (“mildew”) – disease of grain and crops

<sup>103</sup> Grammatically, the idea is expressed as follows: the verb נכה (“to strike”) + the noun (a type of plague) with a particle preposition כ (“with”) as an instrumental marker.

<sup>104</sup> Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (5 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), vol. 4, 82. J. R. Bennett, *Diseases of the Bible*, (London: The Religious tract society, 1891), 72.

<sup>105</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1976), 342.

<sup>106</sup> VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology*, vol. 3, 871.

<sup>107</sup> Bennett, *Diseases*, 72.

<sup>108</sup> Bennett, *Diseases*, 72.

<sup>109</sup> Different vocalization allows reading “drought” to match the other terms with the common idea of burning.

<sup>110</sup> Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, 342.



Vv. 23-24 grotesquely describe hard natural conditions: an incredible natural phenomenon of a ‘metallic’ heaven, iron soil and ‘dusty’ rain as a kind of opposite reality to the ‘heavenly reservoir of blessing’ in v. 12: the ground is likened to iron and the heaven is likened to bronze.<sup>111</sup> In v. 24 powder or dust is a kind of natural *executor* of divine cursing, strikingly, not of harvest, but of people. To conclude, devastating disasters, affecting both agriculture and humans, are torturous and long-lasting.

Vv. 25-26 contain the first hint of dispersion. In v. 25a one polar aspect is picked up, that of the military issue: the defeat of God’s people is a total reversal of the blessing in v. 7. Vv. 25b and 26 possess striking symmetry with a pairing of “all kingdoms of the earth” and “all birds of sky:”

והיית לזעוה לכל ממלכות הארץ (“you will be [an example] of terror to all the kingdoms of the earth,” 25b)

והיתה נבלתך למאכל לכל־עוף השמים (“and your carcasses will be food to all birds of the sky,” 26).

The Hebrew term זעוה in v. 25 is a little bit obscure and literally means “terror” or “trembling.”<sup>112</sup> The sense is that God’s people will become the target of a negative attitude on the part of *goyim* (a reversal of the patriarchal ‘benefit-blessing’). The curse of non-burial balances the sentence: the people’s corpses will be devoured by birds, as *executors* of the curse. As a whole, the curse here receives a clear historical dimension (due to this allusion to kingdoms of the earth as political entities), and it results in verbal abuse (anti-semitism) and death without the possibility of a proper burial.

The paragraph of vv. 27-29 is focused on body and mental disorders, and the Lord is portrayed here as the *Source* of severe diseases, tools of His punishment.<sup>113</sup> The first level is physical illnesses which are characterized as incurable (v. 27): שחין מצרים (“the boils of Egypt”),<sup>114</sup> עפלים (“tumor”), גרב (“scab”) and חרס (“itch”)<sup>115</sup>. The second level is mental disorders such as שגעון

<sup>111</sup> An opposite imagery - the sky = iron and the earth = bronze - occurs in Lev 26,19.

<sup>112</sup> The critical apparatus of *BHS* attests the reading זעוה (“object of trembling”) in the Samaritan version and one Hebrew manuscript in comparison with זעוה (“terror”) in the MT. In the LXX the Greek word δασσπορά is used, as a spatial indication of dispersion.

<sup>113</sup> In vv. 27 and 28 the same grammatical pattern, as in v. 22, is employed.

<sup>114</sup> This word occurs in the book of Ex 9,9.11 in relation to the sixth plague. In v. 35 the word שחין (“boil”) appears with an adjective רע (“evil”) and probably implies leprosy.

<sup>115</sup> Bennett, *Diseases*, 20, associates גרב (“scab,” “scurvy”) with *psoriasis* and חרס (“itch”) with *prurigo*. Both terms denote cutaneous diseases accompanied by severe itching and irritation.

(“madness”), עורון (“blindness”), and תמהון לבב (“bewilderment of heart”) in v. 28. These states imply distraction of mind and retarded understanding. V. 29 further describes a symptom of mental disability by means of an analogie: the manner of people’s orientation in the daytime is similar to that of a blind person groping in darkness. The result is a lack of success: the people will not prosper (לא הצליח) in their deeds.

In the second part of v. 29 the subject shifts to the theme of oppression, which is in focus in vv. 30-33, governed by motives of dispossession and futile efforts. The sense is that all that was retained for personal profit does not belong anymore to the addressee of the curse. The curse extends to the realm of personal belongings and results in radical loss of loved ones (wives, children) and possessions (house, vineyard, domestic animals, products). The people become targeted by enemies who, referred to as איש אחר (“another man”) in v. 30, עם אחר (“another people”)<sup>116</sup> in v. 32 or עם אשר לא־ידעת (“a people whom you don’t know”) in v. 33, function as human *executors* of cursing. The section of vv. 30-33a is structured on parallel sayings:

אשה תארש ואיש אחר ישגלנה  
 (“you shall betroth a wife, but another man will violate her”)  
 בית תבנה ולא־תשב בו  
 (“you shall built a house, but you will not live in it”)  
 כרם תטע ולא תחללנו  
 (“you shall plant a vineyard, but you will not use its fruits”)  
 שורך טבוח לעיניך ולא תאכל ממנו  
 (“your ox shall be slaughtered before your eyes,  
 but you will not eat from it”)  
 חמרך גזול מלפניך ולא ישוב לך  
 (“your donkey shall be torn away from you,  
 but will not be restored to you”)  
 צאנך נתנות לאיביך  
 (“your sheep will be given to your enemies”)  
 בניך ובנותיך נתנים לאם אחר  
 (“your sons and daughters will be given to another people...”)  
 פרי אדמתך וכל־יגיעך יאכל עם אשר לא־ידעת  
 (“a people whom you don’t know will eat up

<sup>116</sup> *Targ. Onq.* reads here הילוני (“profane”).

the produce of your ground and all your labors”).

The first five sayings with a similar pattern underscore the idea of futile efforts, and the last three stress the idea of radical dispossession by enemies. A direct allusion to deportation in v. 32 contains a note on parental sorrow and despair:

ועיניך ראות וכלות אליהם כל־היום ואין לאל ידך  
 (“and your eyes will look and you will be long for them  
 all the day and but there will be nothing you can do”).<sup>117</sup>

This expression conveys the idea of uncertainty and helplessness: it is beyond human capacity to change the situation. The whole paragraph of vv. 30-33a is framed by the same motif, and this structure in Hebrew is perfect:

והיית אך עשוק וגזול כל־הימים (“you shall only be oppressed and robbed  
 continually,” v. 29b)  
והיית רק עשוק ורצוץ כל־הימים (“you will never be anything but oppressed  
 and crushed continually,” v. 33b).

The sense is that the people will only be oppressed and robbed/crushed continually. The time frame כל־היום (“all the day”) or כל־הימים (“all the days”) serves as a *signifier* of the length of the bitter experience, whether it be futile waiting for the return of children or occupation and oppression. V. 34 is a kind of conclusion: people will become crazy (משגע) because of what they see; in some sense craziness is a result of the visual perception of reality.

In the next ten verses the topic concentrates around motifs which were already picked up. Vv. 36 and 37 (also v. 41) contain the first direct allusion to exile. God’s people – together with their king (מלך) – become *deportees*, while the captor is not identified, and is abstractly referred to as a nation (גי), a kind of *incognito*. Deportation is initiated by the Lord, as the verb הלך (“to go”) in the Hiphil (jussive in form), suggests. The word שם (“there”) in v. 36 can be taken as a kind of *designator* of deportation,<sup>118</sup> whereas in v. 37 a context of

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<sup>117</sup> The final phrase can be translated as “there will be nothing you can do” (NASB), “while your hands are powerless” (NJB) or “you shall be helpless” (TNK). *Targ. Onq.* reads it with a long paraphrase, and the point is that even prayer to God cannot help to liberate the children.

<sup>118</sup> This word occurs in Deut 4,27 and 28. As W. Brueggemann points out, the word שמה in v. 27 signifies the Babylonian deportation (W. Brueggemann, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: The Canon and Christian Imagination* [Westminster: John Knox Press, 2003], 92).

deportation is even wider in the sense that כל העמים (“all nations”)<sup>119</sup> are in view, and in v. 41 even the term שבי (“captivity”) is employed. The effects of the curse are servitude and abuse. God’s people are destined to serve idols, namely עץ (“tree”) and אבן (“stone”) while being שם (“there”), and they are transformed into שמה (“horror”)<sup>120</sup>, משל (“proverb”)<sup>121</sup> and שנינה (“taunt”),<sup>122</sup> being בכל העמים (“among the nations”), as vv. 36-37 make explicit. In general, these expressions imply that God’s people become the target of verbal abuse, and their ‘proverbial’ status among other nations (*in diaspora*) becomes fixed. It means that the people of Israel at some period of their history would accommodate to the religious belief of *goyim* and lose their unique identity.

The unit of vv. 38-42 is a new circle in which the motif of dispossession becomes dominant. These verses (except v. 41) are focused on disasters in the agrarian sector. The main aspect is scarcity in spite of great efforts: a sharp contrast – רב (“much”) and מעט (“little,” “a few”) – is drawn between efforts (sowing) and the result (harvest). Such an agrarian curse may be labeled as *a curse of disproportion*. As for the matter of execution, it is curious that in v. 38 and 42, the *executors*, who become consumers, are not enemies anymore (as in the first circle), but insects: ארבה (“locust”), that devour seeds, and צלצל (“cricket”),<sup>123</sup> which are ironically pictured as possessing (יירש) the trees and fruits of the land, whereas the people become dispossessed. To conclude, the main idea of the whole unit is the futility of any kind of human effort.

Vv. 43 and 44 make the first round of curses complete. The saying in v. 43-44 can be taken as an opposite pole of the blessing in vv. 12-13. The people’s position vis-à-vis גר (“stranger”) is reversed: they are brought down to the bottom, and, facing economic decline, are compelled to borrow from those who are on the top in terms of prosperity.

To sum up, the curses of the first round cover many aspects of urban and rural life relating to personal and communal realms, agrarian and military domains, economics and politics. The Lord is introduced as the *Initiator* and the *Source* of curses, and at some stage ‘an unknown nation’ is introduced as a human *executor* of cursing. Effects of the curse are infertility, disasters,

<sup>119</sup> Cf. v. 25 in which a parallel expression “all kingdoms of the earth” occurs.

<sup>120</sup> In the LXX the word αἰνιγμα which literally means “riddle” is used. The sense is that the reaction on the part of ‘outsiders’ would be astonishment.

<sup>121</sup> The meaning of the word in this context is probably “mocking saying.”

<sup>122</sup> The term means “a sharp cutting word.”

<sup>123</sup> It is curious that this word occurs in Isa 18,1 in connection with an allusion to the land of winged crickets.

diseases, failure, futility, defeat, extermination, non-burial, oppression, exile, despair, dispersion, abuse, decline, low status. The curse in the first round is some sort of ‘illusion’ of blessing, i.e., a blessing that is lost: whether begetting of children, or building activity, or agriculture. The motif of dispossession and futility becomes dominant: efforts are not proportional to results, and the labor itself becomes a curse in some sense, since the fruits of labor cannot be used. As for the time aspect, the idea of quick perdition and a continual period of oppression is stressed here.

#### 1.3.2.4. The realm of curses: the second round

V. 45 introduces the second round of curses: it is declared that כל־הקללות (“all these curses”) will come, pursue and overtake the people.<sup>124</sup> The new spiral of *qelalot* is conditioned by the people’s factual disobedience: they did not hear the Lord’s voice in order to keep His commandments and statutes. Conditionality is now changed into causality or, to put it concretely, the ‘if’ is turned to ‘because.’

V. 46 specifies the representative character of this new set of curses:

והיו בך לאות ולמופת ובזרעך עד־עולם (“they shall become a sign and wonder on you and your descendants forever”).

Curses here function as אות ומופת (“a sign and a wonder”), and both the people and their offspring become bearers of such remarkable *qelalot* which become tools of divine punishment. It is emphatically stressed that curses become operative on the level of generations, and their effects are of long-term duration. The context of the curses of this round is living under oppression and foreign authority. The Lord’s initiative in judgment is deliberately stressed.

In vv. 47 and 48 the contrast is sharply drawn between joyfully serving the Lord in abundance (in time of blessing) and serving enemies in the lack of all things (in time of cursing):

כי לא־עבדת את־יהוה בשמחה ובטוב לבב מרב כל (“because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and a glad heart, for the abundance of all things;”)

ועבדת את־איביך ... ברעב ובצמא ובעירם ובחסר כל (“therefore you shall serve your enemies...in hunger, in thirst, in nakedness, and in the lack of all things”).

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<sup>124</sup> The second round is introduced by the verbs בא (“to come”), רדף (“to pursue”) and נשג (“to overtake”) in comparison with the first one in which the first and third terms are used (v. 15).

These two verses make it clear that the blessing and the curse can essentially be understood in terms of bipolarity of *abundance* (רב כל) and *scarcity* (חסר כל). It is explicitly stated here that not serving the Lord is the reason for the curse, and in the case of neglecting such a wonderful possibility, spiritual slavery is the only alternative. The contrast between possibility and inevitability is made vivid through the wordplay of עבד which is used in positive and negative meanings: “to serve” or “to be a slave.” The truth is challenging: if God’s people don’t enjoy the time of blessings, serving the Lord, then they suffer the period of cursing. In v. 48 the Lord is depicted as the *Initiator* of slavery, imposing the iron yoke on the neck of his own people, and finally as the *Source* of their utter destruction.

V. 49 and 50 contain a description of a nation which appears to be an invader, a human *executor* of cursing. The first characteristic (v. 49) is spatial, and it relates to distance: this people will be brought by the Lord from far away i.e., מרחוק מקצה הארץ (“from afar from the end of the earth”). The manner of their attack, which is sudden, is likened to an eagle’s flying: כאשר ידאה הנשר (“as the eagle swoops down”).<sup>125</sup> The second characteristic is communicative: the expression לא־תשמע לשננו (“you will not understand their language”) conveys the idea that the speech of this nation will be completely undiscernible for God’s people. The last characteristic (v. 50) concerns the appearance and the mode of behavior, and it seems that the former reflects the latter. The thought that the nation of fierce countenance (גוי עז פנים) will become merciless toward both – old and young generations – appears in chiastic structure:

לא־ישא פנים לזקן (“who will have no respect for the old,”)  
ונער לא יחן (“nor show favor to the young”).<sup>126</sup>

In vv. 51 and 52 two harms or two effects of the curse are described. The first is famine. In v. 51 there is again a return to the motif of dispossession, and here the invader is presented as a merciless dispossessor who will deprive

<sup>125</sup> This unique Hebrew expression occurs only in this passage. A similar idea is expressed in Lam 4,19.

<sup>126</sup> The idea of cruelty is emphasized by the word פנים (“countenance”) used twice: literally speaking, the nation of fierce countenance will not lift its countenance. Cf. Num 6,26 where similar terminology is employed to convey the opposite: the Lord lifts up His countenance on His people.

Israel of all blessings of productivity.<sup>127</sup> Since the dispossessor will leave nothing of basic life-sustaining products – דגן (“grain”), תירוש (“vine”) and יצהר (“oil”) – hunger is the inevitable reality. The second harm or effect is oppression. In v. 52 the invader is described as an oppressor who will besiege the people in their own territory. Here the phrases והצר לך בכִּשְׁעֵיךָ (“it will besiege you in all your gates”) and בכל־ארצך (“throughout all your land”), repeated twice, emphasize the idea of a grandiose oppression.<sup>128</sup> It is announced that the siege will result in a total destruction of the walls, believed to be גְּבוּהוֹת (“high” or “exalted”) and בְּצִרוֹת (“strong” or “inaccessible”). Ironically, the idea of false trust in human fortifications rather than trust in the Lord, Who granted the land as heritage, is made implicit through the contrast: אשר אתה בטח בהן (“in which you trusted”) and אשר נתן יהוה אלהיך לך (“which the Lord your God has given to you”).

In the unit of vv. 53-57 two curse effects – famine and cannibalism – are neatly interrelated: the former results in the latter. The expressive leitmotif<sup>129</sup> במצור ובמצוק אשר־יציק לך איבך (“during the siege and the distress by which your enemy will oppress you”) articulates the harsh conditions in which the people find themselves. Unbearable famine pushes the people to extreme, unprecedented abnormality: suffering from starvation, they are forced to eat what cannot be eaten *in principle*. There is great deal of bitter irony in the fact that the violent *goyim* eat up all the fruits of the ground and cattle (v. 51), whereas God’s people consume their own offspring (פרי בטן). The tragedy of cannibalism is reflected through two portrayals or types of behavior. Vv. 54-57 describe a typical behavior of a man or woman who in harsh conditions becomes hostile (תרע עינו/עינה)<sup>130</sup> toward the rest of the members of the family, though in normal circumstances they demonstrate their best human qualities, being רך (“tender,” “soft”) and ענג (“delicate”). In the woman’s portrayal such traits as delicateness and tenderness are deliberately emphasized, and the picture of a spoiled woman, who would not even “set the sole of her foot on the

<sup>127</sup> Surprisingly, in this verse the curse is a reversed blessing from v. 4. Precisely the same terminology as in v. 4 – with new elements added (corn, vine, oil) – is used to emphasize the point.

<sup>128</sup> The verb צר carries the idea of “being in narrow and distress,” or “being cramped.”

<sup>129</sup> This phrase is very expressive. The term מצוק conveys a meaning of being under stress, in the situation of hardship. The verb ציק conveys the idea “to press hardly.”

<sup>130</sup> This phrase in Hebrew literally means “to have an evil eye” or “look.” It is curious enough that here in the LXX the word βασκαίνω, which conveys the idea “to bewitch with an evil eye,” is used. It seems that here it signifies the idea of hostility.

ground,” and now secretly consumes the fruit of her own body,<sup>131</sup> is even more shocking. The reason for cannibalism is strikingly banal: there is nothing else left to eat.<sup>132</sup> This abnormal ‘food,’ when parents satisfy their gastronomical needs by eating their own offspring, becomes a curse: such a dramatic reversal of the divine blessing of פרי בטן (“the offspring of body”) in v. 11. To say it metaphorically, the very principle of ‘toledot’ is violated in the sense that there is no generation to come.

To resume, the context of curses in the second (central) round is severe oppression of God’s people inside their own territorial borders by enemies. The Lord is portrayed as the *Initiator* Who brings a cruel invader (*goi az panim*) from far away, and that nation functions as a human *executor* of the divine curse. The people of Israel, targeted by enemies, are forced to servitude, losing their unique identity. The main effects of the curses are siege, destruction, oppression, famine with resulting consequences such as cannibalism and death. The temporal aspect involves the longevity of the period of curses: divine *qelalot* affect generations to come and function as signs for a very long time.

### 1.3.2.5. The realm of curses: the third round

From vv. 58 and 59 onward a last round of curses appears. V. 59 contains the list of future disasters, which follows:

את־מכותך ואת מכות זרעך (“plagues on you and your descendants”)  
מכות גדלות ונאמנות<sup>133</sup> (“severe and lasting plagues”)  
וחלים רעים ונאמנים<sup>134</sup> (“evil and chronic sicknesses”).

Curses in this round are labeled as מכות גדלות (“great plagues”) and חלים רעים (“evil sicknesses”). The Niphal participles of אמן (“to be confirmed”) that follow imply *continuity*, so it is possible to consider the plagues as *lasting* and the sicknesses as *chronic*. The Lord is introduced as the *Initiator* of these extraordinary *makot*, as the term פלא (“to do wondrously”) in the Hiphil form

<sup>131</sup> In v. 57 it is concretized as שליתה היוצת מבין רגליה (“her afterbirth which issues from between her legs”) and בניה אשר תלד (“her children whom she bears”).

<sup>132</sup> It is interesting that in v. 55 the verb שאר (“to leave”) in the Hiphil, which was employed in v. 51, applied to the enemy’s action, appears here in a new context. In addition, in v. 57 the phrase בהסר־כל (“in the lack of everything”), used already in v. 48, occurs.

<sup>133</sup> The NASB translates the phrase as “severe and lasting plagues,” the NJB has here “grievous and lasting plagues,” the LXE translates it as “great and wonderful plagues.”

<sup>134</sup> The KJV translates this phrase as “sore sicknesses and of long continuance,” the NJB has it as “diseases pernicious and enduring.”



suggests. From v. 58 it becomes clear that the condition for such dramatic curses is ultimately serious: they will take place if the people don't keep the words of the written Torah to fear the honored and awesome name of the Lord. As in the previous round the curse here is thought to operate on the level of generations, and it is made explicit through the word זרע ("offspring").

Vv. 60 and 61 are focused on diseases, and the Lord is here portrayed as their *Source*. It is declared that כל־מְדוּה מִצְרַיִם ("all the diseases of Egypt")<sup>135</sup> will be literally clinging to people. V. 61 further develops the subject, making it concrete that some *extra-sicknesses* – כל־חֲלִי ("every sickness") and וְכָל־מַכָּה ("every plague") – not written in the book, will cling to the people.

Vv. 62 and 63 constitute a dramatic reversal of the blessing of multiplication. Here we see again an example of the *bipolarity* of a blessing and a curse. V. 62 begins with a threat of decrease: וְנִשְׁאַרְתֶּם בְּמִתֵּי מֵעַט ("and you shall be left few in number").<sup>136</sup> Then the antithesis follows: תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר הָיִיתֶם כְּכּוֹכְבֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם לְרַב ("whereas you were numerous as the stars of heaven"). The verse ends with a rational explanation: there is a cause behind the curse, and again it is the people's disobedience. In v. 63 it is implied that Lord's acting in cursing will be as consistent as it was in blessing. The Lord is portrayed as the *Source* causing the destruction of His chosen people. The sayings are perfectly balanced:

וְהָיָה כַּאֲשֶׁר־שֵׂשׁ יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְהִיטִיב אֶתְכֶם וְלִהְרַבּוֹת אֶתְכֶם ("it shall come about that as the Lord delighted over you to prosper and multiply you,")  
כֵּן יִשֵּׂשׁ יְהוָה עֲלֵיכֶם לְהַאֲבִיד אֶתְכֶם וְלְהַשְׁמִיד אֶתְכֶם ("so the Lord will delight over you to make you perish and destroy you").

The verse ends with a threat of banishment from the land: the people will be literally torn out (נִסָּח) from the land of promise, so in some sense they are completely cut off from the area of blessings. This verse creates a kind of 'bridge' to the next unit of vv. 64-67 which contain curses that affect the people outside the land.

The context of the last curses is diaspora. The Lord is introduced in v. 64 as the *Initiator* of great dispersion: He will scatter (וְהִפִּיץ) His chosen people

<sup>135</sup> This phrase occurs also in Deut 7,15 in a positive sense, signifying the explicit blessing. It is a curious example of the correspondence of such a blessing to the curse here in v. 60.

<sup>136</sup> The threat here is not that the enemy leaves no grain etc. (... לֹא־יִשְׁאַר לְךָ דָגָן..., v. 51), which is the case in the second round. The real threat is that the people themselves are left few in number (וְנִשְׁאַרְתֶּם בְּמִתֵּי מֵעַט, v. 62), so the people's annihilation by God is the problem here.

among *goyim*. The spatial indications – בכל־העמים (“among all nations”) and מקצה הארץ ועד־קצה הארץ (“from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth”) – signify borders of a complete and grandiose dispersion. The second clause on idolatry is an echo of v. 36 with a slight difference. In vv. 65-67 some traits of dramatic life in diaspora are drawn. It is made explicit that among *goyim* God’s people will constantly experience despair and anxiety. In v. 65 the idea of no rest, neither in temporal nor in spatial dimension, is stressed: there will be no moment for rest (לא תרגיע) and no resting place (מנוח). Then three psycho-emotional states are described: the first phrase – לב רגז – is a unique expression which can be translated as “trembling heart;” the second pairing – כליון עינים – can be translated as “failure of eyes;”<sup>137</sup> and the third expression – דאבון נפש – denotes the state of despair of soul. Characteristically, the Lord appears as the *Source* of such feelings. The idea of anxiety is developed further. In v. 66 the aspect of fragility of life is brought to focus. The metaphor of ‘hanging life’ is a way of stressing the idea of temporal uncertainty. The verse consists of three parts:

והיו חייד תלאים לך מנגד (“and your life will hang in doubt before you;”)  
 ופחדת לילה וימם (“you will be afraid day and night,”)  
 ולא תאמין בהייד (“and shall have no assurance of your life”).

The word חי (“life”), taken in the plural construct form, brackets the clause. The Hebrew root תלא, which literally means “to hang,” is balanced by the verb האמין (to believe”) to emphasize the idea of uncertainty and doubt. In the middle the idea of continual dreadful fear is expressed poetically by the pair ‘day’ and ‘night.’ This idea is further developed in v. 67 with mirrored sayings:

בבקר תאמר מי־יתן ערב (“In the morning you shall say, Would that it were evening!”)  
 ובערב תאמר מי־יתן בקר (“And at evening you shall say, Would that it were morning!”).

The sense is that the terrifying fear of their hearts and the vision of their eyes cause the people to suppress the time.

V. 68 closes up the third round on curses and the whole chapter. The idea is implied that the ‘shade’ of Egypt, as a definitive place of slavery, hangs over the people. The Lord appears as the *Initiator* of the return of His people back to

<sup>137</sup> The word כליון (“failing,” “annihilation”) occurs in Isa 10,22 in the latter meaning.

Egypt in ships.<sup>138</sup> The return to Egypt by the way which is to be forgotten (as is implied through allusion to the Lord's promise "You will never see it again"), is a kind of *anti-Exodus*. It presupposes the dramatic loss of the status of free people. It seems that Egypt serves here as a paradigm for future exiles.

To resume, the curses of the third round, which are designated as *makot*, can be characterized as most terrible and severe. The Lord functions as the *Initiator* and the sole *Source* of the curses in this round. The effects of the curses include diseases, extermination, decrease in number, dispersion, servitude, despair, anxiety, no resting place, exile. The curses, reflecting the transpersonal character of the divine punishment, are for a long time and become the people's everyday reality.

The three rounds of curses represent somewhat of a *spiral*: different kinds of cursing take a new form or come in a more intensive character. The principle of continuity governs the whole section: thus, the curse of dispossession (*portable*) in the 1<sup>st</sup> round runs into the 2<sup>nd</sup> (*radical*); diseases, characterized in the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> rounds as *incurable*, are replaced by *chronic* in the 3<sup>rd</sup> round; the 1<sup>st</sup> round contains some references to exile and diaspora, and in the 3<sup>rd</sup> round almost the whole context of curses is the life of the people in diaspora.

The following table summarizes the roles of the participants in the three rounds:

Round	Source (the Lord)	Executor (enemy)	Addressee (people)
1 <sup>st</sup> round	inflicts calamities		ill
		'unknown nation' → dispossessor	oppressed
	initiates deportation	<i>goyim</i>	deported verbally abused
2 <sup>nd</sup> round	sends a nation	<i>goi az panim</i> → invader	oppressed
3 <sup>rd</sup> round	inflicts diseases		ill
	causes destruction		perished
	initiates dispersion		dispersed
	brings into slavery		enslaved

To conclude, Deut 28 is historically oriented in the sense that ברכות ("blessings") and קללות ("curses") operating as Torah's sanctions – positive and negative – are to be experienced by the people of Israel (עם ישראל) periodically in the course of history.

<sup>138</sup> There are two possibilities for understanding the Hebrew phrase באניות ("in ships"). The first is literal rendering, and the second option is to translate it as an adverb, i.e., "casually."

### 1.3.2.6. Rhetorical features of Deut 28

The text of Deut 28 exhibits high literary style with rich semantics and syntax. It is important to analyze some literary features and rhetorical technique, embedded in the text, in order to understand in general the ‘anatomy’ of the blessings and curses.

#### A. Parallelism and its function

In Deut 28 parallelism is used widely as a means to stress similarity or highlight *bipolarity* of blessing and curse.

The contrast between the two opposite realms is masterfully drawn in the units of vv. 3-6 and 16-19. The units are governed by synonymous parallelism and – in relation to each other – antithetic. In vv. 3 and 16, on the one hand, and in vv. 6 and 19, on the other hand, the parallel structure is perfect, for example, in vv. 3 and 16 the elements *a* (ברוך/ארור אתה) and *b* (בעיר) correspond to the elements *a* (ברוך/ארור אתה) and *b'* (בשדה). In vv. 4 and 18 and 5 and 17 respectively the element *a* is followed by additional elements: four in vv. 4 and 18 – with one element (v. 4) which falls out of the parallel structure – and two elements in vv. 5 and 17. Schematically these parallel units can be presented as follows:

vv. 3-6			vv. 16-19	
v. 3	ברוך אתה	בעיר ו... בשדה פרי-בטנך ופרי אדמתך שגר אלפיד ועשתרות צאנך טנאך ומשאריתך בבאך ו... בצאתך	ארור אתה	v. 16
v. 4	ברוך ופרי בהמתך		ארור	v. 18
v. 5	ברוך		ארור	v. 17
v. 6	ברוך אתה		ארור אתה	v. 19

There are several examples of antithetical parallelism. Vv. 7b and 25b have some antithetic elements inside, and they are antithetical in relation to each other:

<p>v. 7b</p> <p>יתן יהוה את־איביך ... נגפים לפניך  <b>בדרך אחד יצאו ...</b>  <b>ובשבועה דרכים ינוסו</b>          The Lord will cause your enemies...to be defeated before you: they will come out... one way and flee in seven ways</p>	<p>v. 25b</p> <p>יתנכ יהוה נגף לפני איביך  <b>בדרך אחד תצא אליו</b>  <b>ובשבועה דרכים תנוס</b>          The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies: you will go out one way and you will flee seven ways</p>
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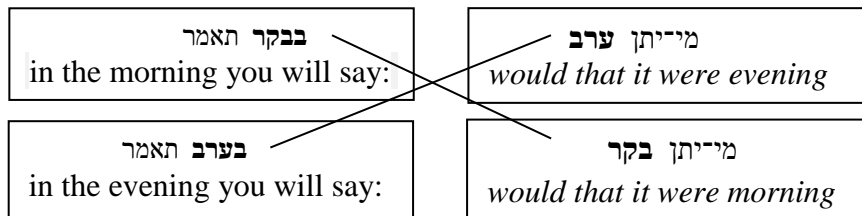
This distinctive feature can be named a *multi-leveled antithesis*. Here the antithesis is threefold: the pairs of “one way/seven ways,” “they will come out/you will come out” and “they will flee/you will flee” highlight the contrast between the people’s victory and the foes’ defeat and *vice versa*.

