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'A PLAGUE ON BOTH YOUR HOUSES': CURSING AND BLESSING REVIEWED*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Issues which occupy the attention of 'ordinary' Christians and which are seen by them as of primary theological and spiritual significance are not always taken up by the academic community. The question of cursing seems to be a case in point. While there have been many studies analysing the biblical material on blessing, in order to examine and combat the position which interprets this material in a way that has become known as the 'prosperity gospel', there seems to be very little material analysing parallel teaching on cursing.

In a preliminary attempt to fill this gap this paper looks at the popular understanding of cursing, and the way in which words are seen as 'powerful'. It goes on to consider how the Israelite understanding of cursing is both parallel to, and different from, that of the surrounding Mesopotamian countries. It looks in detail at texts in Deuteronomy and briefly at the rest of the biblical material, and concludes that much of the popular teaching is in fact misplaced, and misses out on the primary significance that is given in the texts to relationship with God rather than any autonomous impersonal power.

That cursing is, at least in some areas, a relevant issue today is shown by the following snippet printed in the *Independent* newspaper on 22 May 1993:

> Aborigines have asked the Northern Territory government to ban unauthorised curses because they are disrupting their communities, Reuter reports from Sydney. The Northern Territory Solicitor-General, Tom Pauling, said yesterday that eight aboriginal communities want the law changed so that people making unauthorised curses could be prosecuted. In the aboriginal community only tribal elders may authorise a curse. 'Disgruntled people get annoyed . . . and put a curse on community assets, such as stores, schools and banking agencies,' said Mr Pauling. 'Until the appropriate authority comes to lift the curse, the facilities are closed. People are afraid to use them.'

This quotation indicates an approach to curses and cursing that is very

similar to that found in the countries surrounding Israel in the early days of their history. However, this understanding is not restricted to certain ethnic or cultural groups or even to non-Christian communities. Amongst a wide circle of Christians today, at least in Britain, there is a growing tendency to ascribe certain events and circumstances to the influences of curses, and sometimes to modify behaviour for fear of the supposed effects of such curses. Special services and rituals are then carried out in order to revoke or annul the curse and free the believer from its effects. There are a number of books and papers written at a popular level which provide justification for such thinking, notably Derek Prince's book, *Blessing or Curse: You Can Choose!*[1]

Prince's position is summarised in the blurb on his book as: 'Blessings and curses . . . are vehicles of supernatural spiritual power . . . . Both are major themes of Scripture . . . . Their effect may extend to families . . . or whole nations . . . . They tend to continue from generation to generation . . . . The main vehicle of both blessings and curses is words . . . spoken, written or uttered inwardly . . .' There are a number of background assumptions—that a spiritual world exists which shapes our destiny, and that how we interact with and combat or appropriate the relevant spiritual forces determines how we cope with life and how our own history, and that of society develops.[2] And there is the assumption that words in themselves have inherent power which remains in force until specifically revoked.

> There is one kind of curse against which even God cannot provide protection: *the curses that Christians pronounce upon themselves.* This is one way in which Christians frequently bring upon themselves various kinds of trouble of which they do not understand the source. By speaking negative words about themselves, they shut themselves off from blessings and expose themselves to curses.[3]

'People who use this negative kind of language' (e.g. 'It's driving me crazy!'; 'I don't think I'll ever get pregnant!'; 'It always happens to me!'; 'Over my dead body!') 'are unconsciously inviting evil spirits to take them over', and, in effect, cursing themselves.[4] A further assumption is that the curse narratives of Deuteronomy and elsewhere in the Old Testament have direct relevance for Christians today. Deuteronomy 28 is seen as particularly significant: 'Anyone who seeks to understand this whole subject should carefully study this chapter in its entirety.'[5] The results of and reasons for curses are divided into different categories which are then applied directly to people in today's world.[6]

II. THE POWER OF WORDS

The view that in Israel words were seen as having innate autonomous power so that an intention once expressed became an effective reality not able to be recalled even by the speaker, was once common amongst scholars. However this position was strongly and effectively refuted by Thiselton as early as 1974.[7] He argues that biblical references such as Isaiah 55:10 which are used to imply that words in themselves are powerful, in fact draw attention to the power of God that lies behind such words. It is God's word which does not return empty. It is God's power, not the power of the words, that counts. Without that power the words themselves are empty and irrelevant.

