

THE BASIS OF COVENANT RENEWAL
Teaching-Learning Resources
BAPTIST LEADER

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Background Scripture: Deuteronomy 29:1–15

Key Passage: Deuteronomy 29:2–15

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The Biblical Background

This is the first lesson of Unit III, entitled “Covenant Renewal,” and the tenth lesson in this thirteen-lesson series on Deuteronomy. This unit focuses on Moses’ third discourse in Deuteronomy 27:1–30:20, with some attention given to the editorial additions in 31:1–34:12. Commentators are not in full agreement as to where the third discourse actually begins. It is possible that it begins where the wording corresponds closely to the introductory statement in Moses’ second discourse (see 5:1). Because there is no direct correspondence between the fifty “legislative units” in the second discourse (12:1–26:9) and the curses stipulated in 27:15–26, it seems better to this writer to treat 27:1–28:68 in the context of the third discourse. The outline given in the “Teaching-Learning Resources” for June 7 can be consulted as a reference for putting the elements of the third speech in their proper context.

In Deuteronomy 11:26–30, mention was first made of a required ceremony to be conducted on the two mountains adjacent to Shechem, where Jacob had erected the altar El-Elohe-Israel (see Genesis 33:18–20). On Mount Gerizim the tribes were to “set the blessing” and on Mount Ebal they were to “set the curse.” The details of the service were not spelled out in Moses’ second speech, but they are given in an introductory discourse attached to the third speech. Six tribes were

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to stand on Mount Gerizim and pronounce, “Amen!” to blessings that would be operative in the covenant community in the Promised Land; and six tribes would stand on Mount Ebal and say, “Amen!” to the curses that would be operative. The curses and blessings were to be pronounced by the Levites.

It remains a surprise and a puzzle that the list of blessings that were pronounced has not survived in the biblical record; only the curses survive in Deuteronomy 27:15–26. One can conjecture that the blessings were identical with the curses except for changing a positive statement into a negative statement and vice versa. For example, “Cursed be the man who makes a graven or molten image” (27:15) could have been rendered, “Blessed is the man who does not make a graven or molten image.” This is only one of several possible reconstructions.

The closest statement of blessings that would be appropriate in such a ceremony on Mount Gerizim appears in the biblical texts only in the Beatitudes of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:3–11). In the Zadokite Document,¹ which is closely related to the Dead Sea Scrolls, there is a list of laws that provides a blessing to all those who perform them, although the word “blessing” was not used. This text used instead the phrase “for them will God’s covenant be made good, and they shall be preserved for a thousand generations,” citing Deuteronomy 7:9. Were one to combine the style of the Beatitudes and the content of the Zadokite Document, one could produce a blessing pronouncement. It would

1. ‘See Theodor H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures in English Translation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), pp. 68–69.

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read something like this:

Blessed are those who do not rob the poor of God's people. And all the people shall say, 'Amen!' Blessed are those who love their neighbor as themselves. And all the people shall say, 'Amen!' Blessed are those who grasp the hand of the poor, the needy, and the stranger, to seek each one the welfare of others. And all the people shall say, 'Amen!'

A liturgy like this must have been used, but it has not survived.

To study Deuteronomy without paying careful attention to the curses sanctioned by Israel would be to repeat the error of the Israelites, who ignored the curses, once they were sanctioned, until it was too late. The covenants of Yahweh with Abraham and Moses were conditional. There was an "if" attached to every clause, either explicitly or implicitly. Blessings would come only if the Israelites were obedient; otherwise the curses would come upon the disobedient. Default in fulfilling the obligations of the covenant forfeited all rights and all claims for blessing. That was—and remains—the nature of covenant and contractual relationships. (In our time "penalties" have replaced "curses" in our treaty and contractual relationships.)

Moses stated in very clear terms that Israel's eternal security in the Promised Land was not an absolute in or of itself. It was a security that had to be put in the context of covenant fidelity. He reminded them that Yahweh had indeed promised the people redeemed from Egyptian bondage that they would never make the trip (to Egypt) again (see Deuteronomy 28: 68*a*). But in the same breath Moses added these words that would become the ultimate curse for Israel if the covenant were disobeyed: "And Yahweh will bring you back in ships

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to Egypt, a journey which I promised that you should never make again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you” (28:68). This was a harsh declaration. Yahweh’s chosen [page 42] people could again be returned to Egypt as slaves, even though Yahweh had promised otherwise. It was up to them!

The implications of this passage are apparent for Christians who assume the obligations of the new covenant but never fulfill them. God is as good as God’s word—all of it! Covenant promises cannot be violated by God, but they can be invalidated by the disobedient and unfaithful Israelite or Christian covenantee.