Another case of multi-leveled antithesis – when antithetic elements inside the structure (in verses) form an external antithesis between the pair of verses – can be observed in vv. 12b-13 and 43-44. The verses, put together, make it easy to observe:

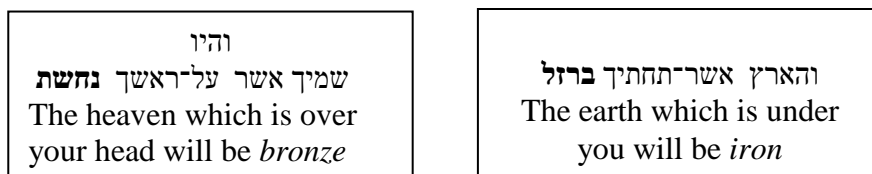
<p>v. 12b</p> <p>והלוית גוים רבים ואתה לא תלוה          you shall lend to many nations but you shall not borrow</p>	<p><i>lending (you)</i></p>
<p><i>head (you)</i> <i>above (you)</i></p>	<p>v. 13</p> <p>ונתנך יהוה לראש ולא לזנב והיית רק למעלה ולא תהיה למטה          the Lord will make you the head and not the tail/you only will be above and you will not be underneath</p>
<p>v. 43</p> <p>(הגר) ...יעלה עליך מעלה מעלה ואתה תרד מטה מטה          the alien shall rise above you higher and higher/you will go down lower and lower</p>	<p><i>high (he)-low (you)</i></p>
<p><i>lending (he)</i> <i>head (he)-tail (you)</i></p>	<p>v. 44</p> <p>הוא ילוך ואתה לא תלונו הוא יהיה לראש ואתה תהיה לזנב          he shall lend to you and you shall not lend to him/ he shall be the head and you shall be the tail</p>

Here the contrast between people's and their neighbor's positions and economic situations is made on multiple levels through such motifs as *being high or low, lending* and a wordplay of "head" and "tail."

In v. 67 there is another example of a perfect structure of multi-leveled antithesis with a big reversal. Here such antonyms as בקר ("morning") and ערב ("evening") form a chiasmic structure:



V. 23 can serve as an example of incomplete antithetic parallelism with two pairs of antithetical and a pair of synonymic elements – sky/ground, above/beneath and bronze/iron – intended to stress the idea of hard conditions of both sky and ground:



In vv. 30-31 the sequence of six antithetic sayings highlight the contrast between *efforts* and *results*. Vv. 38-41 exhibit a similar structure, and the formula which governs this structure is as follows:

the saying (A) + antithesis (-A), introduced by ו / לא, + cause, introduced by כי.

Besides the feature of a structure with *multi-leveled antithesis*, the technique of *symmetry*, when the same motifs are recurrent, takes place. Thus, in the unit of vv. 25-37 the sayings form a kind of symmetrical structure with a local center in vv. 30-32:<sup>139</sup>

<sup>139</sup> The chiasmic structure of this unit and even of a larger unit in vv. 23-42 was observed by a number of scholars. The problem is that the structure of the unit of vv. 25-37 is by no means a perfect chiasm. Perhaps, it is more reasonable to trace symmetrical motifs in verses.

- v. 25 ... והיית לזעוה ("and you will be [an example] of terror...")
- v. 26 ... והיתה נבלתך למאכל ("you carcasses will be a food...")
- v. 27... יככה יהוה בשחין מצרים ("the Lord will smite you with the boils of Egypt")
- v. 28 ... יככה יהוה בשגעון ("the Lord will smite you with madness...")
- v. 29 אך עשוק וגזול כל-הימים ("you will only be oppressed and robbed always")
- v. 30 ... אשה תארש ואיש אחר ישגלנה ("you will betroth a wife, but another man will violate her...")
- v. 31 ... שורך טבוה לעיניך ולא תאכל ממנו ("your ox will be slaughtered before you, but you will not eat of it...")
- v. 32 ... בניך ובנותיך נתנים לעם אחר ("your sons and your daughters will be given to another people...")
- v. 33 רק עשוק ורצוץ כל-הימים ("you will only be oppressed and crushed always")
- v. 34 ... והיית משגע ("you will be driven mad...")
- v. 35... יככה יהוה בשחין רע ("the Lord will strike you with sore boils...")
- v. 36 ... ועבדת שם אלהים אחרים ("and there you will serve other gods...")
- v. 37... והיית לשמה ולשנינה ("you will be a horror, a proverb and a taunt...")

These sayings contain symmetrical elements united thematically. In vv. 26 and 36, though there is no direct correspondence between elements, a common context (diaspora) unites them. It appears that the vv. 30-32, framed by two paralleled sayings, function as the *local foci*. Here we can find an allusion to the Exile as the most tragic event in the history of God's people.

To resume, parallelism is a kind of technical tool in Deut 28: antithesis functions as a technique of contrast to emphasize the *bipolarity* of the blessing and curse; symmetry is a means of returning to the same aspects in order to stress the point and make the exhortation more persuasive.

### B. Verbal forms and their significance

It is remarkable that in Deut 28 a wide range of verbs in different forms is employed. It is important to analyze some verbal patterns in order to see different facets of blessings and curses.

1. One repeatedly used verbal pattern is the structure governed by the formula עד ("until") + infinitive construct of שמד, אבד, כלה, ירד. In most cases this formula has the infinitive construct of שמד or אבד in the Niphal, and the meaning is "until you are destroyed/perished." This verbal pattern appears altogether 10 times. Here is a list of its usage with a preceding subject:

v. 20 curse, confusion, rebuke – עד השמדך ועד אבדך
v. 21 pestilence – עד כלתו אתך מעל האדמה
v. 22 seven plagues – עד אבדך
v. 24 dust and powder from heaven – עד השמדך
v. 48 God – עד השמידו אתך
v. 51 dispossession by enemies – עד השמדך ... עד האבידו אתך
v. 52 destruction of walls by enemies – עד רדת חמתך
v. 61 extra-plagues not written in the book of the law – עד השמדך

In all these cases it is stressed that the destructive power, unleashed by the Lord, will be at work until the point of complete and ultimate destruction. The formula functions as a designation of the apogee of cursing as total extermination.

2. Another example is a structure governed by the formula with the negative particle conjunction אין + participle. This form occurs at the end of a sentence. Here is the list of such occurrences:

v. 26 אין מהריד (“there will be no one to frighten them”)
v. 29 אין מושיע (“there is none to save”)
v. 31 אין לך מושיע (“you will have none to save you”)
v. 32 אין לאל ידך (“there will be nothing you can do”)
v. 68 אין קנה (“there will be no buyer”)

This remarkable device is intended to stress that there is no possibility to change the situation or circumstances. This formula functions as somewhat of a *designator of determinacy* showing that a given state of things or the course of events is unchangeable by those who are subjected to destructive forces.

3. One of the remarkable features is a frequent use of verbal forms in the Hiphil stem, primarily in the curse section. The Hiphil verbs have a strong sense of *causality*, pointing to the Lord as the *Source* of misfortunes and *Initiator* of certain ill-fated events. Verbal clauses in the Hiphil seem to highlight the dynamics of God’s acts or those of human *executors*, who ‘prolong’ the divine activity of cursing. The following chart displays the use of verbs in the Hiphil form for describing God’s and human’s acts:



<i>verb</i>	<i>verse</i>	<i>Initiator/ executors</i>	<i>addressee/ kind of misfortune</i>	<i>context/location</i>
נשג	15	<i>qelalot</i>	(you)	
דבק	21	God	בך את־הדבר	מעל האדמה
הלך	36	God	אתך/מלך	שם / אל־גוי
נכה	22	God	(you) בשחפת ...	
	27	God	(you) בשחין מצרים	
	28	God	(you) בשגעון ...	
	35	God	(you) בשחין רע	
שאר (לא)	51	nation	לך דגן תירוש...	אדמה (implied)
צרר	52-2x	enemy	לך	בכל־ארץ
צוק	53		לך	מצור
	55		לך	
	57		לך	
פלא	59	God	את מכתך ואת מכות זרעך	
שוב	60	God	בך את כל־מדוה מצרים	מצרים
	68	God	(you)	
עלם	61	God	כל־חלי וכל־מכה... עליך	
אבד	51	nation	אתך	אדמה (implied)
	63	God	אתכם	מעל האדמה
שמד	48	God	אתך	מעל האדמה
	63	God	אתכם	
פוץ	64	God	(you)	בכל־העמים / שם

The structure of participants in most cases has the Lord as the *Initiator* of cursing, nation (*goi*)/enemies as *executors* and the people as *addressees*.<sup>140</sup> The verbs describe different forms of divine visitation, as varieties of curses (plagues, extermination, dispersion). The stem is also used to describe the oppressive politics of the executors. Some cases suggest that a divine or human act of cursing takes place in the land, other imply a direction: to lands of diaspora/from the land. To sum up, the Hiphil form is a powerful linguistic feature, helping to express the dynamism of divine initiative or human execution.

<sup>140</sup> This structure is in sharp contrast with roles in the patriarchal blessing in which the Lord is the Initiator of blessing, the patriarchs are executors and nations (*goyim*) are beneficiaries.

### C. Protasis/apodosis structure and cause/effect rhetoric

Now we focus on some stylistic features with regard to syntax. In Deut 28 the formulation of blessings and curses involves a strict sense of conditionality in the sense that blessings and curses are entirely dependent on the people's behavior. The syntactical structure of protasis-apodosis, which is a peculiar feature here, is a means to underline the link between the cause and effect. Conditional sentences bracket the section of blessings and three rounds of curses. In general, protasis with the marker of conditionality "if" establishes the condition for a blessing or curse functioning as *antecedent*, while apodosis articulates the divine promise of a blessing or the threat of a curse, functioning as *consequent*. The following table displays these cases:

If (אם) you obey the Lord..., that (ו) the Lord will set you on high... /all these blessings will come... and overtake you, if (כי) you obey the Lord... (vv. 1, 2)
If you don't (אם-לא) obey the Lord..., that (ו) all these curses will come upon you and overtake you (v. 15)
And all the curses will come...and overtake you..., because you did not (כי-לא) obey the Lord... (v. 45)
Because you did not (תחת אשר לא) serve the Lord..., therefore (ו) you will serve your enemies (vv. 47, 48)
If you don't (אם-לא) keep and observe all the words of this law... to fear this awesome and honored name, the Lord your God, then (ו) the Lord will bring extraordinary plagues (vv. 58, 59)

The rhetoric of cause and effect is convex: in clauses governed by the particle אם ("if"), the future effect (a blessing or curse), potentially dependent on the people's fidelity or infidelity, is stressed, whereas in clauses governed by the cause marker כי-לא ("because") or תחת אשר לא ("because"), the idea of factual infidelity, which becomes the ground for new curses, is emphasized. The sense is that fidelity 'accelerates' the arrival of blessings, infidelity 'wakes up' curses, the third is not given. To resume, conditionality in Deut 28 involves the dynamics of cause and effect, and the structure of protasis/apodosis rhetorically underlines the close link between behavior and reward (b) or retribution (c), becoming part of a persuasive strategy to motivate to conscious obedience.

To sum up, all stylistic features mentioned above are rhetorically significant to make sharper the alternative of two styles of life or two modes of existence.

### 1.3.2.7. Contextual considerations

#### A. Deut 28 within Deuteronomy

In order to see the ‘texture’ of covenantal blessings and curses, it is important to look at Deut 28 within a large scope, in the context of Deuteronomy.

The theme of the book of Deuteronomy is focused on making of the covenant and the repetition of the law. Blessing and curse motifs, scattered throughout the whole speech of Moses, are of crucial importance. They underline the logic of sanctioning of the Torah, and being covenantal sanctions, blessings and curses are intended to receive historical dimension, i.e., to be fulfilled in the history of God’s people.

The very beginning of Deuteronomy is marked by a positive orientation. The motif of the blessing in Deut 1,10-11 echoes the patriarchal blessing of multiplication. It is implied that the blessing is partially realized (present) still being in the train of fulfillment (future). V. 11 contains a benediction:

יהוה אלהי אבותכם יסף עליכם ככם אלף פעמים ויברך אתכם כאשר דבר לכם  
 (“May the Lord, the God of your fathers, increase you a thousand-fold more than you are and bless you just as He has promised you”).

Here Moses, the leader, appears as *the initiator* of the benediction, and the whole nation is a collective *addressee*, whereas the Lord, the God of the fathers, is summoned as the *Source*. Grammatically, it is an utterance in the form of a wish, and here the combination of the verb יסף (“to add”) and the verb ברך (“to bless”) implies continuity of the blessing. The effect of the blessing is increase, i.e., the growth of the nation, and since it is grounded in an earlier promise, its fulfillment is guaranteed.

The motif of the curse is brought to focus in Deut 4,25-28 which has striking affinities with Deut 28. Four effects of the curse – extermination, dispersion, decrease in number and servitude – bring to mind the same curse effects articulated in Deut 28,21.36.62.64. The future curses are conditioned by the people’s apostasy during their long-term settlement in the land. Motivation is even stronger here: thus, heaven and earth are called to be witnesses, and the possibility of overturning of the curse effects is hinted. The point is that the Lord’s mercy and faithfulness to the covenant become primary factors for radical averting of consequences of the people’s unfaithfulness. The spatial context for a *new turn* is diaspora: ובקשתם משם את-יהוה (“but from there you

will seek the Lord”), as v. 29 implies, and the time-frame is באחרית הימים (“in the latter days”), as v. 30 makes clear.

The passage of Deut 7,12-15 is a curious elaboration of the conditional blessing-promise with some reversed elements missing in Deut 28. V. 13 begins with a triadic promise – ואהבך וברכך והרבך (“He will love you, bless you and multiply you”) – and then the sequence of visible material blessings follows. The context of this blessing of productivity (prosperity) is the land (הארץ), and the list, being equal to that of Deut 28,4, is expanded here: three elements – grain, wine, oil – which are mentioned in Deut 28 only in the curse section (v. 51) are added. In v. 14 the idea of a national blessing, superior in its degree, is stressed: ברוך תהיה מכל-העמים (“you shall be blessed above all peoples”).<sup>141</sup> V. 15 articulates ‘the blessing of health’ (no sickness of Egypt) as a reversal of the curse in Deut 28,60 and 61a, and here the potential addressee of such a curse is substituted: it is laid instead upon those who hate Israel (cf. Deut 30,7).

In Deut 8 the ideas of *blessedness of the land* and *blessing in return* are emphasized. In vv. 8 and 9 the land, abundant with seven products, water and bread, and where any kind of scarcity becomes nonsense, is implicitly described as the place of blessing *par excellence*. In v. 9 the terminology of curse – מסכנת (“scarceness”) and חסר (“lack”) – is used in a positive sense, so the promise becomes a reversal of such curse effect as scarcity in Deut 28,48 and 57 when the people find themselves lacking all things (בהסר כל). In v. 10 the triad of verbs – אכל (“to eat”), שבע (“to be sated) and ברך (“to bless) – rhythmically stresses the idea of thanksgiving as a kind of a blessing in return. Here the addressee of the divine blessing is commanded to bless the *Source*, so the Lord is turned into the *Addressee* of a human blessing.<sup>142</sup> The Lord is to be blessed not for food as such, but for the good land (על-הארץ הטובה) He grants. The truth is implied that as in the land of scarcity (in the wilderness) the people experienced abundance (eating manna, v. 16), so they shall definitely not

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<sup>141</sup> This manner of the utterance recalls the snake’s curse in Gen 3,14. Here the superlative מכל (“more than”) signifies the highest status of the addressees of the blessing, whereas in Gen 3 it implies the lowest status of the addressee of the curse.

<sup>142</sup> A similar idea of a blessing in return (a kind of a blessing as *tribute*) is expressed in Deut 16,15-17. The occasion is a cultic celebration when a person is demanded to bring a voluntary gift which must be proportionate to the degree in which the Lord blessed that person. This demand suggests that divine blessing never leaves the person empty-handed. The festive times become occasions for *celebration of blessings*: the material blessing produces almost ecstatic joyfulness which becomes an expression of thankfulness to the Lord as the *Source*.

experience any scarcity in the land of abundance (eating bread, v. 9). The theme of blessedness of the land is further developed in Deut 11,9-12. Three characteristics are underscored to picture its unique quality:

ארץ זבת חלב ודבש (“a land flowing with milk and honey,” v. 9)

ארץ הרים ובקעת למטר השמים תשתה מים (“a land of hills and valleys drinks water from the rain of heaven,” v. 11)

ארץ אשר ייחיה אלהיך דרש אתה תמיד (“a land which the Lord your God cares for always,” v. 12).

The land is presented as rich naturally; it is a *target* of continual divine care, and it is a land which literally ‘drinks’ water from heaven. It is remarkable that, besides the spatial characteristic, the sense of temporality is present. In v. 12 it is said that the eyes of the Lord are always (תמיד) fixed on the land. The expression מרשית השנה ועד אחרית שנה (“from the beginning of the year until the end of the year”) implies that ‘the divine calendar’ is always open, and the Lord is actively involved in sustaining the necessary conditions for the land to flourish. The definite promise of rain in its season (בעתו), early and late rains (יורה ומלקוש) in v. 14 echoes the blessing of heavenly treasure in Deut 28,12, whereas the image of a closed sky in v. 17 recalls the imagery of a ‘metallic’ heaven in Deut 28,23.

In Deut 29-30 some issues concerning the seriousness of covenantal blessings and curses are articulated. The first is a precaution in Deut 29,18-21 against *self-blessing* which can be turned into a curse. The situation is the case when a person neglects the words of curses as stipulations of the covenant (אלות הברית, v. 20) and considers himself or herself to be safe and doing well. The idea of an ‘illusory’ blessing is expressed in a quite striking way. The saying שלום יהיה לי (“I have peace”) in v. 18 connotes the idea of well-being. The verb ברך in the Hitpael form can be translated as “to boast” or “bless oneself in his heart.”<sup>143</sup> It means that a person who considers himself or herself to be blessed, factually becomes the addressee of the curse in a sense of אלה.<sup>144</sup> The second issue is a promise of restoration in Deut 30,1-5. The case is the situation when curses are fulfilled, i.e., they have already become history. The

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<sup>143</sup> Noonan, “Abraham, Blessing and the Nations,” 81, translates this phrase as “he considers himself blessed in his heart” arguing for the reflexive meaning of the stem Hitpael.

<sup>144</sup> In Deut 29 the term אלה (“oath”) is played out in different nuances. In v. 11 it becomes a synonym of ברית (“covenant”) in the sense of oath; in v. 19 this term means the curse of the covenant as punishment, and the phrase אלות הברית in v. 20 implies stipulations of the covenant.

context is diaspora. Characteristically, returning to the Lord (ושבת עדי־יהוה), “and you return to the Lord,” v. 2) is a key factor, but only the Lord’s compassion (ורחמך, “He will have compassion on you,” v. 3) makes a dramatic change from the curse to a blessing possible. The Lord, pictured in Deut 28 as the *Initiator of dispersion*, is here portrayed as the *Initiator of a grandiose return* of Israel to the land. In v. 3 the return from diaspora is pictured as a reversed process to that of dispersion: regathering of the people is undertaken from *there*, from all the nations: ושב וקבצך מכל־העמים אשר הפיצך יהוה אלהיך שמה (“and He will return you and gather you from all the nations where the Lord your God has scattered you”). In v. 5 the promise of a blessing resulting in prosperity and multiplication – והיטבך והרבך מאבת־יך (“and He will make you prosper and multiply you more than your fathers”) – signifies a higher degree of blessing than the patriarchal, so after being cursed the people experience blessings of a new quality.

After this overview it can be concluded that the blessing and curse motifs outside Deut 28 provide us with a fuller picture of the covenantal drama: ‘new’ blessings are added, and some appear as reversals of the curses of Deut 28. Three peculiar motifs outside Deut 28 – blessedness of the land, blessing in return and the miracle of radical change of the curse into a blessing – rhetorically underline the general geographical and historical conditions of the national existence of Israel governed by a blessing or curse.

### B. Comparison with Lev 26

As there is a similar series of blessings and curses in Lev 26, we shall briefly compare the two passages. In spite of the thematic resemblance, the elaboration of blessings and curses in Lev 26 differs from that of Deut 28. Leviticus 26 retains its own particular style and originality. Formulaic language is totally absent. Here the Lord, as the *Initiator* of blessings and curses, directly addresses His people with promises and threats.

Conditionality is strongly felt here as well as in the case of Deut 28. The condition for well-being is the people’s fidelity in keeping God’s statutes (v. 3). The condition for the curse is the people’s disobedience and stubbornness. In Lev 26 a different schema can be traced behind God’s dealing with unfaithful people, and the curse operates here as a kind of *spiral turn*. It is stressed through the figure of speech “seven-time penalty,” which takes place, for example, in v. 18: ויספתי ליסרה אתכם שבע על־הטאתיכם (“I will punish you

seven times more for your sins”). The point is that ignoring God’s warning and disregarding God’s call to repentance in a time of cursing becomes the ground for *a new spiral turn* and leads to new terms of curses. The regularity of such usage in vv. 18, 21, 24 and 28 underlines the idea of *progressive character of divine cursing* which becomes proportionate to the sin committed by people.

The Lord is depicted in Lev 26 as the sole *Initiator* and the *Source* of calamities. Actualization of divine cursing through enemies is not stressed as much here as in Deut 28, where enemies function as human executors. Here wild animals are involved as ‘actors’ in the drama, functioning as *executors*: they consume the people’s offspring and flock (v. 22). In addition, the sword appears as a kind of *executor* of the Lord’s cursing. The leitmotif of ‘striking by sword’ is recurrent, and here is the table of such usages:

v. 25 והבאתי עליכם חרב נקמת נקם־ברית (“I will bring upon you a sword which will <i>execute</i> vengeance for the covenant”)
v. 33 והריקתי אחריכם חרב (“and I will draw out a sword after you”)
v. 36 ונסו מנסת־חרב (“they will flee as though from the sword”)
v. 37 וכשלו איש־באחיו כמפני־חרב (“they will stumble over each other as if [running] from the sword”)

In the first two cases the image of the sword is used to picture God’s action of vengeance, in the latter cases it is used to describe the people’s confusion and fear induced by a kind of ‘hallucination’ of the sword.

The effect of the blessings (vv. 4-12) is generally close to that of Deut 28, and here fertility, abundance, victory, security, peace and divine presence are the main benefits. The idea of military victory over enemies in Lev 26,8 is stressed through a numerical idiom as well as in Deut 28,8, but with different numerical elements. The idiom is beautifully constructed, and it exhibits chiasm structure:

ורדפו מכם חמשה מאה ומאה מכם רבבה ירדפו  
 (“five of you will pursue a hundred,  
 and a hundred of you will pursue ten thousand”).

In Lev 26,5 the blessing involves an amazing aspect of temporality in the sense that seasons overlap each other: the time of harvest lasts until the time of sowing. The time of blessing is stretched in some sense.

The effect of the curses, which is basically similar to that of the “Deuteronomic,” includes agricultural disasters, infertility of the soil, scarcity, futility, famine/cannibalism, extermination, defeat, non-burial, devastation of the land, dispersion, faintness and fear. In particular, such a common effect as scarcity, expressed as a *curse of disproportion*, is described in v. 26 by the striking imagery of ten women, baking bread in one oven:

עשר נשים להמכם בתנור אחד והשיבו להמכם במשקל ואכלתם ולא תשבעו  
 (“ten women will bake your bread in one oven, and they will bring back your bread in rationed amounts, so you will eat and not be satisfied”).

The meaning is that despite the efforts of ten women, bread is given in rationed amounts, and it is tragically insufficient. The motif of futility, common to both passages, occurs here in v. 20, being expressed explicitly:

ותם לריק כחכם ולא־תתן ארצכם את־יבולה ועץ הארץ לא יתן פריו  
 (“your strength will be spent *uselessly*, for your land will not yield its produce, and the trees of the land will not yield their fruit”).

The spatial aspect in relation to blessings and curses is the next point to consider. The land issue in Lev 26 is a key concept, and the land is even personified, being a kind of *executor*. In times of blessing the ground and trees produce fruits, being *executors* of blessing (v. 4); whereas in times of cursing all is contrary (v. 20), and in all days of desolation (כל ימי השמה), when God’s people remain in diaspora, the land enjoys its Sabbaths (v. 34). As in Deut 28, the people’s land is the context of blessings, whereas the land of enemies is the context of curses, and in Lev 26 it functions even as an *executor* of cursing consuming the people (v. 38). However the foreign land becomes a spatial context of radical change: being left in the land of their enemies (בארצת איביהם), the people will repent and confess their iniquity (עון), as vv. 39-40 state. While nothing is said explicitly about the peoples’ return to the land, such a wonderful possibility is hinted at in v. 42: והארץ אזכר... (“then I will remember my covenant... and I will remember the land”). Another spatial reference, which is common, is Egypt: in Deut 28,68 it is associated with slavery, and Egypt as a definite place of exile is still on the horizon, whereas in Lev 26,13 and 14 this place is associated with freedom, and it is left behind. To resume, Lev 26 contains a version of blessings/curses, which are directly uttered by the Lord, and here the words “blessing” and “curse” don’t occur.



### 1.3.3. Summary

To sum up, the texts, analyzed in this section, represent a quite intensive elaboration of the topic on blessings/curses. Deut 27,14-26 contains the fixed form of curses, the so-called Dodecalogue, which is to be administered by clergy. Deut 28 is a collection of covenantal blessings and curses, intended to regulate the life of the people of Israel in the framework of the divine covenant, so they are supposed to be fulfilled in history. The closest parallel to that type of blessings and curses is Lev 26. The following chart summarizes the results:

<i>Rubric</i>	<i>Passages</i>				
	<b>Deut 27, 14-26</b>	<b>Deut 28</b>		<b>Lev 26</b>	
		blessings	curses	blessings	curses
Initiator	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord
Addressee	individual	Israel	Israel	Israel	Israel
Source	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord	the Lord
Administrator	Levites	-	-	-	-
Executor (s)	-	-	plagues/dust enemies birds/beasts, insects	ground/ trees	ground/trees enemies' land beasts sword
Condition	crime	fidelity	infidelity	fidelity	infidelity
Effect	-	fertility, abundance, victory, security, success, prosperity, high status	infertility, scarcity, defeat, disasters, failure/ futility decline, low status, extermination, famine, cannibalism, non-burial, diseases, dispersion, abuse, anxiety, despair, no rest, servitude, oppression, destruction, siege, exile	fertility, abundance, victory, security, peace, divine presence	infertility, scarcity, defeat, disasters, futility  extermination, famine, cannibalism, non-burial, devastation, dispersion, faintness, fear
Time	-		“quick/all days/ forever”	stretched	
<i>to be fulfilled in history</i>					

## 1.4. Blessings and curses in terms of fulfillment

The previous analysis shows that “Deuteronomic” and “Levitical” blessings and curses can be largely understood as divine sanctions. Generally speaking, the Lord sanctions His Torah through blessings and curses, and this is to be materialized through the course of history or individual life. It is important to look outside the Pentateuch and see blessings and curses in terms of fulfillment. “Deuteronomic” and “levitical” formulations of blessings and curses pave the way for inter-textual reading. An attempt will be made to trace the blessing/curse schema in some texts of former/classical prophets and writings, reading them in the light of Deut 28 and Lev 26.

### 1.4.1. Blessings and curses as tools for judging history

In this section several texts which canonically belong to former prophets will be viewed through the lens of “deuteronomic” blessings and curses.

#### 1.4.1.1. 1 Kgs 8,30-53: confession as means to change history

The passage 1 Kgs 8,30-53 is a record of Solomon’s intercessory prayer on the occasion of dedication of the Temple. In this prayer – with clear temporal (*the future*) and spatial (*land/galut*) dimensions – some cases can be interpreted as typical curses. The prayer contains the exposition of a potential case and the request for divine mercy and forgiveness. Solomon asks the Lord to intervene and support His people. The Lord is invoked persistently in the following manner (with variants): ואתה תשמע השמים (“then hear in heaven”). Potential events – defeat by enemies, agricultural disaster, exile – are depicted with the use of a “deuteronomic” vocabulary, and it is stressed that the calamities are conditioned by the people’s sin. It is curious to look at each case.

In vv. 33 and 34 the case is defeat by enemies: בהנגף עמך ישראל לפני אויב (“when Your people of Israel are defeated by enemies”). The Lord is asked to forgive the people and bring them back to the land. It is implied that the people’s return to the Lord is a crucial step for the return to the land: ושבו אליך (“and [if] they return to You”) / והשבתם אליהאדמה (“and bring them back to the Land”). The request to help the people in their battle against enemies in vv. 44 and 45 reminds us of a blessing: the phrase אשר תשלחם בדרך (“by whatever way you will send them”) in v. 44 echoes the promise of Deut 28,7.

In vv. 35-37 the occasion is agricultural disaster. Thus, in v. 35 the imagery of heaven, that is shut up (בהעצר שמים), is identical to that in Deut 11,17, with the use of the same terminology. V. 36 implies that repentance is a key factor in the possible reversal of the curse into a blessing: the Lord is asked to send rain upon the land: ונתתה מטר על־ארצך (“and send rain upon Your land”). The list of disasters in v. 37 includes several curses from Deut 28,22 such as דבר (“pestilence”), שדפון (“blight”), ירקון (“mildew”); and here a wide range of disasters is implied: כלי־מהלה / כלי־נגע (“whatever plague”/ “whatever sickness”).

In vv. 47-51 the occasion is exile. The idea of repentance in such a context as the lands of diaspora is stressed emphatically. The expression והשיבו אל־לבם (“if they thought”) in v. 47 strikingly reminds us of the saying in Deut 30,1 (“and you call them [words of blessing/curse] to mind”). The context is the same: in Deut 30,1 the spatial dimension is בכל־הגוים (“in all the nations”), and here in v. 47 it is the land of captivity: בארץ אשר נשבו־שם (“in the land where they have been taken captive”), so the same perspective is shared in the Mosaic speech and Solomon’s prayer.