Thiselton agrees that blessings and cursings do come into a special category of 'performative language' where something is being *done* as well as said. Other instances of such language would be 'I give and bequeath' in a will, 'I do' in a marriage ceremony, or the repetition of 'I divorce you' in a Muslim community. But 'the power of words in performative utterances has little or nothing to do with natural physical cause and effect'.[8] There must be a context in which the formula is accepted and powerful. 'I divorce you' has effect in some societies but not in others. In other words, it is not any power that the words themselves might have that is significant, but the fact that society has accepted their effectiveness. The effectiveness of spoken blessings and curses in the Old Testament also rests on accepted conventions, 'on procedures or institutions accepted within Israelite society, and usually involving conventionally accepted formulae. They are effective, in most cases, only when performed by the appropriate person in the appropriate situation'.[9]

So, a blessing or a curse may be 'power-laden', but this is true if and only if it is a blessing or a curse spoken by God or with God's direct authority. An unauthorised curse or blessing, like an unauthorised prophecy, is irrelevant and may be safely ignored. Proverbs 26:2 lays down the principle, 'a curse without a cause shall not alight' (NKJV), rightly interpreted by the GNB as 'a curse cannot hurt you unless you deserve it'; and, I believe, misunderstood by Prince when he takes it to mean that 'behind every curse that comes upon us, there is a cause. If it seems that we are under a curse we should seek to determine its cause'.[10] That is, if unexplained bad things happen to us, there must be a curse behind it.

A rather mundane example of where experience may seem to prove that autonomous power exists, but in fact does not, is found in Lillian Beckwith's account of life on a remote Hebridean island.[11] She describes conversation at a ceilidh turning to 'the miraculous traffic lights of Glasgow', when Murdoch after a visit there explained what happened when lights turned red. 'Tis just like a tether on their wheels and they canna move, no not an inch', clearly believing 'the secret of the traffic lights to be a powerful electric ray which effectively immobilized all the engines in the vicinity'. In fact of course, the 'power' comes entirely from the acceptance by the community of that particular rule.

If a father repeatedly tells a child that he or she is worthless the likelihood is that that child will have problems.[12] That in those circumstances a 'curse-revoking ceremony' may lead to a great sense of help and freedom for the child is true, but does not justify the conclusion that the original words as such were, as a curse, the force that created the problem.

III. THE CURSE IN ISRAEL AND IN MESOPOTAMIA

The key issue is the way in which curses were understood within the Bible. Words relating to 'curse' are used around 230 times, and Prince is right to point out that this indicates significance.[13] Where I wish to differ from him is in the nature of that significance. The vast majority of these references are in the context of the *covenant* and it is important, therefore, to understand the way in which curses functioned within the covenant structure. In Deuteronomy, the narratives present the curses as a form of self-malediction; the Israelite who accepts the covenant is in essence saying, 'May these things happen to me if I do not keep the requirements of this covenant', or at least, 'I accept and agree that these things should happen to me'.

In the Ancient Near East in general, the pattern of blessings and curses, which is paralleled in Deuteronomy, seems to have been an essential part of the treaty form. However, this pattern does not occur in the same way in the covenant accounts found in Exodus and Joshua, and is also missing in Nathan's oracle to David in 2 Samuel 7. This raises questions, already well covered, as to whether the Old Testament covenant really was understood as a treaty.[14] For our purposes it means that we cannot automatically assume that the curses functioned in the same way in Israel as they did in Mesopotamia generally, but must examine the way they are used in the Old Testament.

In Mesopotamia, it appears that life was dominated by dealing with the terror of curses and omens.[15] These curses were invoked by individuals and although the actions called for were seen as being carried out by the gods, there is not really a sense that the gods may choose not to act. As van der Toorn notes, 'one gains the impression that it [the curse] acts quite independently of the relationship between the individual and his gods. The many symbolic actions connected with the oath could, much more than in Israel, also be understood as magical manipulations to render the curse automatically efficacious'.[16] The extent to which curses dominated life is indicated by the way in which Mesopotamian liturgical material is steeped in rituals and other material which would allow curses to be revoked and enable the people to cope with life in this context. The Shurpu series of penitential prayers, for example, are incantations designed to reverse or undo the effects of a curse.[17]

So, in both Mesopotamia and Israel, the legal code was validated by a system of curses—that is, God or the gods were ultimately responsible for ensuring that the requirements of the code were met, and for instituting punishment if they were not. But there are profound differences in the way that this was understood. For the Mesopotamian, 'Wisdom lay in maintaining a "low profile", threading one's way cautiously and quietly through the morass of life . . . attracting the gods' attention as little as possible',[18] whereas for the Israelite the heart of his religion was relationship with his God, which demanded involvement and commitment.