The curses listed in 27:15–26 parallel at points the Decalogue and the stipulations in the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17:1–26:46) and the book of the covenant (Exodus 20:22–23:33). To facilitate a comparison of the curses with the laws, they are listed here with cross references.

1. *Curse against the worshiper of an image:*
27:15 (cf. 4:16, 23, 25); Exodus 20:4; 34:17;
Leviticus 19:4; 26:1.
2. *Curse on those who dishonor parents:*
27:16 (cf. 5:16; 21:18–21); Exodus 20:12; 21:17;
Leviticus 20:9.
3. *Curse for the removal of a boundary marker:*
27:17 (cf. 19:14); no other parallels.
4. *Curse for misleading the blind:*
27:18; Leviticus 19:14.
5. *Curse for injustice to the orphan, widow, and alien:*

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27:19 (cf. 24:17); Exodus 22:21–24; Leviticus 19:33–34.

6. *Curse for incest with stepmother:*

27:20 (cf. 5:18; 22:30); Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 18:8; 20:11.

7. *Curse against bestiality:*

27:21; Exodus 22:19; Leviticus 18:23; 20:15.

8. *Curse against incest with half-sister:*

27:22 (5:18); Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 18:9; 20:17.

9. *Curse against incest with mother-in-law:*

27:23 (5:18); Exodus 20:14; Leviticus 18:17; 20:14.

10. *Curse upon a murderer:*

20:24 (cf. 5:17); Exodus 20:13; Leviticus 24:17.

11. *Curse against bribery:*

27:25 (cf. 16:19); Exodus 23:8.

12. *Curse for disregard of the Law:*

27:26; no other exact parallels.

According to Exodus 24:4–7, Moses constructed an altar at the base of Mount Sinai and erected next to it twelve stone pillars, one for each tribe. At Mount Ebal another altar was constructed, and similar stone pillars were erected and plastered so they could be used for writing. The statement of only twelve curses was probably due to the number of the twelve tribes. These curses could have been written on the plastered pillars.

The curses called for horrendous things to happen to the individual and / or nation. These things are given in great detail in Deuteronomy 28:15–68. We tend to skip over this material because it makes such unpleasant reading. Some of the curses

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deal with sickness, including pestilence, consumption, fever, inflammation, boils, ulcers, scurvy, itch, and blindness. Others deal with the sickness of the land, namely, drought, fiery heat, blasting, mildew, dust for rain, a sky of brass, iron for soil, a locust plague, and diseased trees. Most alarming are the curses that affect the family, such as children being taken into captivity as parents look on powerlessly, or how insanity from hunger will end in cannibalism, with family members fighting over the afterbirth. This is not devotional reading; but it is religious instruction rooted in the principle that as you sow, you reap.

Yahweh's desire for Israel was not for the agony of the curses but for the joy of the blessings. The blessings that come from fulfilling the covenant stipulations are listed in Deuteronomy 28:1–15. Typical of the blessings are those stated in verses 3–5: “Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the fields. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your beasts. . . . Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading-trough.” Israel was chosen for the purpose of blessing. Yahweh would bless Israel, and through Israel all the families on earth would be blessed. Because more verses are given in this discourse to listing the curses than are given to reciting the blessings, the conclusion should not be drawn that the blessings are less important. To the contrary, the covenant itself was designed for blessing.

It is now widely recognized that the covenant between Yahweh and Israel was expressed in the style and language of ancient Near Eastern treaties. In such treaties a list of blessings for the faithful and curses upon the disloyal was a characteristic feature. Most of the curses found in the Mosaic

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tradition have been attested in extrabiblical sources. In the area of international politics the curses functioned as a scare tactic to keep the king's vassals obedient out of fear, if not out of love and loyalty. Since the king could not station troops everywhere, he relied upon this literary weapon to keep his subjects docile. When rebellions occurred or taxes went unpaid, the king carried out the violence threatened in the curses. This demonstrated that the curses were not empty threats. But, generally, just the threat of violence worked sufficiently.

In Israel the curses in the covenant also functioned as a scare tactic. This was never intended to be the basic relationship between God and God's chosen people. They were to "fear" Yahweh, but as discussed in the first "Teaching-Learning Resources" of this series, the "fear of Yahweh" was a sense of awesome wonder at just how terrific, not how terrifying, was the God of Israel. The requirement of the law "to fear Yahweh" was complemented by the command to love Yahweh. This was not a command to love the one who scares you to death.