To resume, Solomon’s prayer is constructed around blessing/curse motifs; it is a kind of ‘a prayer in a prayer’ intended to *model the people’s requests in times when a blessing/curse becomes historical reality*. Repentance (a kind of inner ‘catharsis’) and confession of sins are means to stop the curse and get the lost blessing. In other words, confession of guilt is a key factor for *turning the wheel of history in the opposite direction*.

#### **1.4.1.2. 1 Kgs 9,3-9: explanation of history on the basis of a curse**

The visible features of the “deuteronomic” curses also become traceable in 1 Kgs 9,3-9, in God’s response to Solomon’s prayer. Vv. 6 and 7 form the protasis-apodosis structure which is similar to that of Deut 28: infidelity will entail serious consequences which are articulated in terms of a curse, and here the Lord is *Initiator*. Expulsion from the land of promise, destruction of the temple and verbal abuse are the main curse effects. Vv. 8 and 9, focused on the temple and land, stress the idea of an external reaction on the part of כלי־עבר (“all who pass by”).<sup>145</sup> That vision of the temple left in ruin and the desolated land will cause astonishment and make people look for a rational explanation. The question asked in v. 8 is the following:

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<sup>145</sup> Cf. Lev 26,32: here the vision of desolated land causes reaction on the part of those who are settled in the land. In Deut 29,22-28 the land struck by plagues is in view.

על־מה עשה יהוה ככה לארץ הזאת ולבית הזה

(“Why has the Lord done this to this land and to this house?”).

Those who respond explain that all this evil (כל־הרעה הזאת) happened because the people of Israel left the Lord (v. 9). The point is that the people’s explanation of what happened to God’s people is drawn from the basis of a visible curse. This dialogue between those who ask and those who respond is similar to that of Deut 29,22-28 and can be taken as an interpretive model: *the curse fulfilled serves as a means for explaining history*. To draw an analogy with an iceberg, the cause (disobedience) is its invisible part, and the consequence (a curse) is its visible part. Thus, history proposes its own peculiar explanations.

#### 1.4.1.3. 2 Chron 29,1-9: divine visitation in terms of Torah’s curses

The text 2 Chron 29,1-9 is an example of *implicit* interpretation of history in terms of the Torah’s curses in relation to a historical event: the captivity in the monarchic period.<sup>146</sup> The account narrates the event of the sanctification of the Temple in Jerusalem during the rule of Hezekiah. The king, addressing the Levites, interprets the recent past in terms of a curse, a divine visitation brought about by the sins of their fathers. In the king’s wording in v. 8 the Lord is pictured as the *Source (prima causa)* of trouble:

ויהי קצף יהוה על־יהודה וירושלם ויתנם לזועה לשמה ולשרקה

(“therefore the wrath of the Lord was against Judah and Jerusalem, and He has made them an object of terror, of horror, and of hissing...”).

The terms – זועה [*qere* – זועה (“terror”)], שמה (“horror”), שרקה (“hissing”), two of which occur in Deut 28,25.37 – designate the effects of the Torah’s curse to mean that God’s people become the target of oppressive politics. V. 9 articulates consequences of the divine punishment:

והנה נפלו אבותינו בחרב (“for behold our fathers have fallen by the sword,”)

ובנינו ובנותינו ונשינו בשבי על־זאת (“and our sons, and our daughters and our wives are in captivity for this”).<sup>147</sup>

<sup>146</sup> It is likely that the invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE is hinted at here.

<sup>147</sup> These consequences echo the curses of Deut 28 (exile) and Lev 26 (the motif of sword).

The event is a clear case of a materialization of the Torah's curse which is operative on a generational level, and the reform of Hezekiah is a step to reverse the situation.

#### **1.4.1.4. Dan 9,10-14: unprecedented evil as fulfillment of the curse**

The prayer of Daniel, recorded in Dan 9,10-14, is an example of *explicit* interpretation of history in terms of Torah's curses in relation to a historical event: the Babylonian exile.

Daniel confesses the sins of his people and claims that the calamity sent upon Israel is a dramatic fulfillment of the Torah's curses. V. 11 highlights the idea of a direct connection between the corporate guilt and the corporate curse sent upon Israel:

ותתך עלינו האלה והשבעה אשר כתובה בתורת משה עבדי-האלהים כי חטאנו לו  
("and all Israel has transgressed Your law and turned aside, not obeying Your voice,")  
("so the curse has been poured out on us along with the oath which is written in the Law of Moses, the servant of God, for we have sinned against Him").

This event is principally understood as a materialization of the words of the curses written in the Torah of Moses (cf. Deut 29,27). In v. 12 the effect of the curse, which is a confirmation of the divine words, is interpreted as an unprecedented calamity:

ויקם את-דבריו אשר-דבר עלינו ועל שפטינו אשר שפטונו להביא עלינו רעה גדולה  
("thus He has confirmed His words which He had spoken against us and against our rulers who ruled us to bring on us great calamity,")  
אשר לא-נעשתה תחת כלי-השמים כאשר נעשתה בירושלם  
("for under the whole heaven there has not been done anything like what was done to Jerusalem").

The curse in Daniel's wording appears as a synonym of great evil (רעה גדולה). In v. 14 it is implied that it was potential, i.e., it was kept by the Lord and then brought upon the people: וישקד יהוה עליה-רעה ויביאה עלינו ("therefore the Lord has kept the calamity in store and brought it on us," NASB). Daniel's prayer with a *retrospective* overview reminds us of Solomon's prayer which is *prospective*, and confession of sins is a key issue in both accounts.

To resume, the analysis of several texts show that blessings/curses provide an interpretive framework for explanation of history; perception of history in terms of Torah's sanctions is apparent in some cases, when "deuteronomic" language is appropriated to describe the event as a case of their materialization.

#### **1.4.2. Blessings and curses as promise/threat categories**

It is now important to trace the schema of the blessing and the curse behind promises of deliverance and threats of judgment in the texts of classical prophets. In this section some passages from the book of Jeremiah, which has close parallels with Deut 28, and from the book of Amos, which has some affinities with Lev 26, are to be examined.

##### **1.4.2.1. Rhetoric of judgment in Jeremiah**

In the time when Jeremiah prophesized, "deuteronomic" curses seem to receive a concrete shape: the Babylonian captivity – a great disaster, with all its consequences (siege, famine, death) – can be viewed as the fulfillment of "deuteronomic" curses. Jeremiah, who predicted the inevitability of גלות ("exile"), was a real witness of <sup>148</sup>רעה ("evil") that came upon his people. It is curious to trace the curse motifs behind the threats in his rhetoric of judgment and see who the actual addressees of prophetic warning are in specific cases.

It is a well-known fact that the prophetic agenda of Jeremiah is to persuade the people to submit to the Babylonian king and go to *galut*. Those who want to remain in Jerusalem, or flee to Egypt, are addressed with severe words of judgment. These people are destined to taste the divine curse when being besieged and destroyed. Thus, in Jer 21,4-9 it is explicitly stated that those who go to battle against the Babylonian king will be destroyed; conversely, those who fall away to the Chaldeans, will live. The same perspective is shared in Jer 24,4-10; 29,16-18; 42,15-18 and 44,12-14. The people who refuse to go to *galut* are threatened with disasters which echo "deuteronomic" curses. It appears that the king Zedekiah, his officials, and those inhabitants of Jerusalem who remained in the city or are about to flee to Egypt, become the *addressees* of the divine curse. In contrast, the deportees are addressed with a promise of restoration which reminds us of a blessing: they will receive divine favor and

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<sup>148</sup> This term, which is semantically close to the word קללה ("curse"), occurs in a number of passages in Jeremiah e.g., in Jer 1,14 and Jer 16,10.

return to the land after *seventy years* is completed (Jer 24,6 and 29,10-14). In all these passages the idea of God's visitation upon those who refuse to go to *galut* is stressed through the use of two kinds of imagery. The first is a triadic curse of being struck by חרב ("sword"), רעב ("famine") and דבר ("pestilence"). The second is the use of the metonymy of קללה ("curse"), זעוה ("terror")<sup>149</sup>, משל ("proverb"), שנייה ("taunt") and synonyms to indicate that the people become an embodiment of the curse.<sup>150</sup> Here is the table of such usages in these passages:

Jer 21,7	triadic curse
Jer 24,9-10	metonymy + triadic curse
Jer 29,17-18	triadic curse + metonymy
Jer 42,17-18	triadic curse + metonymy
Jer 44,12-13	metonymy + triadic curse

In Jeremiah the threat of Babylonian invasion seems to be inevitable, though the potential possibility of a reversal of the situation, in the case of the people's repentance, is still present, as Jer 18,8 and Jer 26,3 imply: the striking expression ונחמתי על-הרעה ("I may repent of the calamity") is a way to underline the greatness of divine mercy which is still available in times of judgment.

To resume, it is observable that in some prophetic speeches of judgment in Jeremiah the threats concern only a particular group of people. It is likely that the prophetic rhetoric of judgment in Jeremiah in most cases reflects a polemic against those who refuse to go to *galut*. Though the Exile can generally be interpreted as a case of fulfillment of "deuteronomic" curses, in the book of Jeremiah the deniers of deportation become primary addressees of a divine curse, a death sentence, whereas deportees are preserved and live in hope of a future blessing; the time aspect is of crucial importance here: the Exile is a temporal punishment of only seventy years duration.

#### 1.4.2.2. Rhetoric of deliverance in Amos

The promise of divine deliverance in Amos 9,11-15 is a kind of idealistic picture of the peaceful life of Israel in the land of promise, like a 'window' into

<sup>149</sup> BHS reads זעוה ("terror") for זועה ("trembling").

<sup>150</sup> For an interesting view on the use of metonymy, see Jeff. S. Anderson, "The Metonymical Curse as Propaganda in the Book of Jeremiah," *BBR* 8 (1998): 1-13.

a perfect blessing. The time frame of this wonderful blessing is designated in v. 13 as הנה ימים באים ('behold, the days come'), which has an eschatological overtone and points to some distant future.

Vv. 13-15 in its vocabulary reminds us of the 'language of blessing' of Lev 26,4-6. The idea of incredible abundance of natural resources and success in cultivation of the land unites both passages, in which the Lord is introduced as the *Initiator* of the blessing and the *Source* of goodness. The aspect of temporality is crucial: in both promises time is stretched in the sense that one season is overcome by another; to put it concretely, the time of harvest and seedtime are drawn near. Here are two passages in Hebrew:

Amos 9,13

ונגש חורש בקצר  
("when the plowmen will overtake the reaper")  
ודרך ענבים במשך הזרע  
("and the treader of grapes him that sows seed").

Leviticus 26,5

והשיג לכם דיש את-בציר  
("and your threshing will reach unto the vintage")  
ובציר ישיג את-זרע  
("and the vintage will reach unto the sowing time").

It is clearly seen that these passages mirror each other, emphasizing the idea of amazing productivity of the land. In Amos 9,13 the verb נגש ("to draw near") is used, whereas in Lev 26,5 the verb נשג ("to reach," "overtake"), with similar meaning and sound, is employed; thus these verbs represent a kind of inter-textual semantical wordplay.

Besides the temporal aspect, the spatial aspect (place) is paralleled in both passages as well. The land is not only a place of satisfaction, i.e., eating (Lev 26,5) and drinking (Amos 9,14); primarily it becomes a secure place for life. In Lev 26,5 the idea of *peaceful dwelling* is stressed: וישבתם לבטח בארצכם ("and you will dwell in your land safely"). In Amos 9,15 the idea of *permanent dwelling* is emphasized:

ונטעתים על-אדמתם ולא ינתשו עוד מעל אדמתם אשר נתתי להם  
("and I will plant them on their land and they will no more be pulled out  
of their land which I have given them").

This extraordinary blessing is a kind of *anti-curse* in the sense that the people definitely won't be torn out of their land. This prophetic passage is a *message of hope* for God's people in any time: the Lord cultivates His people in their



land while the people's task is cultivation of the land as God's blessed inheritance.

To resume, such inter-textual reading helps us to see the schema of the Torah's blessings and curses behind the prophetic threats of judgment and the promises of restoration.

### 1.4.3. Summary

Covenantal sanctions, as a category of blessings and curses, logically fall into the schema of a word and its fulfillment. The blessings and curses in Deut 28 and Lev 26 can be understood in terms of *meta-history* in the sense that they can be realized in any period of history.

In the texts studied in this section, some events are described and interpreted in terms of blessings and curses which work as sanctions of heavenly Torah. This is, for instance, the case of Dan 9,10-14, when calamity is reflected as the fulfillment of Torah's curses. The "deuteronomic" schema (Deut 29,24-27) of explaining of what happened (which is a kind of *enigma*) on the basis of a vision, as a case of the curse fulfilled, is traced in 1 Kgs 9,8.9; Jer 9,11-14 and Jer 16,10.11.

In prophetic speeches, curses and blessings can be detected behind such categories as threat or promise which constitute a 'skeleton' of prophetic rhetoric of judgment and deliverance. *For prophets, addressing issues of their own time in terms of Torah's sanctions becomes an intensive and particular way of describing divine actions toward God's people.* The prophetic words of warning about an impending punishment or a word of consolation are reminiscent of Torah's curses and blessings. Their fulfillment may take place during the life of the prophet, or in some distant future. It is important to note that the conditionality of sanctions is sometimes not so decisive: punishment is inevitable, and undeserved blessing comes out of nowhere, as a gift of God's mercy.

To conclude, Torah's blessings and curses provide a key which helps people to measure their experience and find an explanation for what has happened. In some sense the blessing and the curse become *tools for judging history.*

## 1.5. General conclusion

The analysis of some passages with a blessing/curse thematic in the Pentateuch allows tracing different forms of blessing and cursing as divine or human activity and brings us to the following results.

As for the roles of participants, it becomes obvious that the leading Initiator of a blessing or curse is God, and He is represented as the sole Source of blessing or misfortune. Characteristically, the speech of the divine Initiator is delivered in indicative form (“I will bless/I will bring plague” etc.). The addressee of a blessing or curse is always concrete, and can be an individual or a group of people. In some cases a human figure assumes the role of initiator, and humans even exercise the role of executors or administrators of blessing or cursing, being appointed by the Lord. On the one hand, the Lord initiates a blessing or curse in His sovereign power; on the other hand, He controls the sphere of an administered blessing or curse. In both cases God is the sole Guarantor of their realization. In the case of divine words of a blessing or curse we characteristically deal with God’s Word of Power which enables and causes. In the case of authoritative (priestly) human utterances of a blessing or curse we deal with delegation of God’s power.

Concerning the condition under which a blessing or curse is supposed to take place, it is important to note that the curse is exclusively conditional (covenantal sanctions) and never groundless (primeval story, Dodecalogue, ‘test of adultery’). The blessing may become conditional (covenantal sanctions), but by its very nature a divine blessing is unconditional since it is impossible to deserve it. The Creational blessing is the highest form of an unconditional blessing which is equal for all people. The blessings of patriarchs are certainly of that quality since they are based entirely upon God's initiative.

With regard to the general meaning and effect of blessings and curses, several conclusions can be drawn. The blessing in its essence is an activity engaging *life-sustaining* power which provides humans with fruitfulness, productivity, and success. The curse is an activity engaging *life-destroying* power that deprives people of fruitfulness, productivity, and success. The effects of blessings reflect the quality of prosperous life and are associated with fertility (people, soil, livestock), good natural conditions, abundance, success, victory, dominion, rich possessions (e.g., land as heritage), high status, divine favor, protection and peace. The effects of curses reflect the idea of the fragility of life and can be generally divided into several categories as relating

to: 1) *human abilities, activity and state* (infertility, failure, futility, defeat, non-burial, physical illness, mental disorders, hardships, feelings of despair, anxiety, faintness; 2) *nature, environment and economy* (disasters, devastation, destruction, scarcity, famine, decline); 3) *relational sphere* (alienation, enmity, extermination, oppression, abuse, servitude, low status); 4) *spatial realm* (banishment, exile, dispersion). Checking the effects of blessings and curses in different passages helps to see that the most common blessing effect, traced in the primeval, patriarchal and deuteronomic blessings, is fertility; as for curse effects, it is remarkable that they are few (while very significant) in the primeval story, completely absent in patriarchal narratives, whereas a full set of curses can be found in Deut 28 and Lev 26.

As for the time aspect, several conclusions can be drawn. In some cases the blessings and curses become fulfilled, as we see in the primeval story. The blessing of procreation starts at some moment of divine creative activity, and it becomes ongoing. The time of the primeval curses is counted from the very moment when the addressees hear the sentence, and it is supposed to last as long as their lifetime. The time frame of the patriarchal blessings is wide: the blessings were already at a stage of realization during the lifetime of the patriarchs, and still the fulfillment of the blessings was directed to the future. In administrative blessings (Num 6) or curses (Num 5, Deut 27), even if there is no exact temporal indication, the time sense is not lost: the effect has to be shown at any time – immediately after the ceremony is enacted by the priest or somewhat later. Within the covenantal form of blessings and curses, there is duality of *when* and *how long*: the time is in some sense ‘suspended,’ since the blessings and curses are supposed to be fulfilled at some moment of history; in some cases internal time markers, such as “quick,” “all day/days,” “day and night,” “forever,” indicate the duration of a particular calamity.

With regard to the *modus operandi* of a blessing or curse, it is possible to distinguish different models. In the primeval story we can discover such a model of blessing and cursing as ‘**guardians of divine order.**’ The blessing is *implanted* within the fabric of creation and marks God’s creational activity, characterized by goodness, and any disturbance of that created harmony activates the destructive forces of the curse. The curse becomes *engraved* in the fabric of human existence affecting the goodness of God’s creation. The blessing is a magnificent divine action toward His creature; the curse is caused by an improper action on the part of God’s creature (animal, humans). In the primeval story the ‘origin’ of the blessing and curse can be traced, and its

function is somewhat *etiological* in the sense that it provides us with knowledge of how human beings came into existence and by what factors it was determined. This data is relevant and of universal significance to all mankind: all humanity is involved in the task of procreation, which is a stable mechanism started with the blessing of the creation, and all humanity is equally vulnerable to the effects of the curses that aggravate the conditions of human existence.

In the patriarchal narratives, which are almost entirely focused on blessings, we discover the so-called ‘**benefit-blessing**’ model. This kind of a blessing – purposed so that through the initial addressees the benefit will be derived by many – has a tripartite structure:

*God as Source (Benefactor)*

*Patriarchs as executors (beneficent role)*

*Nations as addressees (beneficiaries)*

This model possesses an amazing transformative feature: the patriarchs, primary addressees of a divine blessing, playing a beneficent role, function as executors for the secondary addressees, i.e., beneficiaries. The most important features of this model are: 1) an anthropologically significant idea that God shares his blessing activity with human collaborators; 2) the issue of the huge responsibility which is conferred on the human executors of the divine blessing.

Another model of blessing and cursing – ‘**Torah’s sanctions**’ – can be found in Deut 28 and Lev 26. Here blessings and curses are posited as divinely *ordained* positive and negative sanctions. Advanced as a kind of *ultimatum*, they become the legal means to maintain the conditionality of the covenant. The covenantal blessing and the curse, as *two diametrically opposite poles*, represent *two modes of existence* of the covenant community. Well-being or ill-being depends on covenantal allegiance to the normative prescriptions of the Torah. Such a model as ‘Torah’s sanctions’ presupposes the blessing as *divine mandate* and the curse as a severe *divine visitation*. Blessings and curses of that kind involve history, i.e., they arrive at their materialization in history.

Outside the Pentateuch, in former/classic prophets and writings, one more model of blessing and cursing can be discovered. Blessings and curses become ‘**tools for judging history.**’ “The deuteronomic” schema of blessings and curses provides criteria for judging the course of events. In some texts the use of the language of blessings and curses becomes a particularly intensive way of

formulating things by which the authors try to understand the *ups* and *downs* of their own history. Historical events, and tragic, in particular, are reflected in such a way that רע (“evil”) is perceived as a severe divine visitation which is in accordance with the curses (האלות) of the Torah.

Here is a general sketch of blessings and curses in the Pentateuch:

- ▶ Blessing→God’s initiative (primeval story)
  - └ Curse→result of disturbance of cosmic order (primeval story)
- ▶ Blessing→God’s gift (patriarchal stories) – Promise (Gen 12, 22, 26, 28)
  - └ u n c o n d i t i o n a l
- ▶ Blessing/curse →positive/negative sanctions – Choice (Deut 28/Lev 26)
  - └ c o n d i t i o n a l
- ▶ Blessing→priestly administration – prayer of benediction (Num 6)
  - └ Curse→priestly administration – ‘test of adultery’ (Num 5)
  - └ Curse→priestly administration – Decalogue (Deut 27)

It can be concluded that in some cases blessings and curses involve existential aspects and reflect the general conditions of human existence, whereas in other cases they involve history and reflect the conditions of the life of Israel as the chosen people.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Phenomenology of blessings and curses**

The Hebrew Bible is part of a larger cultural and religious context. In this chapter our objective is to approach blessing/curse categories as cross-cultural and religious phenomena. The study will be focused on examination of some ancient texts from ANE, the Greco-Roman world and Indian culture relevant to our topic with the use of an eightfold rubric pattern.

#### **2.1. Meaning of blessings and curses in Ancient Near East**

Ancient Near Eastern culture provides us with a rich collection of texts with blessing and curse formulae. The texts selected for our survey include different types (epic, treaties, inscriptions), which allow detecting various forms of blessings and curses similar to that of Pentateuch.

##### **2.1.1. The drama of the cursed city Agade**

The Sumerian cuneiform text “The curse of Agade: The Ekur avenged” was composed by a Sumerian poet about 2150-2000 BCE.<sup>151</sup> The poem describes the fall of Agade, the glorious capital of Akkad. This event is pictured in terms of the curse. The reason can be rationally explained: the curse has befallen the town due to the fact that the king Naram-Sin, the king of Agade, has defiled the temple of Enlil, located at Nippur, and plundered its treasures.<sup>152</sup>

The theme of cursing runs through the lines from 210 up to 281. In the lines 210-214 it is told that the gods, trying to appease Enlil’s wrath, tell him that what was done in Ekur is to be done for Agade. In the lines 222-224 it is laconically stated that the gods directed their faces (eyes) to the city and cursed Agade with a baleful curse, claiming its complete destruction. The company of

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<sup>151</sup> James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Related to the Old Testament* (3rd edition; Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1969), 646-651, trans. S. N. Kramer. For a detailed research of this epic, see J. S. Cooper, *The Curse of Agade* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); A. Falkenstein, “Fluch über Akkade,” *ZA* 57 (1965): 43-124. Online resource with access to the text, translation and comments is available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/sumerutamiltex/curse-of-agade> (accessed July 8, 2013). Online Pennsylvania Sumerian dictionary is available at: <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd1/nepsd-frame.html> (accessed July 12, 2013).

<sup>152</sup> The lines 106-146. It is curious that Naram-Sin was aware of the unfavorable future of Agade from his nocturnal vision, as the lines 83-86 record.

gods includes Sin, Enki, Inanna, Ninurta, Iskur, Utu, Nuska, Nisaba, and it is apparent that they are introduced as the *initiators* of cursing, whereas the city becomes the *target* of divine cursing. Some gods are introduced as responsible for a particular misfortune,<sup>153</sup> exercising the function of divine *executors*, but in most cases the maledictory wishes, directed against the inhabitants of Agade as *addressees*, are not interrupted with invocatory statements. The real source of the curse seems to be the deity Enlil, whose sanctuary was destroyed.

The curses are well elaborated, and the part on curses exhibits high style. The maledictions are structured in a wishful manner, delivered in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 2<sup>nd</sup> person addresses: “*May something or someone be or become/May your something or someone be or become...*”

The effect of the curse is manifold, and it can be said that the curse was aimed to cover many aspects of the life of the inhabitants of Agade. Among the effects are failure in agriculture, famine, slaughter, desolation, despair. The curse affects all people without regard to status: even aristocrats and noble people are left in misfortune, suffering from hunger. Thus, in the section on famine (the lines 248-253) it is implied that *ninda sa-ga* (“good food”) is replaced by abnormal porridge made from grass, straw and the leather hinges of the door. *Economic instability* is described in terms of *disproportion*: precious metals fell in price. In the lines 242-244 it is specified that gold is reduced to the price of silver, silver is reduced to the price of pyrites, and copper is devaluated to the price of lead. *Human disability* is described in a similar manner: the force of the strongest ones is weakened. In the lines 245-246 it is desired that strong men become weak to such a degree that a man becomes unable to lift the bag onto its stand. Death of loved ones is described by means of shocking imageries as, for example, in the lines 237-239:

“May the oxen slaughterer slaughter your wife,”

“May the sheep butcher butcher his child,”

“May the pauper drown the child who seeks money for him.”<sup>154</sup>

Depression and despair mark the whole existence of the inhabitants of the great city, and even its constructions – irrigation canals, palaces, city gates – become

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<sup>153</sup> For example, it is true for such effect as failure in agriculture: “May your grain return to its furrows, may it be grain cursed by Ezinu” (the lines 233-234), Similarly, the lines 231-232 tell that clay is cursed by Enki, and in the lines 235-236 timber is cursed by the deity Ninildum.

<sup>154</sup> In an alternative translation it is said that the people will throw their children into the water.

affected by misfortune. Metaphors with strange images are used to draw a picture of desolated and insecure places:

*irkuku (mušen) ša-sig-ga-ke* (“the birds of anguished heart”),<sup>155</sup>  
*gi (agir) ir-ra / anir* (“the reed of tears,” “the mourning grass”),<sup>156</sup>  
*šeg-bar mul muš-ul kur-ra-ke* (“recurved mountain sheep and mountain snakes”).<sup>157</sup>

The idea of absence of a place to dwell or relax is expressed radically, as the lines 279-280 show: “He who said: “I would dwell in that city/I would sleep in Agade” found not a good dwelling place there/found not a good sleeping place there” (in another translation: “enjoy the pleasures of a dwelling/resting place”).<sup>158</sup> The glory of Agade wanes, the city is turned into a wild place.

The time of fulfillment of the *Agade curse* is not specified, but it is hinted at in the end that the curse is thought to be realized. The epic ends with the exclamation: “Agade is destroyed (*hu-la*). Praise Inanna.” The realization of the curses is an established fact for the author. The function of the curse here is clearly retributive, as the very title – “Ekur avenged” – reckons. With regard to ancient history, it can be assumed that the historical event of the occupation of Akkad around 2124 BCE by Gutians<sup>159</sup> can serve as a historical background for such a literary masterpiece. The dramatic event could inspire the ancient poet to reflect upon the destiny of the capital of Akkad by means of the curse language. Interestingly, according to historical evidences, Gutians appear as human *executors* of the destruction of the city, whereas in the poem, the divine pantheon appears as a collective divine *executor* which is thought to bring the curse upon Agade in agreement with the will of the deity Enlil. To resume, the poem “The Curse of Agade” is an example of a curse which was thought to result in the total destruction of the whole urban infrastructure of an ancient city.

The following chart summarizes the results of this study:

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<sup>155</sup> The line 259.

<sup>156</sup> The lines 268, 274 and 277.

<sup>157</sup> The lines 267 and 276. These wild creatures act as a hindrance: no one can pass them. They become ‘actors’ of the drama, *executors* of cursing, in some sense.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. Deut 28,65.

<sup>159</sup> Retrieved from: <http://en.academic.ru/dic.nsf/enwiki/578779> (accessed July 26, 2013). It is curious that in the lines 152-157 it is stated that Gutians were brought down from the mountains by Enlil. In the lines 158-208 the effects of their barbarous policy, although not against the town of Agade, are described. The way of their description in the lines 154-156 is similar to that of ‘unknown people,’ brought by the Lord, in Deut 28,49.50.



<i>Rubric</i>	<i>The text</i> “The Curse of Agade”
Initiator (s)	deities: Sin, Enki, Inanna, Ninurta, Iskur, Utu, Nuska, Nisaba
Addressee	inhabitants of Agade
Source	the deity Enlil
Administrator	-
Executor (s)	deities: Enki, Ezinu, Ninildum...; wild creatures; Gutians (?)
Condition	defilement of the sanctuary of Enlil
Effect	failure in agriculture, economic instability, human disability, famine, slaughter, desolation, no resting place, despair
Time	the curse is fulfilled

### 2.1.2. Duality of curses and blessings in Hittite Vassal Treaties

The Hittite suzerainty-treaties<sup>160</sup> date back to 1450-1350 BCE. These treaties constitute inter-country agreements between Hittite kings (*suzerains*) and their subordinates (*vassals*). Being by nature purely political, they contain a section on sanctions which are formulated in the form of a curse or blessing.

In order to understand the mechanism by which it works generally, two texts will be partly analyzed. The well-known Hittite treaty between Muršiliš and Duppi-Tešub of Amurru is a curious example of a quite peaceful agreement between two royal principalities. The section on curses and blessings appears at the very end of the treaty, and it is quite compact and well elaborated:

“All the words of the treaty and the oath which are written on this tablet—if Duppi-Tešub [does not keep these] words of the treaty and of the oath, then let these oath gods destroy Duppi-Tešub together with his head, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his city, his land and together with his possessions.

But if Duppi-Tešub observes these words of the treaty and of the oath which are written on this tablet, let these oath gods protect Duppi-Tešub together with his head, his wife, his son, his grandson, his city, his land, his house, his subjects and together with his possessions!”<sup>161</sup>

Characteristically, the section begins with a threat of a curse, but ends positively, with a promise of a blessing, which is an exact reversal of the curse. Conditionality becomes decisive: the threat of curses is caused by disloyalty to

<sup>160</sup> Several translated texts can be found in Pritchard, *ANET*, 199-206.