Breaking the Old Testament covenant law was seen not as setting in motion an automatic, mechanistically applied series of punishments as set out in the curse narratives, but as being dealt with by God with whom they were in a covenant relationship. There are penitential Psalms in Israel's liturgy, but they do not follow the same pattern as the Mesopotamian ones. They are designed not to 'undo the spell of the curse',[19] but to seek the mercy of God for the penitent sinner. In contrast to the general Mesopotamian material, there is not one instance in Israel's literature of a 'release' ritual or liturgy or ceremony designed to offset the effects of curses, whether the curse of the law or curses called down by other individuals. It is interesting that in spite of the extent of the available material there is no instance of a Mesopotamian curse-revoking ritual in Pritchard's *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*.[20] This may have been because there is no parallel material in the Old Testament, but it means that this significant variation often fails to be noticed.

IV. THE FUNCTION OF CURSES IN DEUTERONOMY

What function then is served by the curse narratives in Deuteronomy? Although the lists of curses are longer than the lists of blessings it is clear that in some senses they serve as a backdrop to those blessings. Deuteronomy as a whole sets out what it means for Israel as a nation and for individual Israelites to be in relationship with God. It means a holy lifestyle based on the law, because God is holy and the law expresses something of his character. But in essence it means blessing, expressed in that context largely in terms of the material benefits that will come to them if they remain in relationship with God, but ultimately referring to the fact of that relationship. To be part of God's covenant people, to belong to God, is to be blessed. To be out of relationship with God is to be cursed. The curses are equally presented in materialistic terms, but it does not appear that they were ever intended to be applied in a mechanistic way, with a one-to-one relationship to individual law-breaking. They are there to show the Israelites that God must be taken seriously, that turning way from God's

will for them will have devastating consequences, that being 'outside of Yahweh' is a terrible state, to be avoided at all costs. But just as the blessing in fact rests on God's promise and is not portrayed as a reward for keeping the law, so the curse is not, strictly speaking, a punishment for not keeping the law, but a description of the consequences of being outside of God's blessing.[21]

This explains why the curses outlined in Deuteronomy were not always or automatically found as a result of behaviour which theoretically should have brought them into play. God's mercy has to be seen as a significant factor in the equation. It is true that everyone who breaks the covenant stands under the threat of the curse. Of course they do, because to break the covenant is to be outside the covenant, and to be outside the covenant is what it means to be cursed. To acknowledge the significance of the curse and the effectiveness of the curse, then, is not a simple statement of legalism. Everything hangs on the question of relationship with God as a living reality rather than on what Eichrodt describes as 'the mechanism of a distributive justice, dispensing reward and punishment'.[22] The Deuteronomist has grasped what it means to be in relationship with Yahweh and is trying to present this in contemporary terms. The attention should thus be focused not on the individual elements of the curse narratives, but on the single curse of being out of the sphere of Yahweh, no longer in relationship with him. What we have in the curse narratives of Deuteronomy, including chapters 27 and 28, is a single solemn warning against rejecting, at any level, God's covenantal rule and reign.

It is quite possible, and perhaps indeed likely, that legalism and understanding the curse as retribution may have arisen in Israel's understanding and practice.[23] However, this does not mean that that is what was intended by the Deuteronomist, and it certainly does not seem to be interpreted in that way within Scripture. Deuteronomy 27:26, 'Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by upholding them', can legitimately be seen as a summary of the preceding more detailed curse statements, thus according with the view taken here that the overall picture is of a unified curse and all who break the law and who thus take themselves out of relationship with God face that curse. It is interesting, and probably significant, how little discussion there is of the concept of cursing outside of these stylised treaty chapters.[24] Westermann points out the difference here between blessing and cursing:

> Quite early blessing was brought into a relationship with the activity of Yahweh . . . but curse was never placed in such direct relationship to Yahweh's work. The Old Testament speaks frequently and in varied contexts of Yahweh's activity in bestowing blessing, but nowhere does it speak of the curse of Yahweh or of

Yahweh's putting a curse on someone or something. Instead of speaking of Yahweh's curse, the Old Testament tells of his judgment and punishment. That is to say in Israel, the curse was never theologized in the way blessing was.[25]

V. OTHER OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES

Although many of the curses outlined in Deuteronomy are identical with prophetic judgments, these judgments are never presented by the prophets as simply the inevitable fulfilments of previously issued curses. In fact, they never refer to the curses as curses at all. Rather, the judgments are the interpretation by the prophets of what it will mean for the people of their time if they depart from the path that God has set before them. Thus, the Deuteronomist uses curse narratives and the prophets use judgment oracles to make the same point. Deserting the covenant through breaking its requirements means moving out of relationship with God, and that spells disaster. In both instances there is an element of conditionality in that God can, because of his great mercy, choose to lessen or delay the impact of curse or judgment. But there is also, in both instances, a sense of inevitability. The material evidences of judgment or cursing may or may not be present, but in the last resort one cannot be out of relationship with God and receive the blessing of being in relationship with God. In the prophetic material, as in Deuteronomy, the key issue is not the threat of the curses as such, but the danger of being cut off from the promise.

There are a number of Old Testament references which could make it sound as if curses were understood in the Mesopotamian way as an autonomous power coming automatically into play once a certain set of words or circumstances set it into motion: Isaiah 24:6, 'They have transgressed laws, violated the statutes, broken the everlasting covenant. Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt'. Zechariah 5:3, describing the flying scroll containing curses; or the ordeal for the adulterous wife in Numbers 5:11–31. But although there are in the Old Testament 'reminiscences of its magical past',[26] whether or not a curse takes effect depends entirely on the authority of God. Van der Toorn points out that in Numbers 5 'an originally magical procedure has been turned into a religious practice. The bitter elixir is no longer auto-efficacious, since the very wording of the curse introduces the Lord as its executor'.[27]

In other cases where sin leads to disease and death—Nabal for example, or Ahaziah, or David and Bathsheba's first baby—it is presented as being sent from God rather than as the automatic result of a curse. The Balaam-Balak story also shows that God is in control. The focus in the story is Balaam's obedience to God. We are not told whether if Balaam had, in fact, disobeyed God and uttered a curse

against Israel then God's blessing would have been over-ridden, but the strong implication is that this is not so.[28] Similarly, when action was taken against children who cursed their parents, or citizens who cursed kings or leaders, the action was taken because of the dishonour involved rather than because of any particular fear of the effects of the curse (Exod. 21:17; 22:28; 2 Sam. 16:9; 1 Kings 2:8; 21:10; Eccles. 10:20). David, too, responds fairly phlegmatically to being cursed by Shimei. In effect saying: 'If he has tapped into God's intention and I am being punished—fine. If not, it won't make any difference and indeed God may overrule his cursing and do me good' (cf. 2 Sam. 16:5–14).

Curses in the sense of saying bad things against someone, and curses in the sense of praying that God will do bad things to someone, are therefore known and even common in the Old Testament. But, like any other prayer, how God answers will always be his prerogative. It is hard to find any evidence at all, and certainly there is nothing conclusive, to indicate that any of the Old Testament writers believed in the concept of a curse which had automatic effect and took away God's right to show mercy if that is what he desired to do. This is true whether the curse is seen as embedded in the covenant or pronounced on one individual by another. It used to be argued by some that the curse type statements recorded in the imprecatory Psalms were thought of as a kind of spell which worked automatically and provided a cultic means to overcome any curses set up by the enemy.[29] But this view is not really tenable. As Carney puts it:

> The Israelites . . . believed that God's intervention was necessary and more often than a directly cursing word we find prayers for God to punish the enemy by means of *his* operative word . . . . In view of this, Anderson questions whether these formulae should be called curses at all. The belief in the ancient world was that curses had a power of their own and this eliminated the necessity of prayer. A curse is aimed *directly* and doesn't 'go through' God. It is a word of power released without resource to God.[30]

Even in the fiercest denunciations of the Psalmist the picture presented does not accord with that position.