But the covenant of Yahweh covered all eventualities. It was recognized that love and loyalty would not always blossom in Israel. [page 43] Consequently, there was a backup system. When love was lost, the backup system would shock sense into the disobedient heart. Fear could lead to repentance and covenant renewal. Then love would again preempt fear. The curses incorporated in the covenant functioned much like the oracles of doom in the prophetic literature. They were designed to evoke a desire for repentance more than to be fulfilled simply because they had been uttered.

Interpreting the Biblical Lesson

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Deuteronomy 29:1—“These are the words of the covenant . . . besides the covenant which he had made . . . at Horeb”

In the Hebrew Bible this verse is cited as 28:69 and is read as the concluding statement of the discourse that began at 27:15. If this is correct, it would indicate that an early editor recognized that the curses and blessings in 27:15–28:68 were not revealed at Sinai/Horeb, but only at the time of the covenant renewal in Moab.

Deuteronomy 29:2—“You have seen all that Yahweh did before your eyes in the land of Egypt . . .”

The same expression occurs in 4:9; 7:19; and 10:21. There were enough of the old timers still surviving that an appeal could be made to their firsthand experiences as witnesses of God’s mighty acts. Missing from this recital of Yahweh’s acts is any reference to the way Yahweh led the Israelites through Moab, as recorded in the Book of the Wars of Yahweh (see Numbers 21:14–15) and alluded to in the Song of Deborah in Judges 5:4–5. (See the “Teaching-Learning Resources” for June 21 for full discussion.)

Until the Israelites stood on the banks of the Jordan, they could not really understand the significance of what they had seen in Egypt and Sinai. Hindsight provided them with insight that had been impossible with only foresight or experience. Forty years after the events, the pieces of the puzzle all fell together. It was recent history but history nonetheless; and the lessons from history became for Israel another source of revelation.

Deuteronomy 29:9—“Therefore be careful to do the

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words of this covenant, that you may prosper . . .”

The contingency of the covenant is asserted here not by an “if” clause but by the admonition to obey the covenant laws in order that the prosperity promised in the covenant may become a reality. Logic carried this correlation between prosperity and obedience to an erroneous conclusion. Prosperity was viewed as proof of God’s good pleasure. In the land flowing with milk and honey, the rich got richer, and they used their wealth to legitimate their immoral and unethical practices. Poverty was assumed to be evidence that the poor were just not living according to the covenant. Were they obedient like the rich, God would bless them also with prosperity. This type of logic proved to be fatal.

Deuteronomy 29:12–13—“that you may enter into the sworn covenant of Yahweh your God . . . as he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob”

According to Genesis 4:26, the name of Yahweh was known and worshiped from the prehistoric days of Enosh. However, Exodus 6:2, as traditionally translated, states that the name “Yahweh” was revealed only at the time of Moses. Personal names from the recently discovered Ebla tablets, dating at least one thousand years before Moses, contain an abbreviated form of the divine name, such as the name Micaiah (meaning, “who is like Yahweh”). Such evidence supports the tradition of Genesis 4:26, that the name “Yahweh” was known long before the time of Moses. The two biblical texts would be in agreement if the Hebrew negative particle *lo’* were read in Exodus 6:2 as the emphatic particle *lu’*.² This

2. See the “Teaching-Learning Resources” for July 26, 1981.

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verse could then be translated, “And God said to Moses, ‘I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty; and by my name Yahweh I did *indeed* make myself known to them.’” The name “Yahweh” was used in Genesis 12 when the covenant was established with Abraham.

Applying the Lesson to Life

Christians stand far removed from the plains of Moab and the banks of the Jordan. Our interest is not in the real estate once inhabited by the Canaanites. We are no longer impressed by the Israelite defeat of two petty kings, although we stand in awe of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, executed without a single Israelite bearing arms. Our recital of God’s mighty acts includes far more than Moses could have possibly anticipated. Without disparaging the revelation to Abraham at Haran or the covenant made with Moses and Israel at Sinai / Horeb and renewed in Moab, we stand more in awe of the revelation that began in Bethlehem and continued to Calvary. We know so much more than Moses of what God wanted for Israel and all the families on the face of the earth. Our greater knowledge carries with it greater responsibility, and the consequences are far greater for us. Israel’s history teaches us the simple lesson that the covenants in the Old Testament carry conditions. The blessings could blossom into reality only in the soil of obedience. The new covenant in Christ is really no different. God is faithful and just, and the laws of creation are dependable. Christians, like the ancient Israelites, will reap what they sow. The choice is ours for curse or blessing.