<sup>161</sup> *ANET*, 203.

the treaty and the oath,<sup>162</sup> and the promise of blessing is conditioned by loyalty on the part of the vassal. In this particular case the suzerain (the king Muršiliš), who introduces himself in the preamble, appears as the *initiator* of curses and blessings, whereas the vassal (Duppi-Tešub) is the indirect *addressee* of the king's utterance. The gods of the oath are presented as *executors* intended to bring the curse or blessing into effect. The invocatory part of the treaty, which precedes the curses and blessings, contains a long list of deities: a great 'armada' of divine *executors* – storm-gods, several patron-gods, oath-gods, warrior-gods and some chief gods and goddesses, including Anu and Ishtar – are called to be witnesses to the treaty and the oath.<sup>163</sup> The function of the gods is not only to destroy or protect, but to control the vassal's loyalty or the opposite. Both persons and objects fall into the 'orbit' of a possible cursing or blessing, being under divine disfavor or benevolence. The *addressees* are Duppi-Tešub, his loved ones (wife, son, grandson), and the *target* is his house, land and possessions. The effect of the curse or blessing can be understood in terms of extermination or protection respectively. It is evident that ultimate destruction in the case of the curse or total protection in the case of the blessing is envisaged. The time of fulfillment is not specified, but it is strongly implied that misconduct on the part of the vassal becomes a 'catalyst' for the suzerain's words to come to pass.

The treaty between Šuppiluliumaš and Kurtiwaza<sup>164</sup> represents a contract made between Hittites and Hurrites in the time of Hittite domination over the kingdom of Mitanni. The section on curses again precedes the part on blessings, and it is quite extended. The curses begin with a general statement:

“If you, Kurtiwaza, the prince and (you) the sons of the Hurri country do not fulfill the words of this treaty, may the gods of the oath, blot you out,<sup>165</sup> (you) Kurtiwaza and (you) the Hurri men together with your country, your wives and all that you have.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> In the treaty it is specified which actions on the part of the vassal can be qualified as disregard of the treaty and the oath.

<sup>163</sup> The number of deities is strikingly large including many deities of different spheres: that of heaven and earth, mountains and rivers. Some deities are associated with particular localities or people: the land of Ḫatti, Amurru (the country of the addressee of the curse/blessing), and surprisingly, even *Hapiry* gods are included in the list.

<sup>164</sup> *ANET*, 205.

<sup>165</sup> The verbs which evoke the idea of total destruction - “to exterminate,” “to blot out,” “to pursue” - appear across the whole section on curses.

In this treaty the king Šuppiluliumaš appears as the *initiator* of the treaty and sanctions, whereas the vassal Kurtiwaza and the men of the Hurri country with their wives appear as the *addressees* of the suzerain's curse. The *target* is the whole country and the peoples' possessions. The curse is transitive in its character in the sense that it affects subsequent generations. Thus, if the vassal takes a second wife in order to drive the curse out, misfortune will find all the members of that family: the wish is expressed that the gods exterminate the name of the vassal and his seed issued from the second wife.<sup>167</sup> The gods, who are supposed to exercise the function of guardians of the oath,<sup>168</sup> pursuing the victim, and even oaths, appear as *executors*, intended to fulfill the curse. This is implied in the following sentence, constructed in the form of an analogy:

“May they (gods) draw you *like* malt from his hull; may the oaths sworn in the presence of these gods break you *like* reeds.”

The main curse effects include extermination, political instability (the overthrow of the throne/the impossibility of lasting peace), and hard natural conditions, such as bad climatic conditions (the coldness of the earth) and infertility of the soil. The last effect is described as follows: “May the soil of your country be a hardened quagmire, so that you break in, but never get across.”<sup>169</sup> The temporal indicator “never” signifies determinacy, and perhaps here complete failure in cultivation of the land is implied. In general, the curse means that the previous stability is lost and there is only poverty and misery.

The section on blessings is shorter, and its general statement is quite curious with regard to addressees of the blessing:

“May these gods protect you Kurtiwaza, together with your wife, the daughter of the Ḫatti land,<sup>170</sup> her children and children's children, and also (you) the Hurrians, together with your wives, your children, and your children's children and together with your country.”

In these clauses the vassal and the Hurrians, their wives and children are numerous *addressees* of blessing, and the whole country is the *target*. The

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<sup>166</sup> ANET, 206.

<sup>167</sup> The text makes it clear that the second wife is not going to be barren, whereas the women of the country of Hurri are implied to be barren (in the introductory curse statement only wives are mentioned, and not children).

<sup>168</sup> The list of gods is extensive and includes divinities of different countries and people.

<sup>169</sup> Cf. Deut 28,23b.

<sup>170</sup> There is an interesting detail: a wife of Kurtiwaza was a daughter of Šuppiluliumaš.

blessing is of long duration, intended to affect generations to come. It includes a wish for political well-being: that the country of Mitanni might occupy its own *place* (territory) and that the Hurrians exercise power (kingship) *forever*. The blessing effects here are divine protection and political stability.

To resume, the Hittite suzerainty-treaties constitute agreements which are highly demanding in their nature since they are conditioned by an oath. The suzerain seeks to secure himself and his country by means of a curse and a blessing, imposing on the vassal certain demands which serve his own interests. In the Hittite treaties the suzerain appears as *the initiator* of both treaty and sanctions of the oath. The vassal, being subservient to his master through the oath, is an *addressee*, whose activity is displayed before the gods. Deities, as an implied collective *source* of good or evil, function as *executors* of the suzerain's order to punish or protect.<sup>171</sup> It can be concluded that the dominant feature of the Hittite treaties is the *multiplicity* of addressees and the *transitivity* of curses and blessings. The following chart summarizes the results:

<i>Rubric</i>	The Hittite treaty texts	
	Muršiliš - Duppi-Tešub	Šuppiluliumaš - Kurtiwaza
Initiator	Muršiliš	Šuppiluliumaš
Addressee/ target	Duppi-Tešub, household/ house, land, possessions	Kurtiwaza, the Hurri men wives, offspring/ country, possessions
Source	mixed pantheon of deities - a collective source of evil	
Administrator	-	-
Executor (s)	b/c - the gods of the oath	b/c - the gods of the oath c - 'the oath'
Condition	b - loyalty to the treaty c - disloyalty to the treaty	b - loyalty to the treaty c - disloyalty to the treaty
Effect	c - extermination b - divine protection	c - divine disfavor, political instability, bad natural conditions (cold climate/infertility of the soil), failure in agriculture, extermination b - divine protection, political stability
Time	-	-

<sup>171</sup> Characteristically, they are the same.

### 2.1.3. Curses of Babylonian *kudurru*

The Babylonian boundary-stones, known by the term *kudurru*<sup>172</sup>, represent transactions of some grants – pieces of land or estates – which were generously given as presents by Babylonian kings to their favourite vassals.<sup>173</sup> They are dated by the period between 1450 BCE and 550 BCE.<sup>174</sup> These stones contain the record of a grant, an iconographic presentation of deities and a curse section. Several examples will be examined in order to understand how the curses were elaborated in these inscriptions and what their function is.

**The land grant to Kîshti-Marduk *kudurru*** (BM 102588)<sup>175</sup> contains the record of the donation of a corn-land by the king Kurigalzu to his vassal Kîshti-Marduk. The grant is unconditional; it is a free and undeserved gift. The *initiator* of the grant is the king (donator) who confirms the rights of the vassal (owner).

The record contains an appended curse section intended to secure the territory, affirmed as his vassal's own property:

“Whosoever in future days - there shall be one who shall say “the field was not given,”- may Anu, Enlil, and Ea, Nannar, Shamash, and Marduk, Nusku and Sadarnunna, Nergal and Laz tear out his foundation, and his seed may they snatch away! May they command that his life endure not for a single day! Whosoever shall deface my name that is (here) inscribed, and shall write his own name (in place thereof), may Shamash, the arbiter of judgment, above on his...and below on his...never bestow clear water. Whosoever shall break this tablet in pieces, or shall cast it into water, may the god Tishpak, who dwells in Dêr...”<sup>176</sup>

The *addressee* of the curse is anonymous: any violator of the property rights may fall under curse. The grounds for the curse are threefold, and it is provided

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<sup>172</sup> The Akkadian term *kudurru* means “frontier,” “boundary,” “region” (CAD, vol. 8, 495).

<sup>173</sup> The *kudurru* stones were profoundly studied by a number of scholars, for instance, by L. W. King and W. G. Hinke: L.W. King, *Babylonian Boundary-Stones and Memorial Tablets in the British Museum* (London: Oxford University Press, 1912); W. G. Hinke, *Selected Babylonian Kudurru Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 1911). In our work the monograph of L. W. King with transliterated/translated texts (in two colophons) of some important *kudurru*s, kept in the British Museum, will be a main source (further referred to as King, *BBS*). The tablets received the designation BM followed by a number. Photos and descriptions of several *kudurru*s are available at: [http://karakusamon.com/orient/Nippur\\_stone.html](http://karakusamon.com/orient/Nippur_stone.html) (accessed August 7, 2013).

<sup>174</sup> King, *BBS*, 2.

<sup>175</sup> King, *BBS*, 4-7.

<sup>176</sup> Face B, the lines 9-24 (King, *BBS*, 6-7). The record is not complete.

for those who dispute the property rights (those of Ƙîshti-Marduk), obliterate the name of the owner, or do damage to the *kudurru* itself. Twelve gods, assumed to play the role of *executors*, are invoked to punish the violator: the principal deities are Anu, Enlil, Ea, Marduk, Nergal and Shamash (“the arbiter of judgment”). The curse effects imply shortening of life, eradication of descendants, and a kind of deprivation (tearing out the foundations). The threat of not bestowing clean water signifies a lack of a vital resource. The indefinite time indicator – “*whensoever* in future days” – implies that the moment *when* someone questions the property rights, is a starting point of the cursing.

**The estate of Takil-ana-ilīšu *kudurru*** (BM 90827)<sup>177</sup> is a big limestone stela which contains the record of the intriguing history of litigation and legal decisions on the occasion of ownership. The case is that the original owner of the estate – Takil-ana-ilīšu – died, and many relatives claimed the property as their own.<sup>178</sup> At last, with the help of the king Meli-Šipak, the estate was granted forever to Marduk-kudurrī-ušur. His rights, confirmed legally, were secured by means of an imprecation.

In general, in this particular case the curse is reserved for anyone – whether a relative or not – who would dare to make claims or cause a claim to the property, saying that it was not granted, or do any damage to the *kudurru* (col. v, the lines 27-47). The imprecatory section is quite long, and the curse is invoked upon a violator as such (all cases seem to be united in one person as the curse *addressee*). The section can be presented fragmentally as follows:

“May Shamash and Adad, the divine lords of right, not prosper his cause...May Urash and Ninegal pursue him with evil...May Ishtar, the lady of the lands, in the place of weapons and of battle, to the weapon of the foe assigns him! May all the gods whose names upon this boundary stone are mentioned, destroy his name and to naught may they bring him!”<sup>179</sup>

The chief gods (Shamash, Adad, Ishtar), less important deities, and, in fact, all the gods mentioned on this particular stela, appear as *executors* of the *kudurru* curse, summoned to pursue the violator with evil, to deliver him into a foe’s hands, and humiliate him as a person. The materialization of the curse may generally be understood as an *evil fate* with such effects as defeat (military and

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<sup>177</sup> King, *BBS*, 7-18.

<sup>178</sup> It is quite curious that in order to win the case some were ready to undergo the water ritual (to be thrown into the river).

<sup>179</sup> Col. vi, the lines 9, 10, 13, 14, 18-25 (King, *BBS*, 18).

perhaps legal, in the case of a dispute over the property rights), and obliteration of the name.

**The land grant to Khasardu *kudurru*** (BM 90829)<sup>180</sup> contains the record of a free gift of the king Meli-Šipak (*donator*) to a person who served as a minister at the royal court (*owner*). The rights of the owner of the land are confirmed by a number of witnesses. The curses are directed against any kind of violator – an agent, a governor, a ruler, or the son of anyone (col. ii, the lines 14-15) – who will question the right of the owner to this property in any way, or replace the stone, or even put it in a hidden place, being motivated by a fear of curses (col. iii, the lines 1-8).

The tone of curses is strikingly brutal and prescriptive as the following lines show:

“May Anu, the father of gods, curse him as a foe! May Enlil, the king of all, inflict his punishment upon him! May Ea, the creator of men, give him an evil fate...May all the gods, whose names are mentioned in the stone, curse him with a curse that cannot be loosened (*ar-rat la nap-šuri li-ru-ru-šu-ma*)...may they not let him, nor his name, nor his seed endure; days of drought, years of famine, may they assign for his lot, before god, king, lord and prince..., may he come to an evil end!”<sup>181</sup>

The deities – altogether thirteen, who mentioned on the stone – are represented as *executors* of the cursing, being the very *source* of evil. In particular, Anu is referred to as the one who curses, and those who are mentioned on the stone, curse with a severe curse, so all these function as the cursers (perhaps they also utter curses, appearing as *administrators* of cursing). The phrase *ar-rat la nap-šuri li-ru-ru-šu-ma* (“the curse that cannot be loosened”) is striking, and it signifies the determinacy of cursing without the possibility to dispel it.<sup>182</sup> There is an impression that the addressee of the curse, being sealed by the curse, holds an evil lot. In addition to the familiar threats, such effects as drought and famine are mentioned. The element of temporality is involved in a quite interesting way. The pairing “days of drought” and “years of famine” probably implies the idea of a few days of drought followed by a long hunger. The

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<sup>180</sup> King, *BBS*, 19-23.

<sup>181</sup> Col. iii, the lines 9-11; col. iv, the lines 5, 6, 8-12, 14 (King, *BBS*, 22, 23).

<sup>182</sup> This phrase with slight modifications appears in a number of boundary stones. The term *arratu* literally means “curse” (*CAD*, vol. 1, Part I, 319), and the term *napšuru* means “relenting,” “forgiveness” (*CAD*, vol. 11, Part I, 304).

conclusion – “may he come to an evil end” – signifies the final stage of *arratu*, the curse that reaches its goal.

**The land grant to Marduk-zākir-šumi *kudurru*** (BM 90850),<sup>183</sup> recorded on a quite large limestone, is a property gift from the king Marduk-aplu-iddina (donator), who is designated as the king of the world, to a provincial governor Marduk-zākir-šumi (owner).

It appears that any secretary, governor or prefect who would raise an unjustified claim to the property or disregard the memorial-stone – to hide, break, burn, put it in water or bury it in the earth – becomes a potential *addressee* for curses, actualized by a number of *executors*. In case of violation seven deities – Anu, Enlil, Ea, Ninib, Gula, Shamash, Marduk – and those, “whose shrines are exhibited upon the stone” are invoked to look in anger upon such a person. The imprecation is quite compact:

“With a curse that cannot be loosed may they curse him! His boundary stone may they tear out! His seed may they snatch away! In evil and sickness of body, with but a few days more of life, may he come to an end, and when to Shamash and Marduk he cries may they not hear him.”<sup>184</sup>

This malediction begins with a wish of cursing with a curse, which cannot be relented. The threat ‘tearing out foundations’ is concretized: the violator’s own boundary-stone is to be damaged. One of the effects of the curse is physical illness that shortens the days of life, as the lines 38-41 imply. The wish that the violator’s prayer would fail is a way to stress the determinacy of the curse.

**The *kudurru* for Ritti-Marduk** (BM 90858)<sup>185</sup> is a stele which can be assigned to the time of Nebuchadnezzar I.<sup>186</sup> The case is that the Babylonian king (donator) grants the towns, freed from the jurisdiction of Namar, to Ritti-Marduk (owner) as a reward for his service. The record ends with severe imprecations.

A potential *addressee* of the curse may be a person of any rank – small or great – who would place the territory given as a grant under his own jurisdiction, obliterate the name of the king or god inscribed on the stone, or smash the *kudurru* itself. The *executors* of the curses are gods who are called to contrive evil against such a person. Being a collective *source* of evil, they are

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<sup>183</sup> King, *BBS*, 24-29.

<sup>184</sup> Col. iii, the lines 33-44 (King, *BBS*, 29).

<sup>185</sup> King, *BBS*, 29-36.

<sup>186</sup> The late 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE.



associated with natural phenomena such as rain, springs, and mountains. The conclusion of the section is of considerable interest:

“May another possess the house which he has built! With a dagger in his neck, and a poniard in his eye, may he cast himself upon his face before his captor, and may he spurn his pleading, and swiftly cut off his life! Through the downfall of his house may his hands enter the mire! As long as he lives may he drag sorrow along with him, and, as long as heaven and earth remain may his seed perish!”<sup>187</sup>

Here the captor is introduced as a human *executor*, who dispossesses, holds a person captive and kills, so the curse effects are captivity, oppression, and extermination.<sup>188</sup> The pairs – “as long as he lives”/“as long as heaven and earth remain”– signify that the violator experiences sorrow all of his life (probably caused by the downfall of his house); there is no one after him because his seed is extinct.

**The purchase of land by Marduk-našir *kudurru*** (BM 90841)<sup>189</sup> contains the record of the purchase of the piece of land by Marduk-našir who served as a king’s officer. In this particular case the price was paid, and the rights of the owner are sealed through the transaction.

The curse section contains a quite large format of curses. Any person – who would take away these lands, or in fear of cursing, cause another person to do this or even send some disabled person to remove the *kudurru* or destroy it – becomes a potential *addressee*. The anger of twelve deities and those inscribed on the stone is invoked upon such a man. The *executors* become appointees of a special sort of evil for him:

Anu, Enlil, Ea, and Nin-makh curse him with an evil curse;  
Sin clothes his body with leprosy;  
Shamash turns his day to darkness;  
Ishtar sends a curse upon him;  
Marduk fills his body with dropsy;  
Ninib tears out his boundary-stone;  
Gula puts a grievous sickness in his body;

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<sup>187</sup> Col. ii, the lines 53-60 (King, *BBS*, 36).

<sup>188</sup> Strikingly, the language reminds that of Deut 28 (dispossession by an enemy, oppression by merciless invaders).

<sup>189</sup> King, *BBS*, 37-42.

Adad overwhelms his field;<sup>190</sup>  
Nabu appoints him days of drought and scarcity (as destiny);  
The gods mentioned on the stone drive him into evil and unhappiness.

The main effects of the curse in this particular *kudurru* are diseases (dropsy, leprosy, grievous sickness, blindness), calamities (infertility of the soil, drought, scarcity), absence of a resting place and unhappiness. The penultimate effect is described vividly: the violator is likened to “a wild ass at the outer wall of the city” or “a dog who spends the night in the open place of the city.”<sup>191</sup> The materialization of curses is to be of a long-term. Some disasters are enclosed within specific time frames: “never,” “days/day and night,”<sup>192</sup> “till the day of his death.”<sup>193</sup> These time markers signify the fatality and durability of the curse.

To resume, the analysis of several *kudurru*-stones shows that the imprecation becomes an integral part of transactions with regard to property rights.<sup>194</sup> The curse functions as a kind of preventive measure (a tool of deterrence) by which the donator (an initiator of the grant and an implied *initiator* of curses<sup>195</sup>) seeks to secure the property rights of the owner. The main role in the case of violation of property rights is reserved for the pantheon of deities who, functioning as ‘guardians of property’ and ‘arbiters of justice,’ appear as *executors*, constituting a collective *source* of evil. Characteristically, the *addressee* of the curse is potential, anonymous.<sup>196</sup> The curse effects include shortening of life, eradication of descendants, different diseases and calamities, unhappiness and sorrow. Such threats as “tearing out foundations” and “obliteration of the name,” fitting the acts of violation (destruction of *kudurru*/clearing out the name of donator/owner), occur often, and most likely this means that the violator is to be deprived of his own property rights in some way. In general, by their nature, the curses mean evil fate. The timeline in *kudurrus* is quite peculiar: the standard time indicator – “in the future, the latter

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<sup>190</sup> The field is to yield weeds instead of green herbs and thorns in place of grain.

<sup>191</sup> Col. ii, the lines 18, 24.

<sup>192</sup> A parallel on identical temporal frames can be found in Deut 28,33 and 66.

<sup>193</sup> A striking similarity on the aspect of incurability takes place in Deut 28,35 and 61.

<sup>194</sup> The biblical analogy of this type of a curse is the curse of the Decalogue for removing a neighbor’s landmark in Deut 27,17.

<sup>195</sup> It appears that ownership was sealed by the king, and in case of problems an owner appealed to the king, who was not necessarily the original donator, to confirm the rights.

<sup>196</sup> In some *kudurrus* the list of potential violators includes the name of a clan or family.

days” – signifies wide time frames: at any time any act of violation will prompt curses.

The style of *kudurrus* has special features. A cursing with “a curse that cannot be loosened” or “cursing with an evil curse” is a distinctive stylistic feature: it signifies *determinacy*. The other feature is an accompanying of a written record by images of creatures, engraved on the surface, for instance, a dragon, scorpion, serpent, etc. These symbols are used in order to capture the imagination of a violator and frighten him. In general, it can be concluded that *kudurru*-curses exhibit a peculiar style which is extremely frightening: both the language and visionary elements are intended to force violators to shake with fear at the thought of disrupting one’s ownership rights or causing damage to the *kudurru*.<sup>197</sup>

The following chart summarizes the results of the study of *kudurru*-stones:

<i>Rubric</i>	The titles of <i>kudurrus</i>	
	<b>Ķišti-Marduk</b> (BM 102588)	<b>Marduk-zākir-šumi</b> (BM 90850)
	<b>Takil-ana-ilišu</b> (BM 90827)	<b>Ritti-Marduk</b> (BM 90858)
	<b>Khasardu</b> (BM 90829)	<b>Marduk-našir</b> (BM 90841)
Initiator	donator (?)	
Addressee	violator	
Source	deities - a collective source of evil	
Administrator	-	
Executor (s)	deities: Anu, Enlil, Ea, Shamash, Marduk, Ishtar, Adad, Sin, Nergal, Nabu, Ninib, Nusku, Tishpak, Gula; humans (captor)	
Condition	violation of the property rights	damage to the <i>kudurru</i>
Effect	<i>major triad</i> : shortening of life, eradication of descendants, deprivation of property rights; <i>other effects</i> : leprosy, dropsy, blindness, infertility of the soil, drought, scarcity, famine, defeat, oppression, captivity, no resting place, unhappiness, sorrow	
Time	“in future times”	

<sup>197</sup> The cases with a promise of blessing for protection of *kudurrus* are exceptional, e.g., a case with a wish of fullness of life can be attested in *kudurru* BM 90834 (King, *BBS*, 115-116).

#### 2.1.4. The curses of the king Esarhaddon

The vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon (*VTE*), dating to the seventh century BCE, constitute alliances between the Assyrian king Esarhaddon (Aššur-ahhe-iddina) and his vassals.<sup>198</sup> *VTE* contain a large body of imprecations, and it is important to look at curses within one of the longest of Esarhaddon's treaties. The treaty with Ramataya – city ruler of Urakazabanu – is quite extensive, and it can be classified as a classic example of Assyrian suzerainty-treaties.<sup>199</sup>

The heading of the document introduces the treaty as being sealed by Ashur, who is designated as king of the gods and lord of all lands. Esarhaddon, who acts on behalf of the prince Ashurbanipal, is introduced as the *initiator* of the treaty and accordingly the curses, and the *addressees* are the ruler Ramataya, his sons, grandsons and all the people of the land of the vassal. Characteristically, the *addressee* of the curse is a collective unit, presented in the person of the vassal (“you, your sons, your daughters...”). This unit can be designated as the *vassal's company*, i.e., people under the oath of vassalage.<sup>200</sup> The legitimacy of the treaty extends into the future, and the transmission of the treaty and its demands for future generations is obligatory. Several adjurations with a standard formula “you are adjured...,” followed by the name of a deity, and numerous conditions and even orders, imposed on the vassal, are articulated in a highly demanding fashion. The different forms of disloyalty create the grounds for severe curses. Besides some general conditions, aimed at forcing the *vassal's company* to submit to Esarhaddon or his successor, one of the specific concerns of the suzerain is a caution against averting the consequences of the oath or reversing the curse.<sup>201</sup> In general, it is implied that if anyone from the *vassal's company* neglects the treaty, the curse is going to be transmitted to his posterity.

The formal structure of the imprecatory part is striking. The first set of curses is preceded by tens of conditions and begins with the invocation of Ashur (the line 414), who is introduced as the one who determines fate. The second set of curses is preceded by two lists of conditions. The first is a kind of self-imprecation, delivered in the first person plural address: (“if *we* rebel or

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<sup>198</sup> *ANET*, 533-541. See also D. J. Wiseman, “The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon,” *Iraq* 20/1 (1958): 1-99. In scholarship the treaties received the designation *VTE*.

<sup>199</sup> Several copies of treaties with other vassals and lands were found (*ANET*, 534, in footnote).

<sup>200</sup> It becomes clear that “you” is to be taken in second person plural address throughout the treaty.

<sup>201</sup> The lines 377-84.

revolt against Esarhaddon..., may the gods mentioned [here] call *us*, *our* offspring and *our* descendants to account”).<sup>202</sup> The second one is delivered in the second person plural address, as usual: “If you sin against the treaty...”<sup>203</sup> There is an impression that the two voices echo one another: the voice of the *vassal’s company* and that of the suzerain. Following these two conditions, the new set of curses begins again with the invocation of Ashur, who is pictured as striking down with his pierce weapons (the line 518). The final set of curses follows the conditional statement “if you abandon Esarhaddon...,” and begins with the invocation of a consuming sword, as an *executor* of cursing.<sup>204</sup>

The curses of the treaty are expressed in the form of maledictory wishes – some are introduced by invocatory statements (“May god [name] do so and so...), whereas other are formulated as analogies (“Just as ..., so may ... be like that”).<sup>205</sup> It is worthwhile to look at both categories in detail.

In the first category the invocation of deities is tendentious. Deities of different ranks and spheres are invoked to bring a curse upon a disloyal party. The gods are presented as *executors* who bring misfortune into the life of people or nature. They seem to fulfill two primary functions: to strike down the minor party (those who belong to the *vassal’s company*) and cause misfortunes. As a matter of fact, their activity reflects their designation. The following table represents the list of main deities and their sphere of responsibility:

Sin (the luminary of heaven and earth) → leprosy (419) = kudurru (BM 90841)
Shamash (the light of heaven and earth) → darkness (424) = kudurru (BM 90841)
Ninurta (leader of the gods) → defeat with a spear/non-burial (425-7)
Marduk (the eldest son) → curse as fate (434)
Adad (the canal inspector of heaven and earth) → disaster (440-52) <sup>206</sup>
Ishtar (lady of battle) → defeat by enemy (453-4) = kudurru (BM 90827)
Nergal (the warrior among the gods) → deprivation of life/pestilence (456)
Ea (lord of the springs) → poisoned water/dropsy (521-2)

<sup>202</sup> The lines 494-512.

<sup>203</sup> The lines 513-17.

<sup>204</sup> The lines 632-35.

<sup>205</sup> There is also a general category of maledictions, introduced simply as “may it be...,” but they are not numerous.

<sup>206</sup> A severe agricultural disaster (crop failure because of locusts) results in famine, and starvation leads to cannibalism.

It is curious that the collective agency of *executors* – the great gods, who inhabit the world, and those who are named in this tablet – is called on, in particular, to curse with a baleful curse (472-5).<sup>207</sup> The executive role can even be assigned to evil spirits/demons,<sup>208</sup> who are called to inhabit the houses, to birds and beasts who devour human corpses, and insects who eat up the land.

The second category of curses, formulated after the pattern of an analogy, is quite intriguing. The analogy is drawn on the basis of associations between some sort of a natural phenomenon and the effect of the curse. The following examples demonstrate this well:

“Just as a snake and mongoose don’t enter the same hole and don’t live there, but plot of cutting each other’s throat, so may you and your women not enter the same house...”<sup>209</sup> (*hole/house*)

“Just as a butterfly ...does not return to its cocoon, so may you not return to your women in your houses...”<sup>210</sup> (*cocoon/house*)

“Just as honey is sweet, so may the blood of your women, your sons and daughters taste sweet in your mouths...”<sup>211</sup> (*honey/blood*)

“Just as a honeycomb is pierced through and through with holes, so may holes be pierced through your flesh...”<sup>212</sup> (*honeycomb/body*).

This technique is used in order to allow the addressee of the curse to imagine what will happen to him and his family. Some threats presuppose a kind of *simile* (likeness) between what is done with some objects and what is going to be done with the recipients of the curse in a figurative sense, as for instance: “just as one burns a wax figurine in fire, dissolves a clay one in water, so may they (enemies) burn your figure in fire, submerge it in water” (the lines 608-11). In the second category it is not stated explicitly who is involved in the drama of cursing with regard to divine (gods) or human (enemies) executors. They are occasionally referred as “avengers” or more generally as “they.”

The curse effects are numerous, and they can be distributed by categories:

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<sup>207</sup> A similar formula in *kudurru*-stones can serve as a close parallel.

<sup>208</sup> They are mentioned in the line 493.

<sup>209</sup> The lines 555-9.

<sup>210</sup> The lines 579-81.

<sup>211</sup> The lines 568-9.

<sup>212</sup> The lines 594-8.

1) *calamities*: harsh natural conditions (“ironed” soil, bad for sowing and “copper” sky, raining “burning coals instead of dew”),<sup>213</sup> agricultural disaster (locust invasion), thirst/famine, cannibalism, pestilence, poisoned water, deluge;

2) *human misfortunes*: leprosy, incurable sore, dropsy, blindness (walking in darkness<sup>214</sup>), sleeplessness, worries, no resting place,<sup>215</sup> deprivation of fatherhood and longevity;

3) *warfare*: defeat, oppression (enemies harass wives,<sup>216</sup> dispossess), captivity (deportation to a foreign land), eradication of offspring (from the land), death, and non-burial (devouring of corpse by eagles/vultures, dogs/pigs).

The time of fulfillment of the curses is not specified, but continuity of some effects is implied, as for example: “may hunger, want, famine and pestilence never leave you,” “your days should be somber and your years dark.”<sup>217</sup>

The style of the curses is very rude. The language describes terrible forms of violence. The tone of some of the wishes is shocking, as for instance: “drinking donkey’s urine,” “grinding of bones (those of the vassal and his children) instead of barley ration,” “clothing in the other’s skin.”<sup>218</sup>

To resume, *VTE* is a curious example of the ancient model of *suzerain-vassal* relations after the ‘Neo-Assyrian’ type. The peculiar feature of that pattern is the *extension of suzerainty and vassalage*. The point is that that suzerainty, represented not exclusively in the monarch Esarhaddon personally, extends to his son Ashurbanipal and his brothers by their mother’s lineage; it is true for the vassalage as well: it extends to those who belong to the *vassal’s company* in present and in future. The Assyrian monarch is a kind of *hegemonic ruler* who seeks to retain power over a large region or even the entire world through extension of his dominion to the prince Ashurbanipal (Assyrian ruler), and surprisingly to the crown prince Shamashshumukin

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<sup>213</sup> These threats are described in the lines 526-33. A parallel (soil = iron/sky=copper), recognized by scholars, is found in Deut 28,23. A parallel on failure in cultivation of the land occurs in the Hittite treaty between Šuppiluliumaš and Kurtiwaza.