Although he bases his arguments on the texts in Deuteronomy, one could argue that Prince's position on curses reflects that of Ancient Mesopotamia, rather than the Old Testament. He does of course fully acknowledge God's power, but in practice this does not seem to make any difference to the way that curses are understood. It is outside the scope of this discussion to deal with questions of the occult or the power of evil spirits to influence the lives of individuals. Suffice it to say here that it is difficult to find anything in the Old Testament that could support the teaching that curses with automatic effects could be placed upon individuals by evil spirits.

But what of the New Covenant? Jeremiah tells us that the law—and presumably in the light of Micah 6:8 and indeed the whole of prophetic reflection on the subject, this refers more to a just and righteous lifestyle than to a legal code—will be built-in to his new people by God. The keeping of the law, that is, living a holy lifestyle, remains an essential part of relationship with God, but because it is built-in, the question of the curse does not arise in the same way. If the guarantee of, and the enabling for that relationship comes from God, then the individual failing to keep the covenant and missing out on the blessing is no longer an issue. Certainly there is, in the passages which could be seen as referring to the New Covenant, no reference to the curse idea at all.

VI. THE NEW TESTAMENT POSITION

I want to argue that this Old Testament perspective which sees the curse as neither a philosophical abstraction nor a mechanistic absolute, but in relational terms, is also reflected in the New Testament.

There is in the New Testament as in the Old an awareness of the popular use of 'curse' simply to mean saying nasty things about or to someone. For example, Luke 6:28, 'Bless those who curse you', and 1 Corinthians 4:12, 'When we are cursed we bless', appear to be talking in those terms even if the larger concept lies behind them. There is no indication whatsoever that either Paul or Jesus understood such curses as having effects which needed to be dealt with by some kind of ritual, nor that they felt that the response of blessing was the way in which otherwise unavoidable effects could be revoked. Rather, the point is that for the Christian bad attitudes should be faced by good ones. But these references are rather different from those which speak of the curse of the law, or appear to view certain people as being in a cursed state.

The best known references to curses in the New Testament are in Galatians, but we will begin with 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 5:5 Paul does not use words for cursing but appears to be using a curse when he tells them to 'hand this man over to Satan'. In 1 Timothy 1:20, the same thought occurs when he says of Hymanaeus and Alexander, 'I have handed them over to Satan'. This appears to refer to some kind of expulsion from the Christian community. The motivation is clearly positive, and Gordon Fee, amongst others, argues that the 'flesh' to be destroyed is 'what was "carnal" in him', although neither the method of destruction nor its therapeutic effects are clear. Fee states: 'The actual separation from the fellowship of the people of God . . . who are living out the life of the future while they await the consummation, would in itself lead to his putting aside his sins so that he might once more join the community.'[31] But it could be that Paul is acknowledging that anyone who has behaved in the way that this man has cannot be assumed to be in relationship with God, and is encouraging the

Corinthians to recognise this fact. They must make it clear publicly that this man is not a member of the community of those who do belong to God, that indeed he remains under the curse. By doing this they give him a chance to join them in reality. Pretending for the sake of tolerance or supposed kindness that blessing exists where it does not is going to help neither the person nor the community.

A similar thought arises in 1 Corinthians 11:27–29 where those who eat the bread or drink the cup 'in an unworthy manner' are spoken of in curse type language as 'eating and drinking judgment against them-selves'. If these people are, as seems likely, those who have not appropriated the efficacy of the body and blood of Christ and are not therefore in relationship with God, then they are under the curse, they stand under judgment. Taking part in this sacrament will bring them no benefit at all. Paul is not, as it were, putting them under a different or a new or a specific curse for wickedly taking communion when they should not do so. Rather, he is acknowledging a state that already exists and insisting that there is no mechanistic magic involved in the service that will take them out of their state of being under judgment.

The same principle of the recognition that what counts is being in relationship with God, and that those who are not are cursed, is seen in 1 Corinthians 16:22, 'Let anyone be cursed who has no love for the Lord'. As Fee puts it, 'failure to obey him is lack of love for him; to reject him in this way is to place oneself under the *anathema*'.[32] One who does not love Christ is by definition not part of the community of believers. The form of words here may indicate that Paul is not simply stating that fact, but calling on the Corinthians to recognise those who are under the curse and not to pretend that they are part of the community.