<sup>214</sup> Cf. Deut 28,29.

<sup>215</sup> Here the idea of vagrancy is implied. A close parallel is found in the *kudurru* BM 90841.

<sup>216</sup> The text says: “May Venus... let your wives lie in the embrace of your enemy before your very eyes..., may a foreign enemy divide your possessions” (the lines 428-30). A similar idea can be detected in Deut 28,30 and 31 (in v. 31 the phrase “before your eyes” occurs).

<sup>217</sup> The lines 480 and 485.

<sup>218</sup> The lines 491, 445 and 450.

(Babylonian ruler). The curse becomes a technical means for the monarch's strategy of retaining power and serves as an instrument to maintain the loyalty of the vassals on the highest level possible.

The following chart summarizes the results of the study of *VTE*:

<i>Rubric</i>	<i>The text</i> "The treaty of Esarhaddon with Ramataya"
Initiator	the Assyrian king Esarhaddon
Addressee	the vassal + <i>vassal's company</i>
Source	deities - a collective source of evil
Administrator	-
Executor (s)	deities: Ashur, Sin, Shamash, Venus, Marduk, Ishtar, Adad, Ea, Nergal, Ninurta; spirits, enemies, birds, beasts, insects, sword
Condition	disloyalty to the treaty, to Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal
Effect	infertility, no rain/fresh water resources, failure in agriculture, thirst/famine, cannibalism, disasters, diseases, no rest/sleep, worries, defeat, oppression, captivity, extermination, non-burial
Time	-

### 2.1.5. Curses and blessings in Syrian Semitic inscriptions

A vast number of ancient inscriptions throughout the Levant were discovered by archaeologists during the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Syrian Semitic inscriptions, in particular, are of great importance, because they belong to the Semitic religious-cultural milieu, thus being close to the Biblical world and literature.<sup>219</sup>

Several royal inscriptions with the blessing/curse formulae will be analyzed in a brief overview. The inscriptions are of a dedicatory or memorial character.

The Aramaic inscription of *Tel Fekherye*<sup>220</sup> is a commemorative document engraved on the statue of Hadad. The curses appear in the lines 10b-12 and

<sup>219</sup> A large collection of ancient inscriptions can be found in W. W. Hallo - K. L. Jr. Younger (ed.), *The Context of Scripture. I: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World; II: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World; III: Archival Documents from the Biblical World* (Leiden - New York, 1997-2002), further referred to as *COS*. West-Semitic inscriptions received the designation *KAI* (Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften) = H. Donner H., W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, I (5th rev. ed.; Wiesbaden, 2002).

<sup>220</sup> *COS*, 153-154 (2.34). The inscription was found in 1979. For the text and translation, see also E. Lipinski, *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics II* (OLA 57; Leuven, 1994), 48-50. For some important works on the inscription of Tel Fekherye see, for example: A. R. Millard, "The Tell Fekheriyeh Inscriptions," in A. Biran - J. Aviram (ed.), *Biblical Archaeology Today, 1990: Proceedings of the Second International Congress on Biblical Archaeology: Jerusalem, June-July 1990*, Jerusalem, 1993: 518-524; J. C. Greenfield - A.



16b-23. The curses are expressed in the precative form – *lhwy* (“may it be...”) – denoting a maledictory wish. The author of the inscription – a local governor of Sikan *Hadad-yis ‘i* – is an implied *initiator* of the curses. The *addressee* of the curse is potential, and may be a vandal who effaces the name of the governor from the inscription. Hadad, who is called *gbr* (“hero”) and declared to be an accuser (*qblh*) of that person, and the deities Šawala and Nergal<sup>221</sup> are *executors* invoked to bring the curse about. The main curses, which can be classified as a *curse of futile effort* and a *curse of disproportion*, don’t contain invocations of deities:

“May he sow, but not harvest.<sup>222</sup> And may he sow one thousand (measures of) barley, but get one paris<sup>223</sup> from it.

And may one hundred ewes suckle a lamb, but let it not be sated. And may one hundred cows suckle a calf, but let it not be sated. And may one hundred women suckle a baby, but let it not be sated. And may one hundred women bake bread in an oven, but let them not fill it. And from the rubbish heaps, may his people glean barley (and) eat (it).”<sup>224</sup>

The maledictions are organized around the motif of *scarcity* to highlight the contrast between an effort and its result: sowing does not result in reaping, and the baking of bread is not proportional to the need. The repetitive use of the numerical *m’h* (“one hundred”) is a hyperbolic device to emphasize the idea of a lack of satisfaction: the efforts of one hundred nursing fail to feed even a single offspring. The curse affects agriculture and animal breeding. Its main effect is agricultural disaster (crop failure) and, as a consequence, famine which strikes not only the curse addressee, but his livestock and household. The time is not specified, but it is implied that the curse may start after any act of vandalism.

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Shaffer, “Notes on the Curse Formulae of the Tell Fekherye Inscription,” *RB* 92 (1985): 47-59; K. J. Baranowski, “The Old Aramaic and Biblical Curses,” *LA* 62 (2012): 173-201.

<sup>221</sup> The deity Nergal is associated with pestilence and plague, and he is described as striking the land with the rod (*šbt*), so even the land becomes the *target* of cursing.

<sup>222</sup> For biblical parallels, see Deut 28,38-40 and Mich 6,15.

<sup>223</sup> Lipinski, *Studies in Aramaic inscriptions*, 67, provides helpful information on the cultural background of the concept *parīs* as a minimal measure usually designating half or part of something bigger.

<sup>224</sup> The lines 19-22. A biblical parallel on baking bread, but with other numeric data, is Lev 26,26. An extra-biblical parallel can be found in the Bukān Inscription (*COS*, 3.89).

The inscription of **Zakir** (KAI 202)<sup>225</sup> is a dedicatory-commemorative Aramaic inscription dating to the eighth century BCE. The author of the inscription is Zakir – the king of the Syrian kingdom of Hamath and Lu'aš – who dedicates the stela to the local lord Ilu-Wer, his patron. The inscription contains a record of the achievements of the monarch. In order to preserve the record of his own deeds, the king delivers curses. The king is the *initiator* of the curse, whereas its potential *addressee* is any vandal who removes the record from the stela or the stela itself. The curse is to be actualized through a company of *executors*, that of Be'elshamayn, Ilu-Wer, Shamash, Sahr and the gods of heaven and earth. The effect of the curse is the destruction of the vandal: he is to be deprived of his head and root. The inscription ends with a kind of self-benediction: “may the name of Zakir and his house endure forever.” It is curious that the king is introduced at the same time as the *initiator* and the *addressee* of the blessing with the effect of a long dominion.

The old Aramaic **Hadad** inscription (KAI 214),<sup>226</sup> dating to the mid-eighth century BCE, is a curious example of interplay of blessing and curse motifs. The author – the king Panamuwa I – dedicates the statue to the storm-god Hadad, to whom he feels indebted for his successful reign and building projects. The section on blessings is found in the lines 15b-18. The *initiator* is the king, and the *addressee* may be any of the king's descendants (sons). The condition is quite unusual: the descendant is obliged to bring an offering to Hadad and pronounce a kind of benediction on behalf of Panamuwa. The person who pronounces this benediction, functioning as a kind of *administrator*, has to use the right blessing formula when addressing the deity Hadad:

“May the soul (the dead spirit) of Panawuma eat with you (Hadad)  
and may the soul (the dead spirit) of Panawuma drink with you.”

The benediction extends into the realm of the *hereafter*, thus crossing the life time limit. The desired effect of such a blessing is a happy existence in the afterlife. This benevolent prayer is accompanied by a proclamation of eternal commemoration of the soul of the king with the name of Hadad. This deity functions as a *source* of goodness for any of the faithful king's descendants,

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<sup>225</sup> ANET, 655-656. For the text and translation, see also J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions. II: Aramaic Inscriptions, Including Inscriptions in the Dialect of Zenjirli* (Oxford, 1975), 10-13.

<sup>226</sup> COS, 156-158 (2.36).

showing him favor and accepting his offering. The blessing seems to be experienced occasionally, probably after exercising such a duty.

If any of the successors of the king fails to pray for the soul of the king and his eternal destiny, he automatically becomes an *addressee* of the curse. The king Panamuwa appears as the *initiator* of the curse, and the deity Hadad, who pours out his wrath upon this person, is now transformed into an *executor* of cursing, the *source* of evil. He is portrayed as the one who does not receive the offering and hear prayers, thus being ‘deaf’ to the request of the king’s son. The curse is expressed in the form of a maledictory wish:

“May he not give to him to eat because of his rage,  
And may he withhold sleep from him in the night...”

The addressee is to be deprived of the most essential human needs: eating and sleeping, so the main curse effects are hunger and sleeplessness.

To resume, the Hadad inscription is an example of a *prescribed blessing* which extends into the realm of the *hereafter*. The king expects to be blessed after his life is over by a human figure (his successor). It is curious that the author of the inscription and the addressee of the benediction are the same: the monarch himself. The son of the king becomes the addressee of a blessing or curse on the basis of his treatment of the memory of his ancestor.

The Phoenician inscription of *Kilamuwa* of Y’dy-Sam’al (KAI 24),<sup>227</sup> dating to the late ninth century BCE, commemorates the glorious deeds of the king Kilamuwa. In contrast with his ancestors, who treated the lower class like dogs, the king considers himself as being highly beneficent to the marginalized (*mškbm*). These people, enriched by the king, were blessed in some sense, being beneficiaries of the king’s rule. In turn, the people paid him with the same. Their affection toward the king was deep: “and they set their soul toward me as the soul of an orphan for a mother (*km nbš ytm b’m*).”

The curse section follows the description of the king’s achievements. Any person who defaces the inscription is an indirect *addressee* of the king’s curse, and the sons of the king are no exception. The effect of this curse is somewhat strange: the relations between two groups of people, one of which is the group of *mškbm*, will be deprived of honor, so the curse implies social distance, a

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<sup>227</sup> ANET, 654-655. For the text and translation of the curse, see also J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions. III: Phoenician Inscriptions Including Inscriptions in the Mixed Dialect of Arslan Tash* (Oxford, 1982), 34-35.

kind of alienation. The imprecation is further intensified through the direct invocation of divine *executors*. The king, being the *initiator* of curses, invokes a triad of deities to destroy the head of a vandal:

“And if anyone smashes this inscription (*wmy yšḥt hspr*), may Baʿl-Šamad who belongs to Gabbar smash his head (*yšḥt rʿš*), and may Baʿl Hamman who belongs to b<sup>m</sup>h and Rakkabel, the lord of the dynasty, smash his head.”

The initiator thinks in terms of equal compensation. The final actualization of the curse results in the extermination of a vandal who deletes the inscription.

The Phoenician inscription of *Tabnit of Sidon* (KAI 13),<sup>228</sup> dating to the early fifth century BCE, is of a different character. It is a funerary inscription with a note of warning followed by the curse imprecation. The author is Tabnit, the priest of Astarte, the king of Sidon. The prohibition is threefold: “don’t open, don’t open it, don’t disturb me.” The priest is the *initiator*, and every potential vandal, challenged directly as “whoever you are,” becomes the *addressee* of the priestly curse. That person is confronted with a reassurance that no precious item can be found in the sarcophagus, and only a dead one is lying there (*wškb ʿnk*, “I am lying here”). The religious concern is clearly expressed: such a thing (opening of the grave) would be an abomination to Astarte.

The curse against a future vandal is formulated as a maledictory wish without invocation of deities:

“May (you) not have any seed among the living under the sun (*tḥt šmš*) or resting-place (*mškb*) together with the Rephaims (*rp ʿm*).”<sup>229</sup>

The effect of the curse is double: no posterity and no resting-place. The ‘funerary curse’ in some sense mirrors the act of vandalism: a vandal will be deprived of a place of final repose. The two realms – life and death – are brought together. The curse crosses the temporal borders and extends into the realm of the *hereafter*. Its function is strictly prohibitive and retributive: the curse is intended to secure the legitimate place of final rest and punish vandals.

The Phoenician *Ešmunazor* (KAI 14)<sup>230</sup> inscription, dating to the fifth century BCE, is a kind of epitaphic commemoration of the deeds of the king.

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<sup>228</sup> ANET, 662.

<sup>229</sup> For details on Rephaims as a group of dead that achieved tranquility in the afterlife and as royal ancestors, see M. J. Suriamo, *The Politics of the Dead Kings* (Tübingen, 2010), 154-165.

<sup>230</sup> ANET, 662.

The author is a royal personality who speaks of himself as “being snatched away before his time.” The king delivers several prohibitions (*taboos*): do not open or move his coffin, do not seek after the treasures, and do not disturb his body in his funeral bed by carrying him away to another resting place. The circle of *addressees* of the script is highly inclusive: it is likely that any person of any rank – *kl mmlkt wkl 'dm* (“any prince, any man”) – is addressed with a request not to let anyone open the grave.

The set of curses follows the prohibition. The central curse formula is similar to that of Tabnit’s inscription, though in reversed order: no resting place/no seed. The threat of curses concerns all who desecrate the tomb: first, the potential *addressees* are to be deprived of the right to have a resting place with Rephaim and burial in a tomb.<sup>231</sup> Second, the vandals will be deprived of their offspring: literally, they will have no son (*bn*) or seed (*wzr'*) after them (*thtnm*). It is curious, that though the primary role in vengeance for the act of vandalism belongs to *divine executors* – “holy” (sacred) gods – execution is extended to *human executors* as well. The king, the *initiator*, expresses the wish that the “holy” gods would abandon the vandal – a prince or man – to a mighty ruler who must exterminate such a person together with his descendants. Thus, the curse receives the status of an authoritative *command*, and future extermination of vandals – either of a royal race or men of the crowd – is legitimized. The curse on vandals, who are addressed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, is reiterated with a new force in the middle of the script. It is quite abstract and enigmatic:

“May they have no root down below and no fruit up on top, and may they not have any stately appearance among the living under the sun.”

It is curious that the monarch reminds the reader of the fact of his premature death which serves as a kind of motivation. In the end the curse reappears as a kind of concluding subscription. The conditionality is strong: “holy” gods, being a collective *source* of destruction, will extirpate those who neglect the prohibitions. The effect of the curse presupposes the total extermination of vandals – whether rulers or ordinary men – and their offspring forever.

To conclude, the funerary curses provide a glimpse into the ideology of the burial policy of ancient people when the last will of a dead person to preserve

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<sup>231</sup> The Aramaic words *mškb* and *qbr* signify the place of final rest for a mortal one: lying with Rephaims in the hereafter or lying inside an individual grave.

his mortal remains in a fixed burial site was legitimized. The curse is used as a protective measure to secure one's final repose and prevent desecration of a 'sacred' sarcophagus. In these particular cases the author of an inscription is the *initiator* of cursing, and the curse becomes legal through the 'voice' of a deceased person (!).

Two more inscriptions are worth mentioning due to their focus on blessings. The old Phoenician inscription of *Yehimilk* (KAI 4),<sup>232</sup> dating to the late tenth century BCE, is a commemorative record of the king's building activity in Byblos. In the opening line the monarch is referred to as a builder of the house (temple) and the restorer of the ruins in Byblos. The script contains the request of a blessing. The king himself is both the *initiator* and the *addressee* of a future blessing. The numerous deities – Baʿl Shamen, the lord of Byblos (or lady of Byblos) and the assembly of "holy" gods of Byblos – are invoked as *executors* of the blessing, constituting a collective *source* of goodness. The effect can be understood in political terms, that of successful reign and long dominion. The desire for divine blessing seems to be justified by the fact that the king is righteous and upright before the gods of Byblos. Thus, the king's conduct becomes the prerequisite for the future blessing. The aspect of temporality is implied: the blessing is expected to last as long as the king holds power.

The Phoenician inscription of *Yehawmilk* (KAI 10),<sup>233</sup> dating to the early fifth century BCE, is another example of a royal blessing. The author of the inscription introduces himself in the opening line of the inscription: "I am Yehawmilk the king of Byblos." The impression is that the king seeks to earn the blessing by trying to please his mistress (he dedicates a bronze altar and other objects to her), so the deeds of the king and his reverent attitude to his patroness become the ground for the blessing. The part on blessings reads as follows:

"May the lady of Byblos bless (*tbrk*) and preserve Yehawmilk, king of Byblos, and prolong his days and years in Byblos, for he is a righteous king. And may (the mistress,) the lady of Byblos, give (him) favor in the eyes of the gods and

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<sup>232</sup> *ANET*, 653-654.

<sup>233</sup> *ANET*, 656. For an interesting study of the basic constellation of blessing and its pictorial representation (reciprocal gesture of greeting/blessing) in this inscription, see M. Leuenberger, "Blessing in text and picture in Israel and the Levant: a comparative case study on the representation of blessing in Hirbet el-Qom and on the stela of Yehawmilk of Byblos," *BN*, 139 (2008): 61-77.

in the eyes of the people of this country and (that he be) pleased with the people of this country.”<sup>234</sup>

It appears that the *initiator* and the *addressee* of the blessing are identical, i.e., the king himself, whereas his patroness – the lady of Byblos (*b'lt gbl*) – is pictured as a sole *source* of the blessing. The materialization of the blessing is to result in personal prosperity for the king: a successful reign and a reputation as a good monarch. The blessing operates within a definite time frame – “the days and years” of his rule over Byblos.

Besides the benediction, the king delivers a curse, and its *addressee* is a person – a ruler or ordinary man – who rebuilds the altar or portico in an inappropriate manner. The king orders a future worker to put his name side by side with his own (Yehawmilk); if the royal order is neglected, the lady of Byblos, invoked in the same manner as in the blessing (the 3<sup>rd</sup> person address, the precativ form), will destroy the person and his seed in the face of all the gods of Byblos. Thus, the same divinity is turned into an *executor* of the curse, the very *source* of evil. To resume, this inscription exhibits a peculiar feature: it is a kind of *self-benediction* with an invocation of a sole divinity.

To resume, the Syrian Semitic inscriptions contain well elaborated sections on curses and blessings. As a rule, the addressee of a blessing is *concrete* (the initiator and the addressee of a blessing are identical on some occasions); the addressee of a curse is *abstract*, so the curse is potential in its nature. The invocation of deities (executors/implied source of ill-being/well-being) seems to be tendentious; a human executor is almost an exception. Blessings are associated with divine protection and favor, and normally invoked upon royal personalities; the curses, associated with destruction and divine disfavor, are invoked upon a violator. The blessing or curse on some specific occasions extends into the *hereafter*, as we see in the Hadad and the Tabnit inscriptions. The authors of the inscriptions used cursing as an effective means to frighten violators. Any act of vandalism can be perceived as acting against *honor* (funerary inscriptions) or *memory* (commemorative inscriptions). The curse is intended to react to such acts of violence in order to avenge a wrong.

The following tables summarize the study of the inscriptions:

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<sup>234</sup> ANET, 656.

<i>Rubric</i>	The name of the inscription			
	<b>Tel Fekherye</b>	<b>Zakir (KAI 202)</b>	<b>Hadad (KAI 214)</b>	<b>Kilamuwa (KAI 24)</b>
Initiator	Hadad-yis'i:	Zakir	Panamuwa	Kilamuwa
Addressee	c - a vandal	c - a vandal b - the king	b/c - king's son b - the king	c - a vandal
Source	deities	deities	the deity	deities
Administrator	-	-	king's son (benediction)	-
Executor (s)	Hadad Šawala Nergal	Be'elshamayn, Ilu-Wer, Sahr Shamash, gods of heaven/earth	Hadad	Ba'l-Šamad, Ba'l Hamman, Rakkabel
Condition	defacement of the inscription	defacement of the stela/ inscription	b - uttering of a benediction c - refusal	defacement of the inscription
Effect	agricultural disaster, famine, pestilence	c - destruction b - long reign	b - divine favor; eating/drinking with Hadad c - depriving of food/sleep	alienation destruction
Time	-	b - continual	b - <i>hereafter</i>	-

<i>Rubric</i>	The name of the inscription			
	<b>Tabnit (KAI 13)</b>	<b>Ešmunazor (KAI 14)</b>	<b>Yeḥimilk (KAI 4)</b>	<b>Yeḥawmilk (KAI 10)</b>
Initiator	Tabnit	Ešmunazor	Yeḥimilk	Yeḥawmilk
Addressee	c - a vandal	c - a vandal	b - the king	b - the king c - a builder
Source	-	deities	deities	the deity
Administrator	-	-	-	-
Executor (s)	-	"holy" gods, a future king	Ba'l Shamen, "holy" gods	the lady of Byblos
Condition	desecration of the tomb	desecration of the tomb	king's deeds	king's deeds/ neglect of king's order
Effect	no posterity, no resting place with Rephaims	no place with Rephaims/ no posterity, non-burial, destruction	protection, long reign	b - protection, long reign, favor, good reputation; c - destruction
Time	<i>hereafter</i>	<i>hereafter</i>	continual	b - continual



### 2.1.6. Summary and concluding remarks

The analysis of some ANE texts provides us with helpful information for our general understanding of blessings/curses as religious and cultural phenomena.

In the ANE texts different types of blessings and curses can be detected. The texts can be divided into five groups according to their cultural-linguistic tradition: 1) Sumerian 2) Neo-Assyrian 3) Hittite 4) Babylonian 5) Syrian Semitic.

The ‘Sumerian’ type is represented by the literary composition *The Curse of Agade*, and here we have an example of an artistic description of the divine curse in action: the picture of a cursed city is drawn in terms of imminent doom.

The ‘Neo-Assyrian type,’ represented by *VTE*, exhibits the harsh style of a ‘technique’ of cursing operating in the framework of the suzerainty-vassalage partnership. This type is characterized only by cruel and numerous curses, and here no benefit for a vassal is envisaged. The curse becomes an instrument used by the stronger party to keep subordinates under the *hegemony* of a superior.

The ‘Hittite’ type is different, and it is apparently more positive. The vassal treaties after the ‘Hittite type’ include both curses and blessings, and here it is evident that the stronger party, though seeking to secure his political interests by means of sanctions, recognizes the minor party as a partner, and wishes equal well-being for him through a series of blessings.

The ‘Babylonian’ type, represented in our study of *kudurru* stones, in spite of a primary focus on cursing, is a peculiar example of beneficiary acts, secured by means of the curse intended to place an owner under the protection of deities. The language is frightening and violent, reminiscent of the ‘Neo-Assyrian’ type.

The ‘Syrian Semitic’ type, represented by *commemorative-dedicatory* and *funeral inscriptions*, has its own peculiarities. The curse is directed at vandals who act against memory and honor. The royal curse becomes a means to prevent acts of vandalism, a tool of deterrence in some sense. The blessing occasionally takes the form of self-benediction, as a means to get divine-human favor and receive benefits for personal gain.

It can be concluded that in the ANE texts, generally, the practice of cursing is more prevalent than benedictory activity. The common feature is the constant use of precatives (‘may it be’) in the written curse formulae. The curses can generally be classified as severe incantations, the blessings as

benevolent wishes. The overall structure of curse/blessing in the ANE texts is complex. The addressee of a blessing is made specific, as a rule (vassal in Hittite treaties, king in Syrian Semitic inscriptions). The effects of blessing are prosperity and successful reign. The function of blessings can be understood in terms of *reward* or *protection* (people/possessions). The addressee of a curse on some occasions (*kudurrus*/Syrian Semitic inscriptions) is *abstract*, whereas in treaties the addressee is *concrete*, and on some occasions (Hittite treaties + *VTE*) is presented as a unit. The drama of cursing in the ANE texts involves a large number of divine executors, i.e., deities of different ranks and spheres. The curses share a similar repertoire and seem to reflect common fears of ancient people (see a short comparative catalogue of curses in different kind of texts in the Appendix). The most horrible threats are associated with extermination and the loss of progeny. It can be observed that the curse in the ANE texts, as a rule (with the exception of *The Curse of Agade*), is potential in its character, and it is supposed to become operative in circumstances when an improper action (breach of the treaty, disturbance of property rights, vandalism) takes place. The temporal mechanism for such curses seems to start immediately after any action of this kind. The function of curses in Mesopotamian, Hittite and Syrian Semitic sources can be understood in terms of *retribution* concerning people (treaties), *protection* concerning ownership (*kudurrus*), and a kind of *taboo* for objects (inscriptions, tombs and statues).

## 2.2. Meaning of curses in Graeco-Roman world

Now in focus is the Graeco-Roman world. The texts, which seem to be interesting for our analysis, contain imprecations with curse formulae and maledictory speeches. Here we will examine several examples of the curse tablets *katadesmoi* and some fragments, relevant to our subject matter, in *The Iliad* of Homer.

### 2.2.1. The binding curses of *katadesmoi*

Studying blessings and curses in a cross-cultural context seems to be insufficient without taking into account the existence of a large collection of curse tablets, which were in use in the Graeco-Roman world in the early and late antiquity: from the fifth century BCE to a millennium onward.

They are labeled as *katadesmoi*<sup>235</sup> in Greek, or corresponding, as *defixiones*<sup>236</sup> in Latin; approximately 1,500 curse tablets have been found.<sup>237</sup> The curse tablets were inscribed on small sheets of lead and buried with the corpse of an untimely dead person (tombs), in chthonic sanctuaries, in bodies of deep water (wells, baths, fountains), which is why in most cases they were

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<sup>235</sup> The term κατάδεσμος is derived from the Greek verb καταδεν (“to bind up”).

<sup>236</sup> The term *defixio* originates from the Latin *defigere* (“to nail down,” “transfix”). The term reflects a practice when a tablet or figurine was perforated, nailed.

<sup>237</sup> Investigation and studying of these artifacts, having begun in the nineteenth century, for example, by R. Wunsch (R. Wunsch, *Defixionum tabellae* [Berlin, 1897]), was largely continued in a number of recent works: C. A. Faraone, “The Agonistic Context of Early Greek Binding-Spells,” in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (ed. C. A. Faraone and D. Obbink; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3-32; further referred to as Faraone, “AC;” D. R. Jordan, “Defixiones from a Well near the Southwest Corner of the Athenian Agora,” *Hesperia* 54, 3 (1985): 205-255; D. R. Jordan, “Two Inscribed Lead Tablets from a Well in the Athenian Kerameikos,” *AM* 95 (1980): 225-39; D. R. Jordan, “New Greek Curse Tablets (1985–2000),” *GRBS* 41 (2000): 5–46; H. B. Versnel, “Beyond Cursing: the Appeal to Justice in Judicial Prayers,” in *Magika Hiera: Ancient Greek Magic and Religion* (ed. C. A. Faraone and D. Obbink; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 60-106; Geoff. W. Adams, “The Social and Cultural Implications of Curse Tablets [Defixiones] in Britain and the Continent,” *SHT* 7 A, no. 5 (2006): 1-15. Detailed review of the published defixiones with supplied bibliography was done by J. G. Gager in his book *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999). This is a helpful source for study (further referred to as Gager, *CT*). Collections of *katadesmoi* received the following designations: *DT* (*Defixionum Tabellae*) = *Defixionum Tabellae* (ed. A. Audollent; Paris, 1904); *DTA* (*Defixionum Tabellae with Appendix*) = *Inscriptiones Graecae* (vol. 3, pt. 3, Appendix: “Defixionum Tabellae;” Berlin, 1897); *SGD* (*Survey of Greek Defixiones*) = D. R. Jordan, “A Survey of Greek Defixiones Not Included in the Special Corpora,” *GRBS* 26 (1985): 151-97.

not found by archaeologists; the oldest examples are attested in the fifth century BCE from Sicily, Oblia and Attica.<sup>238</sup>

In general, a person, who can be designated as the *commissioner*, asks a professional scribe<sup>239</sup> to produce a *katadesmos* with the goal of harming a person in one way or another, or to put it more concretely – *to bind* a victim and prevent him from acting.<sup>240</sup> The peculiarity of *katadesmoi* is the use of two sets of symbols: *voces mysticae*,<sup>241</sup> which functioned as the secret and ‘sacred names’ of gods, and *charaktêres*,<sup>242</sup> which were believed to possess an inherited power and were intended to transmit the power from the divine realm to the human and anticipate the desired outcome of the spell itself.<sup>243</sup> The setting of curse tablets is complex. They were used in different realms: sports, business, court, private life.<sup>244</sup> It would be interesting to briefly analyze some examples of *katadesmoi* from three categories, such as *circus-theater*, *workshop* and *court*, and *pleas for justice*.

The first category includes tablets focused on activity performed at such locations as the *circus*, *hippodrome* and *theater*. The context of tablets belonging to that category is rivalry between professionals, such as choir directors, dramatic actors, athletes, horse drivers, etc.

**The *katadesmos* from Sicily** (SGD 91),<sup>245</sup> dating to the mid-fifth century BCE, is a curious example of directing a spell at several professionals (choir directors) in order to make them unsuccessful, and thus benefit a friend. Their professional activity is connected with a dramatic performance and poetic recitations.

In this case an unknown person (the client), who appears as the *initiator* of the curse, commissions a tablet on behalf of his friend – a choir director – named Eunicos. He states that he acts out of friendship, and the desire to

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<sup>238</sup> Faraone, “AC,” 3.

<sup>239</sup> Useful information on the role of scribes can be found in Gager, *CT*, 5-6.

<sup>240</sup> Faraone argues that the main motivation was restraining, not destroying a victim (“AC,” 8); Gager states that these objects (*katadesmoi*) expressed a desire to enlist supernatural aid in bringing another person under control (Gager, *CT*, 3).

<sup>241</sup> These are unintelligible words.

<sup>242</sup> These are engraved images of humans, animals and astrological symbols.

<sup>243</sup> Gager, *CT*, 5-7, 11. Gager refers to the view of Neo-Platonic philosopher Iamblichus (300 BCE) who spoke about theurgist practice when images and mystical words, used properly, were believed to convey to the theurgist the power of the gods (11).

<sup>244</sup> Gager, *CT*, 153, states that curses were deployed in social and personal conditions of competition and uncertainty; Faraone, “AC,” 3, suggests that an antagonistic relationship was the traditional context for the use of curse tablets.

<sup>245</sup> For the translated text, revised by Jordan, and important notes, see Gager, *CT*, 76-77.

promote a friend becomes the ground for cursing his colleagues.<sup>246</sup> The indirect *addressees* of the spell are several *chorêgoi* along with their fathers (ancestors) and children (descendants), so it appears that the *addressee* of the curse is a collective unit. The names of some victims are listed. No divine executors are called on.

The tone of the spell is quite aggressive. Here a binding formula “I register” with a verb ἀπογράφω (“to register”) and a general formula “I curse” are employed. The curser registers these numerous victims of his spell for failure “in word and deeds,” so the curse is intended to affect the vocation of the choir directors and result in their professional incompetence. Here the effect of the curse implies a lack of success for the victims in comparison with Eunicos: “Let no one be successful more than Eunicos.” The time is not specified, but one thing is certain: a visible effect of the curse is to be revealed in public, perhaps during the time of performance.

**The *defixio* from Roman Gaul (DT 110),**<sup>247</sup> dating to the late third century CE, is an example of rivalry between pantomime actors (*mimes*) on the occasion of a theatrical pantomime.<sup>248</sup> The central personage – the targeted victim – is a man named Sosio. In this case the *initiator* of the spell, its commissioner, entrusts the binding activity to three underworld deities, namely Apecius, Aquanno and Nana who play the role of appointed *executors*. Besides Sosio (the *addressee*) seven more persons (it is not specified who they are) fall into the ‘orbit’ of cursing, but he remains the leading figure.

The curse is expressed in the form of a maledictory wish:

“May Sosio become delirious (*Sosio deliria*)  
may Sosio suffer from fevers (*Sosio pyra*)  
may Sosio suffer pain everyday ((*Sosio cottidie doleto*)...),  
may Aquanno torment you (*Aquanno te torqeto*),  
may Nana torture you (*Nana te comcruciato*)...”

The main interest of the client lies in the professional activity of his victim. The binding spell includes the wish that Sosio will become speechless and

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<sup>246</sup> The author of the tablet states several times that he writes the tablet because of friendship.

<sup>247</sup> For the translated text, notes and an extended bibliography, see Gager, *CT*, 74-75. For the Latin version, see Adams, “The Social and Cultural Implications of Curse Tablets [Defixiones] in Britain and the Continent,” 3-4.

<sup>248</sup> A similar context with a reference to the art of pantomime is attested in *DT* 15 and *DT* 16.

unsuccessful in the face of other mimes, especially the pantomime actor Fotius, who seems to be his main adversary. These two wishes read as follows:

“May Sosio not be able to speak (*Sosio loqui nequeat*)

“May Sosio not be able to snatch the victory from the pantomime actor Fotius (*Sosio de Fotio mimo ne ademtisse victoriam voteat*).”

The effects of the curse are disease and ‘paralysis’ of speech, and it seems that the former somehow affects the latter, so a kind of *fiasco* in Sosio’s professional career is expected. The time is not specified, but it can be assumed that the effects are to be revealed at some time before a performance (daily physical suffering) and when the actor comes to the scene (paralysis at the moment of speaking). There is an impression that the initiator of the spell seeks to promote the actor Fotius, and thinks that if the spell achieves its goal (to disable Sosio) the victory for him is guaranteed. It is clear that the curse is a means to put the rival away and pave the road to success for a less prominent figure.

**The *katadesmos* from Carthage (DT 237)**<sup>249</sup> belongs to the category of sports rivalry. The occasion is horse racing at the hippodrome. The commissioner, the *initiator* of the spell, produces the tablet and deposits it in a grave. The *addressees* are drivers, and even horses are targeted: the names of blue and red horses are followed by the names of their drivers. The spirit of the dead person and *charaktêres* – implied *executors* – are invoked to bind the horses and drivers in such a manner that they will not be able to win.<sup>250</sup> The wish is concretized through the appeal to bind the power, soul, and speed of the horses throughout the whole trajectory of running – the starting gates, the racecourse, and the turning point. As for the drivers, their hands and their sight are to be bound, so that they will not be able to see their own charioteers. The spell puts the victims into a dangerous position: eventually the drivers (as well as the horses) are expected to fall, being dragged alone all over the hippodrome. The effect of the curse is defeat and even physical injury to both the horses and their drivers. The temporal indicators – the reference “tomorrow morning” and the command “now, quickly” – specify the exact time of the spell and its immediacy (!).

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<sup>249</sup> For the text and comments, see Gager, *CT*, 60-62.

<sup>250</sup> The client commands them “to bind up” and “to take away the victory.”

**The *katadesmos* from Egypt** (SGD 157),<sup>251</sup> dating to the fourth century CE, belongs to the category of sports as well. The occasion is a competition between runners. The names of the victims (the *addressees*) are not mentioned, they are simply referred to as being issued from Taeias.<sup>252</sup> The commissioner of the tablet, who appears as the *initiator*, invokes the sacred name *Eulamo* and orders: “I command, accomplish (that) for me.” Other sacred names are also called to carry out the spell: characteristically, each begins with a letter of the name *Eulamo* in sequential order. These mysterious *executors* are called to bind the mental faculties (mind, thinking, thoughts) and physical organs (365 limbs and sinews) of the athletes. The spell is aimed at depriving the runners of power and strength, and keeping them from nourishment seems to enhance the effect of the curse; it weakens the runners to the point where they suffer a *fiasco* in their sports career. Though the exact time is not indicated, it is implied that the effect can be revealed at the moment of the competition.

**Three *katadesmos* from the Athenian Agora**,<sup>253</sup> dating to the mid-third century CE, and deposited near a well,<sup>254</sup> contain spells invoked upon a wrestler. The principal figure is Eutyichian, a professional wrestler, who appears as the indirect *addressee*. In the first tablet (No. IL 950)<sup>255</sup> the commissioner, invoking the deity as an *executor*, uses a combination of the binding formula παραδίδομί (“I deliver”) and the phrase ἵνα καταψύξης αὐτὸν (“so that you may chill him”) (the lines 2-3). The *initiator* of the spell imprecates so that the wrestler will become weak and “cold,” fall down and, as a result, disgrace himself. In the second tablet (No. IL 960)<sup>256</sup> such faculties as ψυχή (“breath”), ὀργή (“impulse”), ἐπιπομπή (“charm”), ἐπιστήμη (“knowledge”) and λογισμός (“reckoning”) are targeted for binding (the lines 14-15). The sportsman is to become κωφός (deaf), ἄλαλος (dumb), ἄνους

<sup>251</sup> The text is available in Gager, *CT*, 59-60.

<sup>252</sup> Gager supposes that the two athletes and their supporters are intended victims here (Gager, *CT*, 60, in footnotes).

<sup>253</sup> For texts in original language and detailed analysis, see Jordan, “Defixiones from a Well near the Southwest Corner of the Athenian Agora,” 213-22; further referred to as Jordan, “DW.”

<sup>254</sup> Jordan maintains that underground bodies of water in the area of Agora were considered magically appropriate repositories from the first to the third centuries CE (Jordan, “DW,” 210). In several tablets the standard formula with slight variations is used: Ὡς ταῦτα τὰ ὀνόματα ψύχεται οὕτως καὶ [person] ψυχέσθω τὸ ὄνομα καὶ [faculties listed] (“as these names grow cold, so too let [person], his name and [faculties listed] grow cold”).

<sup>255</sup> For the text and comments, see Jordan, “DW,” 214-215.

<sup>256</sup> For the text and comments, see Jordan, “DW,” 216.

(“mindless”) and ἀκέραιος (harmless). The third tablet (No. IL 952)<sup>257</sup> specifies that the wrestler is to be deprived of any impulse: μήτε ὀργιζόμενος (“having no impulse”) (the line15). It is apparent that both – faculties and capacities – are to be bound by means of the spell. The effect of the curse implies bodily and mental weakness and failure. The visible effects are supposed to take place at some critical moment of wrestling.

To sum up, the curse tablets, relating to the *circus-theater* locus and directed against talented persons and sportsmen, are intended to prevent them from success and victory. This kind of cursing reflects a strong desire to turn things according to one’s own plan when a person (the initiator) is eager to invoke danger upon a partner and even harm animals. Desire to be promoted at the cost of others is a discernable motif behind spells of this kind.

The second category of *katadesmoi* includes spells relating to the sphere of the *workshop*. The setting is rivalry between partners who probably are engaged in the same business producing the same goods. In such spells, three segments – profession, production and even workplace (ἐργαστήριον) – become *targets* of the curse. The pottery (κεραμικός) and bronze (χαλκεία) industries are frequently cited. The profession (τέχνη) of a person is bound in order to prevent economic profit. Several early Greek tablets are worthy of mention as classic examples of tablets of this sort.

**The *katadesmos* from Attica** (DTA 109),<sup>258</sup> is an example of a binding spell used to weaken the qualities and faculties of the adversary. Written in reversed form, from right to left,<sup>259</sup> the spell is directed against a person named Manês (the *addressee*), his affairs and his entire business. The commissioner (the *initiator*) delivers the direct formula: “I bind and restrain Manês,” and then transfers the act of restraining to deities (*executors*), addressed as “dear goddesses of vengeance” and Hermes, the restrainer. The request is quite abstract: the deeds of the victim are to be restrained in such a way that all will become contrary and backward (ἐπαριστερα) for him. The effects of the curse can be understood as ill-being and the lack of success. The time is not specified, but it is hinted at in the end of the spell, through some sort of an anticipatory note. The point is that the commissioner promises to offer a sacrifice to the feminine deity, whom he invokes, in exchange for good news

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<sup>257</sup> For the text and comments, see Jordan, “DW,” 217-218.

<sup>258</sup> For the text, see Gager, *CT*, 156.

<sup>259</sup> Such a method of writing takes place in a number of tablets.



(εὐαγγέλια). In other words, the news that the victim has been beset by trouble would serve as a signal that the spell brought the desired outcome.

**The *katadesmos* from Attica** (DTA 87),<sup>260</sup> dating to the fourth century BCE, is another curious example of spells from that category. Fragmentary parts of the *katadesmos* follow:

“I bind Kalias, the shop/tavern keeper who is one of my neighbors and his wife Thraitta..., and the shop/tavern of Anthemiôn..., and Philôn the shop/tavern keeper...Of all of these I bind the soul, the work, the hands and the feet; and their shops/taverns...I bind Kittos, my neighbor, the maker of wooden frames - Kittos’ skill and work and soul and the tongue of Kittos. I bind Mania the shop/tavern keeper who is (located) near the spring and the tavern of Aristandros of Eleusis, and their work and mind...all of these I bind to Hermes, the restrainer, in the unsealed graves.”

The *addressees* of the spell are numerous, including tavern keepers and merchants; and even their enterprises (taverns) are targeted. The victims are named and occasionally referred to as neighbors. The reason for the binding of these people is not concretized. The commissioner, the *initiator* of the curse, deposits the tablet in the grave and delivers all victims to the restraining power of Hermes, who appears as the sole *executor*. The whole professional activity of the workers – their work and skills – falls into the ‘orbit’ of cursing. The implied curse effect here is non-productivity as a consequence of weakening of the general personal qualities and skills needed for successful business.

**The *katadesmos* from Attica** (DTA 55),<sup>261</sup> dating to the late fourth century BCE, belongs to the same collection as the previous one. It is surprising that in this particular case the commissioner of the tablet, the *initiator*, is identified; and his name is Dioklês. The *addressees* of the spell are numerous: the list of names includes professionals (at least two carpenters and a pipe maker) and those whose occupation is not specified.<sup>262</sup> It appears that all these – together with their children and wives, and even containers for goods – the jar and the box for carrying pipes – are targeted. The text does not give any hint of the reason for hostility toward such a large group of family clans. It is evident that the *initiator* functions as the sole curser delivering the severe (direct) curse and

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<sup>260</sup> For the text, see Gager, *CT*, 156-157.

<sup>261</sup> For the text, see Gager, *CT*, 158-159.

<sup>262</sup> There is an impression that the commissioner tries to avoid confusion of the names of victims: they can be identified by patronymics, inner-family relations or through the association with soldiers serving in different localities.

being independent of any divine executor. There is an impression that the commissioner sees the spell as operative on the level of self-realization through such *executors* as the tablet (lead and wax) and even the grave: he binds and consigns his enemies to graves (ἐν μνήμασιν), delivering them to destruction, defeat and distress. The effects of the curse are quite abstract, though two of them are precisely concretized: unemployment and bad reputation.<sup>263</sup> The time is not specified, and it can be assumed that the spell was intended to result in a gradual collapse of the business of the workers and a hardening of their families' life-conditions.

**The *katadesmos* from Greece** (SGD 44),<sup>264</sup> dating to the mid-fourth century BCE, has its setting in a rivalry between potters in the Kerameikos. Its style is peculiar: the standard formula – “I bind” [the name of victim] “before” [the name of deity] – governs the entire text of the *katadesmos*. The anonymous commissioner, the *initiator*, casts the spell against several persons who appear as *addressees* of the curse. Two of them are identified as ceramic workers. The occupation of others is not specified.<sup>265</sup> It can be supposed that these figures stand between the commissioner and his rivals, so the curse is directed equally against the ceramic workers and those who act on their behalf. The spell is to be carried out by Hermes, the restrainer, and Persephone, the deity of Hades, and both function here as *executors*. Neither harming effects nor temporal frames are specified. It is implied that the binding of physical abilities (parts of the body) and moral capacities (soul, speech, will) should lead to a weakening of the competencies needed for successful business and public disputes.

**The *defixio* from Nomentum** (DT 135)<sup>266</sup> is a Latin counterpart of the tablets on professional rivalry. The *addressees* of the spell are two persons – Malcius and Rufa – whose profession is not specified. This particular *defixio* is a portrayal of a person totally bound in all his or her capacities. The commissioner, the *initiator* of the spell, does not invoke any deity; he just scrupulously lists the parts of the human body which are to be targeted through the binding action. It appears that besides the main parts of the body (hands,

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<sup>263</sup> These two maledictions are connected in the sense that bad reputation is an obstacle to being employed.

<sup>264</sup> For the text and comments, see Gager, *CT*, 162-163. This tablet was purchased in the Athenian market place, so it is of unknown provenance.

<sup>265</sup> For an interesting proposal concerning their role in legal proceedings, see the comment in Gager, *CT*, 162.

<sup>266</sup> For the text, see Gager, *CT*, 172.

head, feet, mouth, eyes etc.) such parts as nails, hair, chest, cheeks, teeth, lips, neck, forehead, eyebrows, bones, and even genitals are targeted. The effect of the curse is further concretized in a wish for the binding of business profits (*quaestus*) and health. The curse should materialize physically, so the effect can be the loss of physical energy, and, as a consequence, non-productivity, since maintaining a business becomes problematic.

To sum up, the curse tablets from the category of *workshop* are aimed at making people, engaged in different kinds of business, unable to maintain their productivity. These tablets serve, for the commissioners of the *katadesmoi*, as a means to drive a prosperous rival out of business and satisfy their own professional ambitions.

The third category of *katadesmoi* includes legal curses, and their setting is speaking at trials.

**The *katadesmos* from Attica** (DTA 107),<sup>267</sup> dating to the fourth century BCE, is a binding spell which was written on the occasion of a legal procedure. It is apparent the commissioner, who appears as the *initiator*, seeks to incapacitate the opponents who are going to speak against him in court, so the fear of being accused becomes the ground for the act of cursing. The *addressees* of the spell are a man named Pherenicos, his girl and supporters. The *executors* of the spell are underworld deities – Hermes and Hecate – before or to whom the victims are to be bound. More specifically, the minds, souls, tongue, and things planned against the commissioner are to be bound. The wish is that everything will turn contrary for Pherenicos and his company, so it is implied that their statements should not be taken into account. The commissioner uses the technique *similia similibus* (“similar to similar”) in his formulation of the spell, and it sounds like this:

“Just as this *lead* is worthless and *cold*,  
so let that *man* and his property be worthless and *cold*.”<sup>268</sup>

The spell is intended to cause harm to that person and his property. Although effects and time are not specified, in general it can be assumed that the

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<sup>267</sup> For the text, see Gager, *CT*, 126-127.

<sup>268</sup> This is an example of a so-called *persuasive analogie* (see, Faraone, “AC,” 4-10) when an analogy is drawn between some phenomenon (e.g., coldness of lead) and the state or way of acting of the curse addressee; it is believed that the desired result can be achieved through the use of such a technique.

speakers will be deprived of persuasive speech, being in some sense paralyzed during the time of the trial, and their testimony will be impaired.

**The *katadesmos* from Olbia Pontica** (SGD 173),<sup>269</sup> dated between the third and the first centuries BCE, is a curious example with regard to an *executor*. In this particular spell it is the spirit of a dead person. The *addressees* of the curse are ten people who are supposed to come to the court to give testimony. The commissioner (the *initiator*) directly addresses the spirit of a dead person (“you”) asking it to carry out the spell and constrain the speakers, and even promises an agreeable gift (ἄριστον δῶρον) as a reward in the case of a positive outcome. The recurring motif of uncertainty – “we don’t know” – concerning a forthcoming witnessing is significant: as the dead person is unknown, so it will be with the evidence. In other words, it is desirable for the initiator that the testimony of speakers could be exactly commented on that way. The effect of the curse is confusion of witnesses during their testimony, and the implied time frame is probably the nearest procedure in court.

**The *katadesmos* from the sanctuary of the goddess Malophoros** (SGD 107),<sup>270</sup> dating to the fifth century BCE, is one of the oldest curse tablets. The occasion is a trial, but the exact details are not given. The spell contains a long list of names – probably both prosecutors and witnesses – that appear as the intended *addressees*. The commissioner (the *initiator*) records<sup>271</sup> his victims before the holy goddess (the *executor*). The life (ψυχή), strength (δύναμις) and “tongues” (γλῶσσας) of several persons are claimed to be recorded. The effect of the curse is the weakening of opponents, that is, rendering them incapable of withstanding the court hearings because of a lack of energy. It is likely that the legal proceedings last a long time since a lot of people are involved in the case.

Besides this category there is a separate group of curse tablets which can be labeled as *pleas for justice*. These tablets are intended to appeal to the supernatural realm for justice when different kinds of offenses take place. To such belong tablets on theft and robbery. In these cases the theft becomes the ground for casting the spell. Here are several examples.

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<sup>269</sup> For the text, see Gager, *CT*, 138.

<sup>270</sup> For the text and comments, see Gager, *CT*, 139-141.

<sup>271</sup> Here the classic Greek verb for *katadesmoi* καταγράφω (“to record”) with the preposition παρὰ (“before”) is used.

**The *defixio* from Wilten-Veldidena,**<sup>272</sup> dating approximately to 100 CE, was found in a Roman cemetery. The occasion is the theft of two necklaces, worth fourteen denarii. The commissioner of the tablet (the *initiator*) is a woman named Secundina. She is the victim, the thief is unknown. The woman commands Mercurius, Moltinus and Cacus – deities associated with theft – to persecute the thief (the *addressee*) and the stolen objects. A mandatory tone is strongly felt throughout her appellation: the use of the verbs *delegare* and *mandare* is meaningful in such context.<sup>273</sup> The woman functions as an ‘appointee’ of the *executors*, who are in charge of her case, and even dictates to the gods how to deal with the thief: the punishment must fit the crime. The thief is to be deprived of his possessions (*fortunas*) and separated from his family and dear ones (*proximis* and *carissimos*).<sup>274</sup> The effect of the curse is more or less concrete: in general it presupposes the loss of possessions and social isolation. It is curious that the woman is self-presented as a *devotee* of her lost treasures to deities. It is likely that this strategy is used to motivate the gods to act on her behalf. The spell ends with a command to bring the thief to justice. It is evident that the victim is looking forward to supernatural aid and final recompense, so the time is ‘suspended’ in some sense. The *defixio* is extraordinary: *a human figure delegates power to divine executors*.

The large group of *defixiones* on incidents with stolen property (mostly personal items at baths) was attested in Britain, at the Bath and Uley.<sup>275</sup> Here are a few examples.

**The *defixio* no. 54**<sup>276</sup> is a curious example of a plea for revenge on the occasion of the theft of two silver coins (*argentiolos duos*). It is curious that

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<sup>272</sup> For the version in original language and translation, see Adams, “The Social and Cultural Implications of Curse Tablets,” 6-7; for the translated text, comments and bibliography, see Gager, *CT*, 198-199. For the text and comments, see also Versnel, “Beyond Cursing,” 83-84.

<sup>273</sup> The Latin verb *delegare* means to appoint someone to act as a representative on one’s behalf. The verb *mandare* means to entrust or commit someone or something to one’s charge. For an interesting comment on their use, see Versnel, “Beyond cursing,” 83.

<sup>274</sup> The motif of separation is recurrent through the use of such Latin verbs as *aufero* (“to take away,” “to remove”), *averto* (“to remove,” “to turn away”) and *abeo* (“to go away”).

<sup>275</sup> Adams, who focused his study on this particular group of curse tablets from isolated Roman province, argues for their *reactional* character in comparison with continental Greco-Roman tablets. He states that these examples were ‘magical’ reactions to an action rather than a provocation, and they were typically centered upon correcting the *status quo* rather than delivering an advantage for the author (Adams, “The Social and Cultural Implications of Curse Tablets,” 12-13).

<sup>276</sup> For the text in Latin and translation, see Adams, “The Social and Cultural Implications of Curse Tablets,” 8.

both the victim and the thief are identified: a woman named Arminia appears as the *initiator* of the curse, and a man named Verecundinus appears as the *addressee*. The victim pleads to the goddess Sulis (the *executor*) to consume her offender. It is specified that he must not be permitted to sit, lie, walk, to have sleep or be healthy (*nec sedere nec iacere [ne]c...a[m]bulare n[ec] somn[um] nec] sanitatem*).<sup>277</sup> The effect of the curse here is deprivation of ordinary human needs and health (in some sense the ceasing of normal activity). Remarkably, the time is specified: the request to consume the criminal is urgent: as soon as possible (*quantocius*).

**The defixio no. 5**<sup>278</sup> is another story of revenge for stolen articles. Here a person named Docimedis (the *initiator*) invokes a curse upon a thief (the *addressee*) for two gloves (*manicilia dua*) that are lost. The curse is intended to fit the crime, but the loss is incomparable: as the victim has lost (*perdidit*) his belongings, in the same way a thief should lose (*perdat*) his mind (*mentes*) and eyes (*oculos*).<sup>279</sup> No deity is invoked. The effect of the curse is bodily and mental injury: probably the loss of sight and some kind of mental problem.

**Tablet no. 44**,<sup>280</sup> dating to the second century CE, is one more example on theft. Here the stolen object is a bronze vessel. Neither victim nor thief is identified. Wide frames are established for a potential *addressee*: “whether woman or man, whether boy or girl, slave or free.” The commissioner (the *initiator*) delivers the thief to the temple of Sulis, so the agency of the goddess as an *executor* is expected. The tone of the spell is entirely aggressive: the person who committed the theft is claimed to be utterly accursed and is to spill his own blood into the vessel itself.<sup>281</sup> A strong imbalance between the crime and the recompense is clear, however it cannot be said for sure that the spell implies the death of the thief. The request for revenge is drastic: ironically, the thief, who has stolen the vessel, is expected to be finally ‘found’ by the god.

**The defixio no. 4**<sup>282</sup> is the last tablet selected for our examination. The occasion is a theft of some articles which are not specified. A person named Biccus, who appears to be the victim, promises to make a donation to the patron deity Mercury for the return of the stolen articles. The temple of

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<sup>277</sup> The text of this tablet is damaged and some words were reconstructed by scholars.

<sup>278</sup> The text is available in Adams, “The Social and Cultural Implications of Curse Tablets,” 7.

<sup>279</sup> The Latin verb *perdo* conveys the meaning “to lose” or “to be ruined, wasted.”

<sup>280</sup> For the text, see Gager, *CT*, 194.

<sup>281</sup> In some tablets the standard phrase *sanguine suo* (“with own blood”) is used (Gager, *CT*, 196, in footnote). The aim is to stress that a thief must recompense for theft with his own life.

<sup>282</sup> For the Latin text, see Adams, “The Social and Cultural Implications of Curse Tablets,” 9.

Mercury is intended to become a storage place for the stolen goods. It is curious that the deity is not invoked directly; however the executive role of the patron god is implied, and perhaps he functions as a kind of *custodian* of property. The commissioner (the *initiator*) expresses a wish that the thief (the *addressee*) will be unable to sleep, stay awake and even urinate and defecate until the stolen things are returned to the temple. That person is to be deprived of well-being (*salutem*<sup>283</sup>) and health (*sanitatem*<sup>284</sup>). The effects of the curse can be classified as *temporal paralysis* of everyday needs and the loss of well-being/health. The time is hinted at: the curse is at work until the things are returned. The spell's goal is to prompt action by the thief, rather than revenge.

To resume, *katadesmoi* represent a quite unusual phenomenon among different forms of cursing in antiquity.<sup>285</sup> The examination of several texts helps to distinguish remarkable features which can be outlined as follows:

- 1) absence of solid **ground** for cursing<sup>286</sup>
- 2) anonymity of **initiators**/naming of **addressees**<sup>287</sup>
- 3) invocation of mysterious **executors** (chthonic deities, spirits, etc.)
- 4) use of the technique of *persuasive analogy* to enact the spell
- 5) the main **effect** of the curse is the loss of capacities
- 6) implied or exact **time** indications

With regard to the different settings of curse tablets, the action of initiators of spells can be classified as follows:

<b>Circus-theater</b> – <i>incapacitating</i> of a competitive partner
(acting against vocation and talent)
<b>Workshop</b> – <i>disabling</i> of a successful rival
(acting against productivity)
<b>Court</b> – <i>paralyzing</i> of a dangerous opponent
(acting against freedom of speaking)

<sup>283</sup> The form is derived from the word *salus* (“well-being”).

<sup>284</sup> The form is derived from the word *sanitas* (“health”).

<sup>285</sup> A biblical analogy is the example of Balaam in Num 22-24: his spells were believed to have the potential to undermine God's people and incapacitate them.

<sup>286</sup> The group of pleas for justice, where the rationale for cursing can be found, is an exception.

<sup>287</sup> It is contrary in pleas for justice.

In general, *katadesmoi* were intended to seize the power to act and speak, seeking to shape the acts and behavior of an opponent in a certain fashion through the medium of the written word.<sup>288</sup> The tablets reflect a clear concern for predominance and success achieved not due to honest means, but through cheaper ones. This clearly points to a *manipulatory* function of the *katadesmoi* as a phenomenon. The curse becomes an instrument of manipulation over other persons. *Katadesmoi*, being in their nature pure magical spells, are witnesses of the *dehumanization* of a certain part of ancient Graeco-Roman society. They can be classified as ‘acts of violence’ against human potential. Harm brought by cursing cannot be measured in scale: less harmful and temporal effects could bring about more serious effects, as the language of some *katadesmoi* implies. The following chart summarizes the results of the study of *katadesmoi*:

<i>Rubric</i>	The texts of <i>katadesmoi</i> by categories		
	<i>circus theater hippodrome</i>	<i>workshop</i>	<i>court/ pleas for justice</i>
Initiator	the commissioner of a <i>katadesmos</i> (mostly <i>anonymous</i> )		
Addressee/ target	professionals (musicians, actors, sportsmen) horses	businessmen (potters, merchants, tavern keepers) production	opponents in trials/ thieves
Source	deities, spirits - an implied source of evil		
Administrator	the manufacturer of a curse tablet?		
Executor (s)	gods of Graeco-Roman pantheon, underworld deities (Hermes, Persephone), the spirit of a dead person, <i>voces mysticae</i> (sacred names), <i>charaktêres</i> (images), the lead tablet, the grave (?)		
Condition	the success of a colleague, a competitor	the productiveness of a rival in the business	witnessing in court, a counterclaim/ an offense (theft)
Effect	nonsuccess, weakness, injury, disease, defeat, <i>professional fiasco</i>	weakening of faculties/qualities, failure, distress, <i>non-productivity</i>	<i>paralysis of speech/</i> ceasing of normal activity, injury, losses
Time	not rare: “as soon as possible,” “quickly,” “tomorrow”		

<sup>288</sup> Perhaps the scribes or, more aptly, the *manufacturers* of the tablets, can be seen as *administrators* of spells since they were inscribing the message of the curse with the right formulas, while they themselves remain out of sight.



### 2.2.2. Drama of the curse in *The Iliad* of Homer

The literary masterpiece – *The Iliad* of Homer – tells the story of a long bloody war between the Achaeans and Trojans which ends with the fall of Troy (*Τροία*).<sup>289</sup> Gods and people become involved in a chain of events caused by different factors which often entail dramatic consequences. It would be interesting to examine briefly several episodes which are relevant to our subject matter.

**The oath ceremony** (*Iliad* iii. 266-301) is one of the most intriguing episodes in the epic, and its role seems to be crucial in all that follows. The story tells that the Achaeans and Trojans decide to put an end to the bloody war and let two people – Paris and Menelaos – engage in single combat.<sup>290</sup> If Paris wins, the Achaeans promise to withdraw from Troy, in the opposite case the Trojans are obliged to return Helen and pay a tribute. The agreement is sealed by an oath, and it is likely that the Achaeans appear as its *initiators*. The leader of the ceremony, Agamemnon, who acts as an *administrator*, takes two lambs, cuts off their hair, gives it to the participants and then cuts the throats of the animals. The killing of the sacrificial lambs is accompanied by a ritual with a libation of wine. The ceremony ends with curse imprecations (the lines 300-301). The *addressees* of the curse appear to be both sides, the Achaeans and Trojans. It states that those who break the oath *first* become accursed: their brains (ἐγκέφαλος) are to be poured onto the ground in a similar fashion as the wine (οἶνος) is poured out; and their children and wives will be overpowered (δαμῆεν) by the other. Here both sides equally subdue themselves to the oath by means of a bloody/wine ritual, so both recognize themselves as potentially accursed. The principal deities summoned during the ceremony are Zeus, Helios, underworld deities and “immortal gods.” It is curious that chthonic deities are referred to as those who are going to chastise (τίνυμαι) men who swear falsely. In general, all these divine figures appear to be *executors* who function as witnesses, keepers of the oath and avengers. It is interesting that the effect of the curse – its materialization – is demonstrated by means of the ritual with wine (a kind of *simile*). The curse presupposes the ruin and total destruction of breakers of the oath, and it also affects their households: they

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<sup>289</sup> Access to the Greek text of *The Iliad* is provided by the Perseus Digital Library. The text is available at: <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/collection> (accessed October 10, 2013).