Galatians 1:8 can also be interpreted in this way. If anyone 'should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed'. Preaching a different gospel is clear evidence of being outside of Christ and therefore being under the curse. Galatians as a whole makes it clear that the only way one can come from curse into blessing is through faith in Christ Jesus.

In Galatians 3:10–13 Paul refers to both Deuteronomy 27:26 and 21:22–23. He takes it for granted that the whole of the curse narratives of Deuteronomy can be summed up in the words of 27:26, and that there is indeed a single, unified curse which makes it impossible for the cursed person to inherit the blessing of Abraham. Whether he is simply stating that breaking the law takes people out of the sphere of the covenant and therefore places them under the curse, or whether he is stating that relying on the law—even if it were possible to obey every part of it completely—is the major problem, has been a matter for extensive debate, but is not really relevant in the context of our discussion.[33] In either case their behaviour or attitude removes them

from the sphere of the blessing and the promise, and leaves them under the curse.

Christ redeems us from that curse and enables Jew and Gentile alike to come into relationship with God and thus receive the blessing. As Caneday puts it: 'In its OT covenant context, Deuteronomy 21:22–23 prepares for and anticipates Christ's curse bearing upon the cross. The corpse of the covenant-breaker is hung "upon the tree" as a gruesome sign that he is an object of curse.'[34] Lindars also argues for that interpretation of Deuteronomy 21:22–23: 'The man is not accursed because he has been hung but hung because he is already accursed on account of his crime.'[35] Caneday again: 'Paul argues that Christ hung "upon the tree" in Israel's place, bearing the curse of the violated covenant and turning away God's wrath from his people by redeeming them out from under the law's curse. This redemption of believing Jews . . . is epochal in character, for Christ replaces the law for Jews and in so doing extends to Gentiles the blessing promised to Abraham.'[36]

VII. CONCLUSION

So we see that other than the non-technical usage where the term 'curse' is applied to bad language, virtually all the curse references refer to the state of being out of fellowship or relationship with God. In the Old Testament this means being out of the covenant, and in the New Testament out of the kingdom.[37] So the 'goats' in Matthew 25:41 are told, 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire'. Any interpretation of the biblical curse references that fails to take into account this *relational* context does not do justice to the way that Scripture itself understands and uses the covenantal curse passages. Nor does it recognise the strength of the idea that it is *relationship with God* that is the key to life and not the power of any impersonal forces.

Given this relational perspective, the concept of blessing rather than cursing one's enemies is seen in rather a different light. There should be a strong desire that they, whoever they are, should come into a relationship with God, in which context whatever problems one might wish to be dealt with could be resolved. Paul's longing for the salvation of the Jews in Romans 9:3 is such that he would be willing himself to become accursed if only by doing so it would be possible to bring them into the blessing—specifically described as community with Christ. Westermann, in discussing the incorporation of the work of Christ into the Old Testament concept of blessing says:

> Through God's work in Christ death is no longer a limit to God's bestowal of blessing. As a consequence, cursing of others is abolished as a limit to and a necessary supplement to the bestowal of blessing by believers. In this way, cursing in every form, even a spiritualized form, is eliminated from Christian worship. Where

such cursing still occurred in worship in the history of the church, it was based on a failure to recognize the transformation that took place when blessing became united to the work of Christ.[38]

One can perhaps add to that by saying that it can never be right for a Christian to wish that any other human being remain out of relationship with God, the 'go to Hell' which is what is symbolically implied in any curse.

So in biblical terms, although bad things can and do happen for all kinds of reasons to those who belong to the kingdom, a Christian, by definition, cannot be understood to be under the curse. Similarly, a Christian cannot legitimately curse another human being. It may be right and even necessary at times to 'hand people over to Satan' in the sense of making it clear that they, by their behaviour and attitudes, are asserting that they are in fact not part of God's people. But the motivation for this can only be that they too may be blessed and eventually hear the words of the king to those at his right hand: 'Come you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world' (Matt. 25:34).[39]

Endnotes

1 D. Prince, *Blessing or Curse: You Can Choose!* (Milton Keynes: Word Publishing, 1990). The same basic position is taken by Timothy Pain, *Blessing and Cursing* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1987), but this is written in a much more sensitive and tentative way.