<sup>290</sup> In fact, the incident with Helen, whom Paris took from her husband Menelaos, provoked the beginning of the war.

experience slavery and death. The effect will be launched as soon as the violation of obligations takes place. As the story continues, it becomes clear from the context that the Trojans immediately break the solemn oath (Paris withdraws from combat), and no further steps to fulfill the conditions of the oath are taken. The account on council of gods (*Iliad* iv. 64-72) tells that Zeus, urged by Hera, sends the deity Athena<sup>291</sup> to the field of battle, as a messenger of war, thus releasing his power as the one who directs circumstances.<sup>292</sup> The reason is clearly stated: the Trojans are the first (ἄρξωσι<sup>293</sup>) to have broken the oath (ὄρκια<sup>294</sup>) (the lines 67 and 72). Similar reasoning comes from a human hero (a leader of the Achaeans): since/because (ἐπεὶ) the Trojans broke the oath, death (θάνατος) and distress (κῆδε) will overcome them (*Iliad* iv. 265-271). The war goes on, and it serves as a self-revealing truth that the curse is already at work though the ultimate destruction is delayed. Thus, the Trojans' despising of the oath was fatal for them and determined the ultimate fate of Troy.<sup>295</sup> Although the time goes slowly, the dramatic fall of the city is inevitable.

**The monologue of Menelaos** (*Iliad* xiii. 620-639), which is a kind of maledictory speech, is an example of enmity and hatred as fruits of war. The context is a harsh battle: Menelaos strikes the warrior Pisander, and he loses his eyes. Then Menelaos expresses his bitterness toward the Trojans. He functions as the *initiator* of a malediction, and the Trojans are the indirect *addressees*. Menelaos accuses the Trojans of taking his wife and treasures and characterizes them as insatiable in combat and violence. He curses the Trojans, calling them “evil dogs” (κακαὶ κύνες), and announces their final destruction, claiming that loud-thundering Zeus, who is presented as the *source* of the

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<sup>291</sup> In *Iliad* V. 876 this goddess is referred to as οὐλόμενος (“accursed”) in the sense that she is a source of evil.

<sup>292</sup> Divine and human realms are closely interrelated in the epic. Divine beings intervene in the course of the war and seem to direct circumstances.

<sup>293</sup> It is the aorist form of the Greek verb ἄρχω (“to be first”).

<sup>294</sup> Here the plural form of the Greek word ὄρκιον (“oath”) is used.

<sup>295</sup> The fall of Troy is somehow foreseen in the epic. Its destruction is even envisaged in the ceremony itself. As C. Faraone observed, the entire oath serves as a kind of prophecy and foreshadows the death of the Trojans, their wives and children (Christopher A. Faraone, “Molten Wax, Spilt Wine and Mutilated Animals: Sympathetic Magic in near Eastern and Early Greek Oath Ceremonies,” *JHS*, 113 [1993]: 60-80, here 76). In mythology the prophetic foretelling of the fate of Troy is associated with the figure of a doomed prophetess Cassandra (Κασσάνδρα) mentioned in *Iliad* xxiv. 697-706. She was thought to have been granted a gift of prophecy, but then she was cursed and told that nobody would believe her. The fall of Troy confirms that her prophecy was somehow fulfilled.

curse, will utterly destroy (διαφθέρσει<sup>296</sup>) their city at some time. In this impressive maledictory monologue the indefinite time indicator (once) underlines the hope that the curse effect (destruction) is expected to come true very soon.

**The speech of Hector** (*Iliad* iii. 38-57) is a kind of rebuke in the form of a maledictory wish. Hector is the *initiator* of the malediction or accuser, and his brother Paris is the *addressee*. Hector challenges his brother with a bitter note, telling him that it would be better for him to be unborn (ἄγονος), unmarried (ἄγαμος) and utterly destroyed (ἀπολέσθαι). It sounds like cursing. He denounces his brother's existence, saying that this will turn into profit for all. This malediction is caused by Paris' deeds in Achaia. The addressee is identified with a great calamity (μέγα πῆμα) for [to] his father and the whole land of Troy. This metonymy implies that the people of Troy will experience the curse because of that person, so he is somehow transformed into the source.

**The speech of Achilles** (*Iliad* xxii. 345-354) is one more example of a maledictory speech. The context is mortal combat between Achilles and Hector. Achilles strikes Hector and predicts that his body will be thrown to the dogs and birds. In the last moment of his life Hector pleads with his enemy asking him not to give his body to the dogs for devouring and proposes a ransom. Achilles refuses to do this and pronounces a severe malediction. He addresses Hector as a "dog" and tells him that there is no man who will keep the dogs off of his head.<sup>297</sup> In his cursing Achilles states that dogs and birds will divide Hector's body among themselves (κύνες τε καὶ οἰωνοὶ κατὰ πάντα δάσσονται). It is curious that this curse of non-burial, as we know from the story, does not come to effect, and the body of Hector is finely ransomed by his relatives.

**The story of Phoenix** (*Iliad* ix. 447-495) is a curious example of a paternal curse. The occasion is a family incident: Phoenix rebels against his father, who is unfaithful to his wife, Phoenix's mother, and acts on her behalf.<sup>298</sup> Phoenix's behavior for the sake of his mother is the main reason for his curse. The father of Phoenix, the *initiator*, utters the severe curse upon his son, its *addressee*. In the hero's wording, his father screams out to the cruel Furies and says that he

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<sup>296</sup> The Greek term διαφθείρω means "to be destroyed utterly."

<sup>297</sup> A biblical parallel is Deut 28,26, especially, concerning the aspect "no one to frighten them away." One more biblical parallel is the account in 2 Kgs 9,36 on Jezebel's curse.

<sup>298</sup> A biblical analogy is the curse of Canaan in Gen 9,20-27, and the case is also family conflict. Although the situations differ, Phoenix acts against the honor of his father, like Ham.

will never have a son of Phoenix on his knees. Childlessness (no posterity) appears to be the main effect of the curse utterance. In his retelling the hero stresses the role of divine *executors* saying that the gods – Zeus and Persephone – drove home his father’s curse. The temporal marker “never” signifies *determinacy*, but as the story reveals, the reality is somewhat different. Phoenix becomes a step-father to Achilles, so somehow the hero denounces his own curse and turns it into a blessing. In fact, as the epic tells, Achilles treats Phoenix as his real father.

This brief examination of several speeches and stories brings us to several observations. In the texts selected, cursing takes the form of an imprecation (oath, paternal curse) that moves to its realization, or a maledictory speech which is primarily aimed at accusing another. A malediction as such becomes a kind of ‘instrument of hatred’ built into human speech. What is striking in *The Iliad* is that although human figures invoke gods as executors to fulfill the curse, they themselves are turned out into a source of the curse for each other, causing death and suffering.

To conclude, the curse seems to operate as a *driving force* which lies behind the events in *The Iliad*. The tragedy of war involves both sides, and the Achaeans and Trojans both taste its fruits, or more precisely the curse which result in destruction, death and loss of loved ones. There is an abundance of sorrow, laments, despair, blood, and burials. It becomes apparent that the incident of the violated oath did not exclusively concern the Trojans. In some mysterious way, in the two lambs, killed during the solemn ceremony, the Greeks and Trojans are embodied as bloody sacrifices. It would be no exaggeration to admit that the theme of the curse underlines the logical structure of the narrative plot in *The Iliad*.

The following chart summarizes the study of the curse motifs in the epic:

<i>Rubric</i>	The passages in <i>The Iliad</i>		
	<b>The oath</b> ( <i>Iliad</i> iii. 266-301)	<b>The curse of Phoenix</b> ( <i>Iliad</i> ix. 447-495)	<b>Maledictory speeches of Menelaos, Hector, Achilles</b> ( <i>Iliad</i> xiii. 620-639; iii. 38-57; xxii. 345-354)
Initiator (s)	Achaean	Phoenix' father	Menelaos/Hector/Achilles
Addressee	Achaean/Trojans	Phoenix	Trojans/ Paris/ Hector
Source	deities		warriors
Administrator	Agamemnon	-	-
Executor (s)	Zeus, Helios, underworld deities	Furies, Zeus, Persephone	Zeus - -
Condition	breaking the oath	'bad' action	improper actions
Effect	ruin/destruction	childlessness	destruction/ non-burial
Time	-	fulfilled	"soon"

### 2.3. Dramatic curses in the Indian Epic of Mahābhārata

The Hindu epic of Mahābhārata (महाभारत) belongs to the Indo-European cultural tradition.<sup>299</sup> It is written in classical Sanskrit, and being a part of oral tradition, it may date to the eighth or the ninth century BCE. The main topic is the rivalry between two clans – the Pāṇḍavas and Kauravas – culminating in the battle of Kurukṣetra.<sup>300</sup> The account on Karṇa<sup>301</sup> – a great warrior and skilled archer – is a fascinating story of the dramatic interplay of a triad of curses, resulting in the hero's death.

Some details on Karṇa's biography can serve as a background for the curse drama. The legend tells that Karṇa was born through the divine help of the solar deity Surya, and his mother Kunti, being unmarried, put him into a basket and sent him away on the river Ganga in the hope that someone would find him.<sup>302</sup> The baby was found by a charioteer Adhiratha who, with his wife, adopted him and raised him up. Karṇa became a pupil of guru Parashurama and achieved a great deal of success in the arts of warfare and archery. In order to be accepted by the guru, who trained only those who belonged to the Brahmin's caste, he was forced to pretend. In reality, by his mother's lineage he belonged to the clan of Pāṇḍavas, against whom he fought, and it turned out that Karṇa's main opponent in the battlefield was a warrior Arjuna, his half-brother. When Karṇa was informed by his mother of his true identity, he promised her not to fight against his four half-brothers except Arjuna. The latter, not knowing that Karṇa was his brother, swore to kill him at all costs. The warriors were forced to fight a duel, and this ended fatally for Karṇa.

Three curses, invoked upon the hero by different personages, led to irreversible consequences. The first was uttered by his guru Parashurama. The occasion was quite banal. In a day of rest, when his teacher fell asleep, a giant bee stung Karṇa; the wound began to bleed, but he tried to endure the pain in fear of disturbing the guru. When the teacher woke up and saw that Karṇa endured pain, he mistakenly took him for a man of the Kshatriya caste since

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<sup>299</sup> The online English version of the epic Mahābhārata, translated by Kisari Mohan Ganguli, is available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/maha/index.htm> (accessed November 21, 2013).

<sup>300</sup> John Brockington, *The Sanskrit Epics* (Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill, 1998), 25.

<sup>301</sup> The story of Karṇa is told in Mahābhārata, Book 8: Karṇa Parva. The text is available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m08/index.htm> (accessed November 25, 2013).

<sup>302</sup> The story of the hero's miraculous birth and rescue is narrated in Mahābhārata, Book 3: Vana Parva. The text is available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m03/m03306.htm> (accessed November 28, 2013).

only those who belonged to this caste could demonstrate such patience. The guru cursed him, saying that one day, in a time of foremost need, he would forget all mantra incantations. Later the guru realized his mistake and regretted it, but the curse seemed to be irrevocable.<sup>303</sup> The context of the next two curses was ordinary life situations. Karṇa accidentally killed a cow of a poor Brahmin with an arrow during training. The Brahmin became furious and cursed the hero, predicting that one day Karṇa would become helpless in the same fashion as the cow, and the wheels of his chariot would stick to the ground. Then Karṇa met a small girl who was crying, because she spit ghee from a pot. Acting out of generosity, he helped her and squeezed the ghee from the soil into the pot, and immediately heard he a screaming voice from under the ground, that of the “mother of the earth.” The goddess cursed the hero, saying that some day, at a crucial moment, the wheels of his chariot would be trapped in the same fashion as he treated the soil. Thus, the hero became the *addressee* of three curses announced by three *initiators* – the sage, the poor person and the goddess of earth. In each case the imprecation was caused by an action which was qualified as ‘bad.’ The effects of all three curses strikingly matched each other: they were to result in the helplessness of the hero<sup>304</sup> at a moment when delay meant death. Though the exact time was not specified, it is clear that the curse would take place at some crucial moment (that of the foremost need), so potentially any battle became dangerous because the effect of the curse could manifest itself.

As the legend reveals, these three curses were fused into one and came true at the time of the dramatic duel of Karṇa with Arjuna.<sup>305</sup> The fulfillment was exact: when the hero’s chariot was bogged down in the sand, he immediately forgot all of the incantations (*brahmastra*) which he learned from his guru. In the account it is stressed that all happened in accordance with the Brahmin’s curse, and now “the earth is devouring his car-wheel.” It seems that the ground was a kind of ‘actor’ here, an active *executor* that caused trouble. Karṇa descended from the chariot in order to lift the sunken wheel up and asked Arjuna to wait for a moment, but the latter neglected war etiquette and killed

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<sup>303</sup> It is interesting that later his guru blesses him in a dream with a wish of everlasting glory after death (in the realm of the *hereafter*) for Karṇa’s humble acceptance of the curse.

<sup>304</sup> The effect of the curse brings to mind some *katadesmoi* with their aim to incapacitate the victim (here the hero is destined to be immobilized).

<sup>305</sup> The account is available at: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/m08/m08090.htm> (accessed November 25, 2013).

him, being provoked by the deity Kṛṣṇa.<sup>306</sup> Thus, the drama ended with Karna being slaughtered “as an elephant by a lion.”

It is not easy to interpret the role of the curse in this story. At first glance, the triadic curse, caused by quite trivial cases and resulting in the hero’s death, seems to have no solid basis, but what lies on the surface opens a second level of deeper collisions and factors involved. According to legend, the deity – the lord Indra, hidden behind the shell of a giant bee – appears to be the real *source* of the curse. It is likely that the curse was placed upon Karṇa, who is a kind of protagonist, purposefully, and all the rest is nothing more than provocation. The curse seems to function as a means to provide the opportunity for the protagonist’s final fate which is preordained. It may be suggested that the hero becomes a victim of random evil forces which work outside his control.<sup>307</sup>

To conclude, the drama of Karṇa’s curse, which is at first glance caused by the hero’s wrong status, in reality reflects a situation when the curse becomes an instrument of provocation of the hero’s death at the hands of a weaker opponent by means of a banal trick with the wheels of the hero’s chariot. It is a curious example of a tripartite curse with identical effects which seems to point to one source. The human and divine figures become actively involved in the life-drama of a great personality, described in the epic as “blessed with good fortune.” The following chart summarizes the results of that study:

<i>Rubric</i>	The text “The epic <i>Mahābhārata</i> “ (the account on Karṇa)
Initiator (s)	guru Parashurama Brahmin the goddess of the earth
Addressee	the warrior Karṇa
Source	the deities Indra/ Kṛṣṇa
Administrator	-
Executor	the earth
Condition	‘bad’ actions
Effect	helplessness: incident with the wheels of the chariot
Time	“in time of the foremost need” (the curse is fulfilled)

<sup>306</sup> The warrior was under the patronage of this deity. At the moment when Karṇa became helpless the deity urged Arjuna to strike him.

<sup>307</sup> Some specialists point out the deterministic character of the epic. According to Nicholas Sutton, one of the main controlling factors here is *daivam* (what is bestowed by gods), i.e., destiny; he argues that the true destroyer and controller of events in the epic is the deity Kṛṣṇa (N. Sutton, *Religious Doctrines in the Mahābhārata* [Delhi, 2000], 367-384). As J. Woods states, “the life and death of Karṇa is one of the best-documented examples of the machinations of the gods (*daiva*) in the epic” (Julian F. Woods, *Destiny and Human Initiative in the Mahābhārata* [New-York, 2001], 43-46, here 43).



## 2.4. General conclusion

Our research allows tracing and making comparisons of different traditions of blessing and cursing in Ancient Near Eastern, Graeco-Roman and Indian religio-cultural milieus and brings us to the following conclusions.

As for the roles of the participants in speeches of a blessing or curse, in extra-biblical texts the human figure is most commonly an initiator. The addressee of a blessing is usually specific, and is a known personality, for instance the vassal in treaties, the king in inscriptions. The matter becomes complicated with regard to curses. In some cases the addressee of a curse is specified (in ANE treaties, in Graeco-Roman *katadesmoi*, in literary compositions). But in many cases the addressee is anonymous, and anyone, who violates the interests of an initiator, may become such a person (it is evident in collections such as the *kudurrus* [though here the circle of addressees is sometimes limited to a concrete clan or family], and the Syrian Semitic inscriptions). A collective unit can be presented as an addressee (this is true, for example, for ANE treaties, and it is the case of the oath ceremony in *The Iliad*), but it is not a predominant feature. One of the common trends in extra-biblical sources with regard to participants is the pantheon of deities functioning as executors. They seem to fulfill the will of human initiators of a blessing or curse, constituting a collective source of good or evil. In literary compositions the sympathy or antipathy of the gods toward heroes is an important factor: deities interfere in human affairs and determine the ultimate destiny of heroes.

The condition under which a blessing or curse takes place can be considered as follows: a blessing can be conditional (Hittite treaties) or unconditional, although a good action is a guarantee of a future blessing, as we see in royal inscriptions. With regard to the curse, it can be observed that in solemn occasions it is strongly conditional. Examples include ANE treaties (Hittite, VTE), the solemn oath in *The Iliad*, and this is close to the biblical model of curses as sanctions. In addition, any violation of prohibitions may become a solid ground for cursing (Babylonian *kudurrus*, Syrian Semitic inscriptions). It is significant that in all these cases the addressee is warned about the potentiality of the curse. In contrast, in cases of banal life situations the curse is unconditional, and here a curse of an unreasonable nature is not rare. This is true, for instance, for Graeco-Roman *katadesmoi*. Characteristically, in *katadesmoi* the addressee is not warned about the threat of cursing.

The effect of blessings and curses is the most uniting element in extra-biblical sources. The texts share a similar scope of blessings and curses which generally reflect the common desires (blessings) or fears (curses) of the ancient people. They can be characterized as existential goods or threats respectively. The effect of blessings is generally associated with abundance of resources and food, wealth, long life, posterity, secured possessions, peace, honored position, whereas the curse effect is generally associated with lack of resources, natural disasters, famine, diseases, the loss of posterity and possessions, oppression, destruction, disgrace.

With regard to the temporal aspect, in cases with a passive (potential) mode of cursing the time is 'delayed' (e.g., in treaties, inscriptions), whereas in cases with an active mode of cursing, for example, in *katadesmoi* and some maledictions in *The Iliad*, temporal urgency is implied.

In general, our analysis of texts belonging to different religio-cultural traditions shows that there is an imbalance in the texts in favor of curses. In the ancient world different forms and practices of cursing were used in wide religious, political, and social contexts. There are two basic forms of the curse speech: a maledictory wish delivered in the form of a precative ("may it be") and direct curse formulae ("I bind/register/curse"). Accordingly, two modes of cursing are noticeable: 1) passive when the curse is primarily intended *to warn*; 2) active when the curse is intended *to harm*.

With regard to patterns of blessings and curses, a few basic models can be detected in ancient sources: 1) the model of '**royal blessing**' in which the addressee is a king (royal inscriptions) 2) the model of blessings and curses as '**treaty sanctions**' (treaties) which is close to the biblical model of 'Torah's sanctions;' 3) the model of the curse as a '**tool of deterrence**' when the curse is delivered against potential violators who represent a threat to personal rights (*kudurrus*, Syrian Semitic inscriptions), and perhaps as a variant, the model of the curse as a '**tool of manipulation**' (*katadesmoi*) when an anonymous initiator seeks to influence skilled persons, opponents, offenders; 4) the model of the curse as a '**driving force**' when the curse operates as a kind of 'motor' moving heroes to their ultimate fate (epics).

## CHAPTER 3

### Theological-anthropological synthesis

This chapter will be focused on drawing theological and anthropological applications on the basis of study that has been done. Our primary concern is to trace the ideas of God and man in biblical and extra-biblical concepts of blessings and curses. This inquiry will presuppose two steps in dealing with each body of literature: the first is to define theology and the second is to derive anthropological assumptions.

#### 3.1. The idea of God in blessings/curses in the Pentateuch

A study of texts with a blessing/curse thematic in the Torah leads to the conclusion that God, Who blesses or inflicts curses, is presented in different facets, and this discovery of the *divine face* behind the biblical drama of blessings and curses is a fascinating endeavor. In general, it can be said that the Lord's encounter with people in blessing/curse contexts reflects consistency and logic; there are no arbitrarily made decisions or actions in the divine policy of blessing or cursing. Monotheistic and ethical concerns become theologically significant. In the Torah we always face *the same God* in a 'colored mosaic' of blessings or curses.

There is strong sense of consistency behind the biblical concepts of a blessing or curse: the blessing as an ultimate goal (*telos*) is an instrument of divine grace, the curse as a necessity is an instrument of divine chastisement. Behind the story of creation and the fall we discover God Who establishes the cosmic order and subjects human beings to moral principles which govern God's universe; corruption of that order led human beings to face the reality of the curse which was a signal of broken harmony. In the patriarchal stories we meet God Who seeks to 'repair' the broken harmony by means of a blessing with a global perspective and purpose to bring benefits to all people of the earth, i.e., to enrich all humanity. Behind the "deuteronomic" covenantal sanctions we see God who continues His program through one particular nation – Israel – which becomes the arena of divine grace and chastisement.

There is a kind of a *theological bridge*, and this bridge brings us eventually to the New Testament where a global blessing, attained through the person of Jesus Christ, becomes reality. The portrayal of God in relation to blessings and curses in the Pentateuch can be drawn in a triple perspective.

### 3.1.1. God as gracious Benefactor

The stories on blessings are rich theologically. The blessing is essentially a manifestation of divine power and love.

In the drama of creation the divine blessing foreruns the very existence of mankind: the Creator seeks to bless His creature and transmits to human beings the power to procreate and continue into the future. God is depicted as the Lord who supplies the blessing in order to enable humans to fulfill this task and live out their potential. The dramatic events of the fall and flood did not totally destroy the divine initiation of a life-producing blessing: Noah's line continues, and humanity is restored due to a new command to multiply. In the patriarchal stories or, more aptly, the patriarchal 'life journeys,' the blessing becomes a synonym of promise. In the personal encounters of the forefathers with the Lord, the blessing is primarily a divine gift, and the promise of future blessing, being continually reaffirmed, finds them in a moment of crisis or at a point of transition. Land, growth of family, material prosperity and protection are powerful gifts of a loving God sealed by an oath. The Lord acts as a gracious Benefactor, El Shaddai, Who is the very embodiment of infinite good. The blessing of the patriarchs is in some sense protected through the threat of a curse invoked upon those who neglect God's sovereign choice to bless His chosen (Gen 12,3a). The question of God's preference can be posited, but it is undisputable. The amazing nature of divine love strikes and surprises: even those who are thought to be outside of the elected line are blessed (e.g., Ishmael). It must be stressed that the divine 'preferable' blessing is not exclusive (to exclude others), but inclusive in its ground (to embrace as many as possible). Divine love to all humanity stands behind the true reason for the blessing of the patriarchs who are transformed into bearers of a beneficial kind of blessing. The divine program of blessing is grandiose in terms of global extension: all nations of the earth are included. In this sense the blessing of the forefathers is *divine provision*. God's program continues further through a particular nation, the chosen people of Israel who are called to become partakers of a divine covenant. The blessing of Israel is a completely unmeasurable gift of divine grace, though it involves the element of conditionality with a curse as the alternative. The concept of the universal divine blessing is of fundamental importance in theology: it forms the basis for the doctrine of salvation. Blessing is the ultimate goal in God's redemptive

plan. The theology of blessing is a message of hope. This theological trajectory must be kept when we approach the idea of God in the blessing.

### **3.1.2. God as severe Inflictor of curses**

Another facet of God's portrayal is the divine image 'hidden' behind curses.

Dramatic accounts on primeval curses involve the problematic of evil in the divine world which was created as good *par excellence*. Evil as such is not created by God; it is the result of distortion of the divine order by humanity's forefathers. Chastisement becomes a *divine necessity*, and the curse is its tool. In the primeval story the Lord assumes the role of a Watcher, He informs human beings of a radical change in the cosmic order because of them. In the covenantal or "deuteronomic" picture God is not the Curser either; He functions rather as the Causer of the curse. God is not a source of evil, but He acts as the Inflictor of the curse activating evil which is under His ultimate control. The idea of the inevitability of divine visitation is expressed by means of the language of causality: in curse formulae the Lord is introduced as the Inflictor of different sorts of misfortune. It is by no means arbitrary. The Lord is forced to chastise those who violate His order and neglect His norms. In some sense, the curse becomes a *means of regulation of the divine order* in the lives of people. In the Pentateuch the formula of direct God's cursing is almost not used, and it is remarkable. We don't find a God Who hates or curses, rather we encounter a God Who expresses His wrath toward disobedient human beings, and it takes the form of cursing. The curse is caused by the guilt of an individual or nation, and the divine discontent expressed in the form of a curse is never groundless.

### **3.1.3. The Lord as merciful Giver of a 'new chance'**

The divine portrait which can be drawn out of biblical blessings/curses is not complete without recognition of mercy as an attribute of divine nature. Behind the "deuteronomic" type of curse we discover the merciful Lord Who is ready 'to repent' of calamity and give a 'second chance' creating conditions for new possibilities. Divine mercy is a primary factor which is made active in human situations of hopelessness. Due to infinite mercy, the human drama of curses is reversed to *divine possibility*, rather than determinism.

Theologically speaking, human disobedience always activates the destructive force of the curse, and the conflict between the divine order and

human conduct leads to severe terms of divine visitation. Only the intervention of divine mercy can abolish or avert the effects of the curse. With regard to the “deuteronomic” curses, the Lord’s faithfulness to the forefathers (to the initial plan of the global blessing) seems to be a decisive factor for experiencing new terms of divine favor by God’s people in their history. Historically, covenantal (Torah’s) curses led to the great tragedy of the Exile; and in this period hope in the ‘theology of blessing’ seems to have failed, and was no longer dominant. However it turned out that the curse served as a temporal means of chastisement, and the return of Israel from *galut* to the land of the forefathers became a renewed blessing initiated by God’s mercy.

### **3.2. The idea of man in blessings/curses in the Pentateuch**

The concepts of blessings and curses in the Pentateuch are complex and rich in relation to anthropology.

It seems reasonable to take the primeval story as a starting point for anthropology, and before drawing a general portrayal of man being under blessing or curse, some basic assumptions are to be outlined. In some sense, the function of the first chapters of Genesis is *etiological*: through the stories of the creation and fall we get an understanding of how the world functions, and what rules govern the world. The world was designed as a harmonic whole, functioning according to divinely established rules which are not supposed to be distorted by humans. In some sense, the rules of the world take the form of a blessing or curse: the blessing signifies a positive rule, and being a primary feature of an ordered universe, is displayed in the ability to procreate, time ordering, abundance of resources, etc.; whereas the curse signifies a negative rule which implies punishment for the abuse of the created order. As we learn from the primeval story, the distortion of divinely created order led to radical change of the initial state of things: the blessing which was almost synonymous with creation, representing *telos*, the very goal of God's plan for humanity, was challenged by the curse. Characteristically, עֲצֻבֹן (“sorrow”) becomes a regular feature of human existence, affecting primarily *human labor*<sup>308</sup> (man’s vocation) and the ability of *generating* (feminine vocation). To resume, the primeval story provides us with a general paradigm of human life. It gives us insight into a common *status quo* of humankind: when the curse entered the

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<sup>308</sup> A note of caution seems necessary. Human labor, being marked by negativity, is not a curse as such. It simply implies futility of human efforts and constant struggle.

world, man becomes mortal, subjected to destructive forces, fragile and vulnerable. After the creational harmony was broken, the blessing on humans was not revoked, but curses began to affect human existence.

### 3.2.1. Man blessed: potency of life and wholeness

The biblical blessing is inconceivable apart from God, and it is manifold thanks to the breadth and diversity of benefits bestowed by the Lord as the Source upon addressees. The blessing in a biblical sense includes not only material goods but spiritual values as well and involves a wide range of human capabilities. *The blessing relates to the foremost human needs and desires and frees human potential, being a precondition for its development.* The accounts on blessings provide us with some sort of an ideal picture of human life.

The first characteristic of a man under blessing is *fruitfulness*. It can be said that the essential dimension of human blessing can be understood in terms of procreation. As the primeval story shows, human beings were granted the ability to generate sons and daughters in their likeness; the principle of ‘toledot’ (תולדות) is of fundamental importance: generations persist through time, forming the social structure of humanity. The blessing of procreation is made active in the patriarchal stories and in the “deuteronomic” promise of posterity: characteristically, numerous progeny is a vivid sign of a blessed man.

The second characteristic of a man under blessing is *life in good surroundings*. To use metaphoric language, in blessing there is ‘harmony’ between vertical and horizontal dimensions. To put it concretely, the relation between שמים (“heaven”) vs. אדמה (“ground”) is perfect. Harmony of blessings presupposes sufficiency of water resources and abundance of food (everything comes in its season). It can be said that in the time of blessing basic human needs are satisfied. The ground yields fruit; people enjoy the products of the land. Life under blessing is stable, and people are placed inside a ‘protection zone.’

The third characteristic is *success in labor*, with *prosperity* as a result. The blessing allows a person to develop his personal potential and creativity. The “deuteronomic” pair of the blessing in the field and in the city, which constitute *two basic spheres of human activity*, reflects the idea of success in all human enterprises. It is evident that success in labor results in material prosperity. The people become able to satisfy their basic needs and even share their resources with others (it is implied, e.g., in the “deuteronomic” idea of lending).

The fourth characteristic of a man under blessing is *wholeness* and *integration*. A man under blessing is a whole personality, physically and mentally healthy, and is able to integrate into the social environment. When a person lives under divine blessing, there is neither enmity with God nor with people, and a true identity or good position among people is retained. The divine blessing makes men collaborators of God's blessing program (an example is Abraham and his descendants), and it is the most amazing feature of the biblical blessing itself.

To resume, a man under blessing in a biblical perspective is a prosperous person, living in harmony with his environment and capable of development.

### **3.2.2. Man accursed: fragility of life and disharmony**

The curse, as a radical contrast to the blessing, relates to the most powerful human fears and dangers, negatively affecting human potential and possibilities for life. The 'curse' material provides us with a view of what a person under curse looks like. Some generalizations seem to be allowed.

The first characteristic is *life in hostile surroundings*. In some sense the human curse results in losing a *vitaly needed connection* with the environment. When a person experiences a divine curse, even nature – both שמים (“heaven”) and אדמה (“ground”) – is hostile (no water resources, no produce of the ground). Such a person is unable to avoid natural calamities, and as a result there is a constant lack of life-saving resources. In times of cursing people are unable to meet their own needs. Human life under a curse is fragile, and humans experience temporal and spatial uncertainty and anxiety, living in hostile environments, often outside their native soil and ‘protection zone.’

The second characteristic is *failure in labor*, with *scarcity* as a result. A man under cursing is deprived of the possibility of success in any enterprise. Labor is doomed to failure, all attempts are failed. This is often described in terms of a so-called *curse of disproportion* or *futile effort*. In the curse there is no place for the development of creative potential, and success is simply unattainable.

The third characteristic is *disharmony* and *disintegration*. A man under cursing is a fragmented personality. The curse brings inner disorder, affecting the physical, emotional and mental state of human beings: illness, as a sign of inner disunity, deprives them of enjoyment of life and acting in a normal way. A person under cursing is incapable of social integration; relationships with



others are marked by hostility. This may be accompanied by losing a unique position among the people (a quite telling example is the loss of a unique status of עם קדוש by Israel). The ‘psychology’ of the curse is such that accursed people show the dark side of their personality (e.g., an extraordinary curse of cannibalism reveals to what state people can be reduced when, being trapped in hard circumstances, they cease to behave normally, losing their human face).

To resume, a man under curse in a biblical perspective is a fragile person living in hostile surroundings and deprived of any success and development.

The biblical material on curses warns us to be alert. We need courage to face reality. We, as humans, must recognize that we have deviated from the ideal, and a perfect blessing is not attainable through our own efforts. We can perhaps discover the secret of existence and try to live in harmony with the divine order, but we are still subjected to negative forces operating in the world independently of us because of the universality of the human curse. Fortunately, we are not left without hope. There is a loving Lord who seeks to bless humanity, and resolution is in His mighty will.

### **3.2.3. Resolution of human problem: Abrahamic blessing fulfilled**

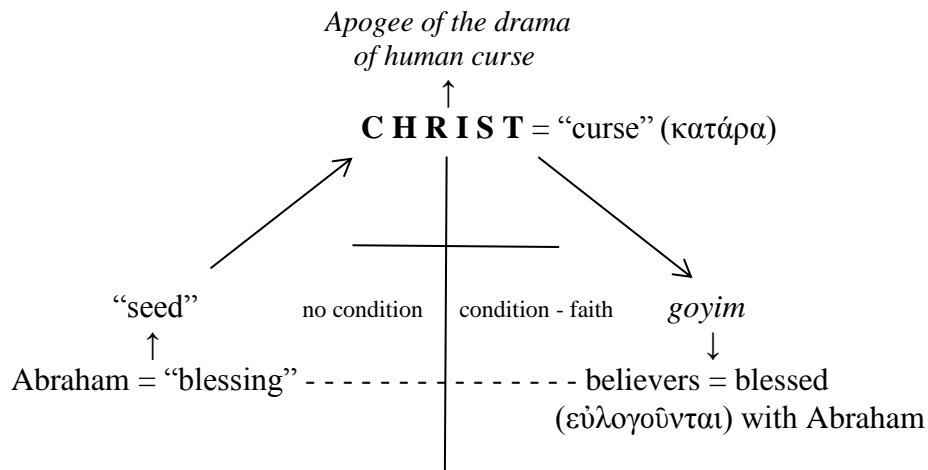
The tension between the curse as a regular feature of human existence and the blessing as God’s initiative and purpose brings us to the New Testament. This tension is ultimately resolved through the person of Jesus Christ. The passage of Gal 3,6-16 with some allusions to the figure of Abraham is important in this connection.<sup>309</sup> It is interesting to examine the text with the eightfold pattern.

The part on the blessing in vv. 8 and 9 basically reminds us of the promise to Abraham in Gen 12:3b: Abraham appears as the *executor* of the divine blessing and the nations as *beneficiaries*. The effect of the beneficial blessing is here made specific: justification, initiated by the Lord, reached *goyim*. The condition of such a blessing is faith. V. 9 suggests the close connection between faith and the blessing: those who are of faith (ἐκ πίστεως) are blessed (εὐλογοῦνται) with Abraham, so the actual *addressees* or partakers of the Abrahamic blessing are believers. The part on the curse in v. 10-14 is a kind of antithesis to the preceding part. V. 10b basically reminds us of the Decalogue curse in Deut 27,16: here the *addressee* of the curse is not a

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<sup>309</sup> For an interpretation of vv. 8-10, see Jeffrey R. Wisdom, *Blessing for the Nations and the Curse of the Law: Paul's Citation of Genesis and Deuteronomy in Gal 3.8-10* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001).

person who does not fulfill the words of the Torah, but rather those who are of the works of the law (in contrast with those who are of faith) become *addressees*. The curse is caused by any attempt to be justified by the law. The only possibility to escape it is provided through the redemptive work of Christ who became a curse (κατάρα) for us. The metonymy reflects the truth that Christ became the embodiment of the human curse. In Christ the human drama of the curse reaches its apogee, and the way to the global blessing becomes open, as v. 14 specifies: “in order that in Christ the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles.” We can discover here the great paradox: **Christ became a partaker of the human curse that is universal, so that human beings could become partakers of the Abrahamic blessing that is universal as well.** V. 16 makes it clear that “the seed” which was the kernel of the Abrahamic promise, is to be associated with the figure of Christ who turns from the ultimate *Addressee* of the human curse into the ultimate *Executor* of the divine blessing. To conclude, this passage, which is of midrashic character, describes how the divine promise of blessing, given to Abraham, is realized. Here we find a great message of hope, *the ultimate answer to the human existential problem*, and even though we live in a world in which the reality of the existential curse is still present, there is an escape from its fatality. Through faith we have already become *partakers of the divine global blessing* which is still looking forward to its final realization.<sup>310</sup> The following sketch graphically summarizes these reflections:



<sup>310</sup> However, all this should not lead us to take the patriarchal blessing, as realized in Christ, in a substitute sense. It is risky for believers from *goyim* to forget that the beneficial blessing, attained through the seed of Abraham, does not cease to operate in its primary sense; it is a fatal mistake to think that the national blessing of Israel is repudiated.

### 3.3. The idea of god (s) in blessings/curses in extra-biblical sources

Now we turn to extra-biblical material in order to formulate the idea of god and man behind blessing/curse concepts as complex notions involving the close link between human existence and supernatural forces.

In general, the idea of deities in the Ancient text sources is based on the understanding that gods determine the destiny of man: they were thought *to decree good or bad fate* for human beings. It is evident in extra-biblical sources, that there was a strong sense of dependence upon divine favor, and people often tried to gain the favor of the gods and sought to please them by performing rituals. In ANE the custom of erecting statues of deities was widespread, and even a gesture of divine favor or protection was sometimes depicted in stone.

The picture of gods in extra-biblical texts is characteristically polytheistic. Religious ideas and beliefs of ancient people were concentrated around a large pantheon of deities, and every people or religious group retained its own pantheon. Thus, leading Mesopotamian deities were Anu, Enlil, Inanna, Ishtar, Ashur, Shamash, Marduk, Adad, and Nergal.<sup>311</sup> In Syrian Semitic sources the principal deities were Hadad and Baal; popular in the Graeco-Roman pantheon were Zeus, Athena, Mercury, Hermes etc. The large number of deities (*the assembly of gods*) in blessing/curse formulae is a constant feature in extra-biblical sources.<sup>312</sup> Formulae of blessings and curses even testify of such a phenomenon as a *mixed-shared pantheon* of deities. The names of deities, which were thought to have universal value, are found in texts of blessings and curses belonging to different religio-cultural traditions. While generally, benevolence and favor on the one hand and malevolence and disfavor on the other hand were associated with divine figures, some cases demonstrate that the belief in the blessing or curse as an *independent self-operating force* was not rare.

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<sup>311</sup> In the summoning of gods human initiators of cursing often address them by name and title as, for instance, Anu (the father), Enlil (the king), Shamash (the judge), Marduk (the leader), Adad (the ruler of the earth). Some deities were associated with different sorts of disasters, e.g., Shamash with darkness, Sin with leprosy, Nergal with pestilence.

<sup>312</sup> 'Monotheistic' tendencies are rare; the portrayal of a sole divinity in the Yehawmilk inscription can serve as an example.

Some general points in relation to the portraits of divinities in the concepts of blessing or curse are to be outlined.

### **3.3.1. Deities as believed to grant favor**

The idea of divine blessing is not unusual in extra-biblical sources, but there is an impression of its narrow sense.

People sought the favor of the gods, and this is evident in the wishes or requests for blessings. In the blessing formulae deities are pictured as providing protection and bestowing their favor upon an addressee. In particular, the idea of divine protection is reflected in Hittite treaties where gods act as protectors. In ANE deities were associated with benevolent power, and they were begged for favor, long-life and success. Characteristically, requests for blessing often occur in texts in which the addressee is a royal figure. We can find several examples of royal blessings in the collection of Syrian Semitic inscriptions: here divine benevolence is sought by a king, and a desire for a long and secure dominion is common in such requests. A telling example of beneficent activity on the part of a goddess, who bestows her favor upon the king, is the figure of lady Byblos in the inscription of *Yeḥawmilk*: the blessing seems to be deserved since the king pleased his mistress. Similar examples of a blessing in the form of divine benevolence toward kings can be found in other texts. Such occurrences point out that divinities were thought to be obliged to bless the king. It seems that the blessing in many cases served *royal ideology* since kingship was believed to be granted by gods. A king's rise to power and successful dominion were associated with transferring political power from the divinity to a royal figure.

As far as our study shows, there is no developed conception of divine blessing close to the biblical pattern when a blessing is attached to a specific person or group through whom blessings expand and reach many. In extra-biblical sources an image of a beneficent god who bestows an unconditional blessing for people of all ranks is clearly lacking, although not totally absent.

### **3.3.2. Deities as revengers and causers of evil**

In general, the ancient extra-biblical sources reflect a common belief that divine beings are able to release evil forces and cause misfortunes.

In the texts the deities often assume the role of revengers. The idea of the divine curse, inflicted due to improper action on the part of humans, is

expressed in a number of texts. Some cases imply that the action of the curse, as retribution, already took place (mostly, in such category as epics<sup>313</sup>), other texts suggest the potential threat of retribution (such categories as treaties, grants [*kudurrus*], dedicatory or funeral inscriptions, *katadesmoi* [*pleas for justice*]). Deities seem to act as human projections of justice and protection, and their function is to revenge when there is a breach of obligations, laws of ownership or other rights. Characteristically, numerous gods, referred to e.g., as “the gods of oath” or the assembly of “holy” gods, are often summoned as a collective source of retribution. In Mesopotamian texts deities are mostly pictured as cursing and causing evil, whereas in some Graeco-Roman texts they are portrayed as binding a victim and causing damage. In the latter case, even underground deities were seen as having sufficient power to interfere in human affairs. In addition, in many cases, deities are simply pictured as ‘mercenaries’ of people’s unjustified requests (this is particularly evident in *katadesmoi*), some texts imply that a person is subject to the manipulation of deities (e.g., in epics). The idea of divine retribution in the ANE texts, as a whole, is close to biblical, but here deities are used by people to promote their interests, not as in the Bible, where the idea of God’s punishment in the form of curses is mostly on God’s initiative.

### **3.4. The idea of man in blessings/curses in extra-biblical sources**

The picture of a man under blessing or curse (a conjectural portrait) can be drawn from benedictory/maledictory wishes, which remains the regular structure of the material on blessings or curses in extra-biblical texts.

#### **3.4.1. Man under blessing: desire for wealth and stability**

Formulations of blessings in extra-biblical sources, although not numerous, reflect general human desires for prosperity, long life, stability and security.

The blessing in some extra-biblical texts suggests a close link between welfare and royal service. As part of political treaties, for instance, in the Hittite form, blessings, addressed to vassals, reflected general qualities of good life and stability, being *in service of interstate political strategy*. Blessings in the royal Syrian Semitic inscriptions, often delivered in the form of ‘egoistic’

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<sup>313</sup> For example, Enlil in *The Curse of Agade* and the Furies in *The Iliad* act as cruel revengers.

self-benediction, reflect the desire for a successful and long reign, thus being *in service of royal ideology*. Prosperity and stability were among the main benefits needed by a king, and a royal figure, under the patronage of deities and accumulating wealth, can serve as an ideal portrait of a blessed person.

### **3.4.2. Man under curse: a tragic figure with fixed fate**

The common trend of pagan religions – human fear in the face of nature and belief in fate – is reflected in the curse speeches. Curses such as natural disasters, extermination, non-burial and the threat of no posterity constitute the main human fears behind maledictory wishes in different types of non-biblical material.

In extra-biblical texts a man, metaphorically, being under the ‘veil of curses,’ is a fully *tragic figure*, unable to withstand disasters and change evil fate. The concept of free choice is not developed in the sense of a biblical “deuteronomic” great choice which defines human fate. We see in epics, in particular, that human fate is defined not by free choice, but rather by the will of the gods, and the fate of a man is often predetermined due to random forces. It seems that in ANE treaties the freedom of choice exists, but if the curse is already in action, there is no way to get out of it (no ‘second chance’).

The picture of a man under curse in extra-biblical texts involves aspects such as inter-personal communication. Problematic of curses in some texts mostly reveals the human side of this activity; we can speak generally about a strong human tendency to curse another person pursuing his own interests. We can trace this tendency in different kinds of texts. For instance, in Babylonian *kudurrus* and Syrian Semitic inscriptions, the initiator delivers curses which are aimed at the total destruction of a potential violator/vandal ‘making’ his or her fate fixed. In addition, phenomena such as *katadesmoi* provide us with an insight into the role of the curse in inter-personal conflicts: the initiator of the spell is looking for ways to dictate the course of action of the addressee (to influence destiny), and such curses are aimed at weakening human potential.

With regard to the general image of a human being in extra-biblical sources, it can be concluded that cursing as such is a sign of the vulnerability of people: the curse addressee is a vulnerable creature due to disasters of different natures, and the initiator of cursing is also not a fully integrated person because of fear for his own rights or interests. The human image behind the curse is fractured: man is not a highly free being and appears to be a cog in the vast universe not

knowing what to expect from life. And as a consequence of the failure to find or recognize the secret of true existence and good, a person often seeks to control the social sphere by means of various curses, summoning deities and even spirits as executors. When the curse is imposed for some damage, this type can still be justified, but the widespread use of a ‘curse practice’ in ancient times as a whole reveals the degradation and dehumanization of ancient society.

### 3.5. Summary

Despite similarities between biblical and non-biblical concepts of the blessing and the curse, there is a fundamental difference in the views of God and man in these concepts.

Within the ‘biblical orbit’ the concepts of the blessing or curse reflect high theology. The biblical idea of God behind these concepts is attached to notions such as divine providential care of humanity, and a divine blessing or curse in a primary sense becomes a *direct expression of the will* of God, the Creator of the Universe, the Redeemer of Israel and Savior of all nations. This implies a particular conception of man: in the Torah it is crucial that an individual or group of people become aware of the ethical norms that reflect the divine order: life in accordance with this order brings blessings, whereas violation of the rules leads to the release of curses. From the biblical point of view, a person has a high degree of existential freedom, being free to choose between two alternatives or two types of existence – blessing or curse, and even in the case of an erroneous choice a possibility for restoration remains.

Not much of this sort we find in extra-biblical texts. In spite of a general understanding that welfare or misfortune is caused by a deity, blessings and curses are not posited as direct engagements of the will of divinity. It becomes tendentious in comparative studies to equate the biblical concept of the covenant with the ANE treaty pattern, in particular. The attempt to see ANE treaties as an expression of the will of divinity cannot be justified on the basis of comparison of a general structure of participants in blessing/curse formulae in treaties. In the Ancient Orient the deity is not presented as the initiator of the treaty, rather deities were meant to act as executors. Neither Ashur nor other deities, in spite of their favor to the kings, who were believed to keep the divine order in some way, are pictured as those who express their will by means of a blessing or curse for an individual or the whole nation as we see in

the biblical version. To put it differently, in the ANE treaties blessings and curses serve the political agenda, reflecting the pro-monarchist sentiment, while in the biblical covenant between God and Israel the redemptive agenda is of primary importance, and the Lord Himself acts as the King of the Universe and the Lord of history.<sup>314</sup>

Finely, it can be stated that in the Pentateuch, the texts on blessings and curses carry a theological message which is holistic and congruent with Old Testament belief, whereas the theological ideas behind these concepts in non-biblical sources are disparate, being in agreement with polytheistic beliefs.

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<sup>314</sup> Erich Zenger stresses significant differences between the Assyrian and biblical models of treaties, distinguishing between the treaty as a means of Assyrian expansion and the biblical treaty, in which God is represented as the Lord and the people as the subject of history. For details, see E. Zenger, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1995), 182-184.



## General conclusions, considerations, implications

The examination of blessings and curses within the Pentateuch and in different religio-cultural milieus show that these concepts, being attached to the divine-human relational sphere, are not just verbal phenomena, but suggest reality.

The study of blessings and curses in the Pentateuch has revealed the following results. The biblical concepts of blessing and curse are in close connection with the idea of divine activity in the life of an individual and even a nation. It becomes evident that there is a logical sequence behind the seemingly disparate narratives on blessings and curses in the Pentateuch.

In the primeval story the blessing and the curse (**'guardians of divine order'** model) can be definitely comprehended in terms of amplified 'function' or display of the divine order. The divine initiative of the blessing of creation faces resistance from man and even creatures, when they do something that does not match creational harmony, and this discrepancy leads to the release of the curse. It is significant that from the beginning the curse power extends to surroundings. Thus, the guilt of the serpent, Adam, Cain and pre-flood humanity affects the ground (אדמה), which becomes a silent participant (third party) in the drama of the curse. The cursing, as a counter-reaction to the violation of the divine order in the realm of family ethics, takes place in the case of Canaan, and here we are dealing with the transpersonal character of the curse that affects generations. The *grammar* of the primeval curse involves such features as causality and specific time frames, i.e., the curse is caused by improper behavior, and the effects become immediately evident (the serpent changes its way of existence, human labor and procreation become overshadowed by hardship and pain (עצבו), Cain is banished from the ground), and only in the case of Canaan is the effect postponed. In order to counteract the negative effect of the curse, the Lord provides a new blessing in the post-flood world, renewing the conditions of the earth and enabling new humanity to continue through generating.

The greatness of God's initiative to continue in blessing, which resists the curse, manifests itself in the blessing of the patriarchs (**'benefit-blessing'** model). This is a specific kind of blessing which is based on election, and it is unconditional in its ground. The basic features here are the absence of a human factor and concrete time frames. These features make the blessing distinctive; it becomes a promise which goes beyond just a family of patriarchs. The promise

reflects God's global concern for the nations of the earth, so His program of blessing is intended to be worked out from a single person (patriarch) to an innumerable multitude of people (nations). The *grammar* of the patriarchal blessings reflects the transformative process: the addressee of the blessing is intended to be an executor to supply blessing for others, becoming a real benefactor. The patriarchal blessing is transitive in its character, and this transitivity is *asymmetric* to that of the primeval curse. The visible effects (progeny<sup>315</sup> and land) of the promissory or beneficial blessing take place during the lifetimes of the patriarchs: the first bearer of that kind of the blessing – Abraham – is declared as *baruch* by an authoritative figure (Melchizedek) in the highest sense of the word, i.e., as the one who is enriched by El Elion. The divine blessing, operating on the personal level, then reaches Isaac, Jacob and Joseph in spite of their life collisions and it is, in fact, the blessing of Abraham (ברכת אברהם) that they inherit. One of the peculiar features of the patriarchal blessings is that the promise of a blessing in its oral form is delivered in a moment of crisis or at some transitional point (in the vicinity or in the land of promise). The nature of the divine blessing most shows itself in patriarchal stories ('life journeys'), and it is such that the divine blessing eliminates human fears and doubts. The stories of the patriarchs are exclusively oriented in blessings; the only curse, the negative element, is the verbal curse which is included in the formula of blessing (Gen 12,3; 27,29), and it reflects the divine principle of retribution against one who pronounces a curse upon those who belong to the chosen line. The story of Balaam in Num 22-24 is an example of such action, an attempt to curse the group of elected ones (those who issued from the patriarchs and already constituted the people of Israel), but this curse is destined for failure. Due to divine intervention, a 'planned' curse turns into the 'unexpected' blessing, which is consistent with the primary divine goal to bless the progeny of Abraham, so the illegal curse is cancelled by a promissory blessing.

We then find a particular type of a blessing and a curse ('**Torah's sanctions**' model) in Deuteronomy 28. Blessings and curses are intended to be realized in the life of Israel as a nation, and they become strictly dependent on covenantal fidelity. This covenantal type of the blessing and the curse involves history: the history of עַם יִשְׂרָאֵל ("the people of Israel") is the arena of divinely

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<sup>315</sup> Its realization is not possible without miraculous blessings of the matriarchs, for example, Sarah whose blessing, announced to Abraham (Gen 17,16), was fulfilled in the exact time.

enacted blessings and curses. In view of the patriarchal type, the covenantal blessing of Israel (the seed), being a divine mandate, is in harmony with the blessings of the forefathers. The curse in its covenantal form is a kind of juxtaposition; it becomes a threat to the realization of patriarchal blessings. This thesis can be supported by referring to two specific “deuteronomic” curse effects: extermination and banishment from the land. The motifs of banishment from the land and return are of great importance in this regard: some texts suggest two-directional movement: מעל האדמה (“from the land”) and also אל-הארץ (“to the land”); the possibility of return is envisaged due to intervention of divine mercy and grace. It becomes evident that the land of the fathers (patriarchs) is the exclusive context of the blessings. The idea of the blessing outside the promised land seems to be alien to the Pentateuch. The *galut* is the spatial-temporal context of divine curses in their highest manifestation. The *grammar* of covenantal blessings and curses, as a whole, permits us to perceive them as divine acts, so the words of blessings and curses reflect objective reality. The scheme of covenantal blessings and curses can be traced behind events described in historical and prophetic books: the blessing and the curse (**‘tools for judging history’** model), serve as some criteria for historiography.

Blessing or cursing, as a form of divine activity, has another side, that of human administration. Three passages – Num 5,11-31; Num 6,22-27 and Deut 27,14-26 – describe different occasions when a blessing or curse is to be administered by clergy. The priestly benediction in Num 6 is an example of priestly administering of the blessing upon a group of בני ישראל (“the sons of Israel”). The divine blessing of the community members operates on an individual level: each one, belonging to the corporate unity, gets a personal blessing. Here we discover one of the most amazing features of the Bible, i.e., the idea of divine corroboration with humans: being appointed by the Lord and ‘borrowing’ a certain amount of divine power and His sovereignty, the priests prolong the divine directive (the blessing) in the life of the people.

The administering of the curse is the focus of the ‘test of adultery’ in Num 5 and in the Decalogue declaration in Deut 27. Both cases involve social ethics, and each case is a flagrant violation of divine order. The curse becomes a means to deal with violators in cases when the crime is committed without witnesses, and the priests certify the reality of the curse in the life of those who overstep divine standards. This is an example of operating the curse on a personal level, in the life of an individual. Here we can discover a link to the primeval story. In the primeval story the heroes become aware of the reality of

the curse which affects their personal experience directly by God, and in the latter cases the awareness of the inevitable experience of the curse in case of guilt comes indirectly, through *administrators*, i.e., priests.

A few more words are important. Dealing with the biblical presentation of blessings and curses, it is important to distinguish between the operation of a blessing or curse on the individual level, which involves an existential dimension, and their operation on the corporative level which involves a historical dimension. Both are interrelated and both address the issue of liability, i.e., personal or corporate responsibility. All this provides us with some implications. Blessings and curses in biblical terms are of *timeless value* for every generation of people. The rules of blessing and cursing work independently of our perceptions and imaginations. We must not ignore clear warnings, given in the form of blessings and curses, otherwise our own lives will reflect the consequences of the neglect of the divine order and rules as in a mirror.

The study of blessings and curses as religious and cultural phenomena in the Ancient Near Eastern, Graeco-Roman and Indian worlds is an interesting endeavor. The information, obtained during this research, is valuable both in itself and in connection with the biblical material. In general, it can be observed that in extra-biblical sources there is some kind of irregularity of blessing formulae in comparison with that of curses.

In the ANE texts, in particular, we find more examples of curses (**'treaty sanctions,' 'tool of deterrence'** models) than blessings. This is partly due to the use of the curse as a powerful tool against violation of agreements (Hittite and Neo-Assyrian treaties), disregard for property rights (Babylonian *kudurrus*) or damage to statues or tombs (Syrian Semitic inscriptions). The use of the curse in such contexts generally influenced the style which is tremendously frightening. The blessing as such is mainly linked to the figure of a king (**'royal blessing'** model).

In the texts from the Graeco-Roman world the tendency of cursing also predominates over that of blessing. The aggressive tone of curses in *katadesmoi* (**'tool of manipulation'** model) speaks for itself. The *grammar* of curse tablets suggests that an anonymous person (initiator) tries to force supernatural beings (executors) to enact the desired result, and here not only deities, mostly underground, but the spirits of dead men are implied to be active; that looks totally absurd. In epics the curse (**'driving force'** model) implies an imminent evil fate. In *The Iliad* the curse, serving the animosity and

hatred between the two parties involved in the war, defines the final fate of the heroes.

In the Indian epic *Mahābhārata* the curse is deliberately imposed, and being at first glance purely banal, it inexorably leads the hero to his terrible fate.

This intercultural study shows that common motifs and themes were widely spread, and it testifies about the existence of a common pot of beliefs and customs. The people in ancient times often perceived reality in terms of a blessing or curse. Blessings and curses, like a mirror, reflect the desires and fears of the ancient people regardless of cultural or religious context: the blessing in general presupposes the idea of the life desired, while the curse implies the idea of the foremost human fears and disruption of human existence on all levels.

Our research helps us to find at least two things in common. The first is the common (similar) set of blessings and curses (though the wording can differ). The second is phenomenon such as an allegiance to the word. In ancient times the oath was a common custom or means to regulate relationships in the framework of contracts: the word of promise of any kind was sealed by an oath, and its breach caused the curse effects that were stipulated in the agreement.

In spite of these common features, some differences can be detected. Generally, the biblical world-view is more positive and consistent. The concepts of blessing and cursing in the Pentateuch reflect high theology, whereas in extra-biblical sources there is no consistent idea of the gods behind these concepts, and in general the picture of interrelation of deities and human beings is incongruent with the biblical message. Blessings and curses in the Pentateuch are ethically conditioned, while in extra-biblical sources there is a lack of ethical concern, and often it is questionable if some is implied. The styles also differ in many ways: in extra-biblical sources the language of curses is frightening and even aggressive. It can be said that extra-biblical texts reflect a belief in the power of words, while in the Pentateuch the people were supposed to trust the divine Word of power which shapes people's destiny and makes history. The *grammar* itself of blessings and curses is cardinally different: in the Pentateuch, the Lord is presented as the *Initiator* (as a rule) and the sole *Source* of blessings or curses, guaranteeing their fulfilment and delegating His power to human collaborators (they are in His service); whereas in extra-biblical texts a human figure appears as an initiator (as a rule), invoking numerous deities as executors and a collective source of evil (they

serve his or her agenda). In general, the biblical picture is more optimistic and positive: there is no blind predetermination of human destiny, and the chance to change fate remains in spite of the tragic nature of circumstances.

Lastly, what remains unique in the Pentateuch it is the concept of the universal blessing. **THE OBJECTIVE REALITY OF SUCH A BLESSING RESTS ON THE WILL OF THE CREATOR, WHO WISHES THAT THE BLESSING WILL REACH EVERY HUMAN BEING AND BECOME A WAY OF LIFE.**

## Appendix

### *A short catalogue of curses in different biblical and ANE texts<sup>1</sup>*

<i>the kind of a curse</i>	<i>The text</i>						
	Deut 28	Lev 26	“The curse of Agade”	Hittite treaties	VTE	<i>Kudurrus</i>	Syrian Semitic inscriptions
natural calamity	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
‘curse of disproportion’	x	x	x				x
‘curse of futile efforts’	x	x	x	x	x		x
disease	x	x			x	x	
defeat in battle	x	x			x	x	
oppression	x	x	x		x	x	
dispossession	x	x		x	x	x	x
captivity	x	x			x	x	
eradication of offspring	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
‘no rest/sleep’	x		x		x	x	x
non-burial	x	x	x <sup>2</sup>		x	x <sup>3</sup>	x
famine/ cannibalism	x x	x x	x		x x	x	x
destruction	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
dispersion	x	x					
bad feelings (despair, worries, fear)	x	x	x		x	x	

<sup>1</sup> The catalogue, which is in accordance with the author’s present knowledge, is by no means comprehensive, neither with regard to types of curses (just a few types are selected), nor with regard to their occurrences (they relate mainly to the texts studied).

<sup>2</sup> Although the curse of non-burial is not mentioned in the imprecatory part relating to the curse of the city Agade, such threat is referred to in the part in which the devastating consequences of the invasion of the Gutians on Sumer are described.

<sup>3</sup> The curse of non-burial can be found in some *kudurru*-texts which were not subjected to our analysis.

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