2 Cf. Prince, *Blessing or Curse*, 28.

3 Prince, *Blessing or Curse*, 112. His italics.

4 Prince, *Blessing or Curse*, 113–14.

5 Prince, *Blessing or Curse*, 38.

6 Prince, *Blessing or Curse*, 40–52.

7 A.C. Thiselton, 'The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings', *JTS* 25 (1974), 283–99.

8 Thiselton, 'The Supposed Power of Words', 293.

9 Thiselton, 'The Supposed Power of Words', 294.

10 Prince, *Blessing or Curse*, 53.

11 L. Beckwith, *The Hills is Lonely* (London: Century, 1959), 130.

12 Cf. Prince, *Blessing or Curse*, 99–101.

13 Prince, *Blessing or Curse*, 23.

14 In, e.g. D.J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), 10–34, 85.

15 K. van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia: A Comparative Study*, Studia Semitica Neerlandica 22 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1985); J.G. Gager (ed.), *Curse Tablets and Binding Spells from the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

16 Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 53.

17 Cited in W. Beyerlin (ed.), *Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1978), 131.

18 J.J. Finkelstein, 'The Ox That Gored', *TAPS* 71/2 (1981), quoted in Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 5.

19 Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 12.

20 J.B. Pritchard, (ed.) *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955).

21 To reject God after having been in relationship with him is worse than never to have accepted him in the first place. The covenant curses are also making this point. However, in terms of consequences there is very little difference—there are not different degrees of being 'outside of Yahweh'.

22 W. Eichrodt, 'Covenant and Law', *Interpretation* 20 (1966), 315.

23 Cf. Eichrodt, 'Covenant and Law', 319.

24 Leviticus 26 is an example of a chapter which contains very similar material to Deuteronomy 27 but does not use the language of blessing and cursing.

25 C. Westermann, *Blessing: In the Bible and the Life of the Church*, trans. K. Crim (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 23–24.

26 Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 55.

27 Van der Toorn, *Sin and Sanction*, 54.

28 Cf. G.W. Coats, 'The Way of Obedience', *Semeia* 24 (1982), 53–79.

29 H. Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmists* (London: SCM, 1963), 30–32.

30 S. Carney, ' "God Damn God": A Reflection on Expressing Anger in Prayer', *BThB* 13, 4 (1983), 117; cf. B.W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for us Today* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 65–93, S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), Vol. I, 202–203.

31 G.D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 212–13.

32 Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 838.

33 F.F. Bruce, 'The Curse of the Law', in M.D. Hooker and S.G. Wilson (eds.), *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C.K. Barrett* (London: SPCK, 1982) and *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982); D.P. Fuller, 'Paul and "the Works of the Law" ', *WTJ* 38 (1975), 28–42; H.D. Betz *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letters to the Churches in Galatia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979). The views of these writers and also those of Noth, Schlier and others are well summarized in T.R. Schreiner, 'Is Perfect Obedience to the Law Possible?' *JETS* 27 (1984), 151–60.

34 A. Caneday, ' "Redeemed from the Curse of the Law": The Use of Deut 21:22–23 in Gal 3:13', *TrinJ* 10 (1989), 208.

35 B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic: The Doctrinal Significance of the Old Testament Quotations* (London: SCM, 1961), 233.

36 Caneday, ' "Redeemed from the Curse of the Law" ', 208–209.

37 The cursing of the fig-tree by Jesus (Mark 11 and Matthew 21) is in rather a different category. M.D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St Mark* (London: A&C Black, 1991) argues persuasively that 'whatever its origins . . . the story is certainly used symbolically by Mark and probably had this symbolic significance from the beginning. The fig-tree represents Israel' (261). She notes the link with verses such as Jeremiah 8:13, and concludes that Jesus cursed the tree 'not out of pique, but because it represents Israel, and Israel has fallen under the judgement of God' (262). Possibly even the mention of it not being the season for figs could be a deliberate way of ensuring we realise that this was a symbolic action. As such it could be seen as confirming the picture of Israel as under the curse, i.e., out of relationship with God, thus as not bearing fruit and eventually withering.

38 Westermann, *Blessing: In the Bible and the Life of the Church*, 104–105.

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