

NPC Adult Education Deuteronomy 27 to 30: Curses and Blessings

This section of Deuteronomy is Moses third set of exhortations to the people, with specific instructions for affirmation of the covenant once they set foot in the land. The curses and the blessings found here are not threats to bring vengeance upon the people for criminal acts, but as affirmations of the covenant relationship with God. Deuteronomy is as much a book with a “motif of gratitude” (Thompson, 288) towards Yahweh as it is about the Israelites completing their journey to the Promised Land.

These four chapters alternate with themes of blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience. We must remember that God wanted them to remember Him as the author of their salvation; to forget that was to forget that “the Lord is your life” (30:20). This section is also in keeping with the format of a Middle Eastern sovereign-vassal treaty that we discussed many weeks back.

1) Consequences of Obedience and Disobedience (Chapters 27, 28): this first section uses a motif of mirror images to describe the consequences of accepting or rejecting God.

a) Setting up the Altar on Mount Ebal (27:1-8):

- Why the altar of “uncut” stones?

⇒ Use of tools on the stones would defile God (see Ex 20:24-26)

⇒ This was the method for building altars as prescribed by God

- Mount Ebal is in the area of Shechem; site of Abraham’s altar (Gen 12:6-7) and Jacob’s well (Gen 33:19)
- Parallel to covenant ceremony and altar on Mount Sinai (Ex 24:4, 7-8); reaffirmation

b) Gathering of the Tribes at Shechem (27:9-14):

- Six tribes on Mount Gerizim to pronounce blessings (v. 12)
- Six tribes on Mount Ebal to pronounce the curses (v. 13)
 - ⇒ The Levites (v. 14) were the priests who recited the curses, while the tribes said “amen”
 - ⇒ No real rhyme or reason to the order or placement of the tribes of which we know
- The tribes were probably to stay on their respective mountainsides while all of the blessings and curses in the remainder of 27 and 28 were pronounced.
- Moses is reminding the tribes of God’s choice of Israel and His covenant with them (v. 9-10)
 - ⇒ “Affirmation of that special relationship must be made over and over again, particularly at strategic moments like covenant renewal” (Merrill (344))
 - ⇒ How many times must we remember that we are God’s chosen people, the heirs of Abraham? “Awareness of election and redemption must periodically be invoked so as to make it...personal and ongoing” (Merrill (344))
- This reaffirmation was fulfilled by Joshua and the Israelites (see Josh 8:30-35)

c) Curses from Mount Ebal (27:15-26)

- The Levites in the valley, with the Ark of the Covenant, might have pronounced the curses; however, it is clear that the tribes would respond, as they did in Ex 24:4, 7-8

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- ⇒ Each curse is accompanied by an “Amen”, in effect a declaration that the Israelites declare their understanding and acceptance of the consequences for these violations of God’s laws
- What do these curses remind you of? Emphasis on sexual relations, property and mistreatment of poor and needy people
 - The curses are each specific to one or more of God’s commandments
- ⇒ Each curse is a specific response by God to a specific action by a man or woman; the later curses (and blessings) are collective to the nation.
- ⇒ This is a way of reinforcing the nature of God’s commandments as applying to each and every individual
- d) Blessings for Obedience (28:1-14)
- What are these blessings (vv. 3-6) oriented towards? What is the focus?
 - ⇒ What they have and do; safety, security, fertility
 - ⇒ Fleeing in seven directions: a total rout; no regrouping
 - What are the Israelites commanded to do?
 - ⇒ Follow the Lord God, obey His commands, do not turn aside to follow other Gods
 - These are NOT “rewards” for being good; instead, these blessings flow from “full obedience” to God and generally following his commandments (vv. 1, 2)
 - The blessings listed here are not specific responses by God to specific acts, as the curses were in Chapter 27.
- e) Curses for Disobedience (28:15-68)
- Why do you believe God spent more time admonishing the Israelites concerning the impact of disobedience?
 - Structure, while longer, seems to follow blessings structure:
 - ⇒ Verses 15 through 19 closely parallel verses 2 through 6 in content
 - ⇒ Disease and drought (vv. 20-24) reveal the death and destruction resulting from a “sickness of both people and land” (Merrill, 359) and mirror vv. 11-12
 - ⇒ Deprivation and deportation (vv. 25-37) as well as captivity and exile await disobedience; there will be defeat (v. 25) instead of victory (v. 7)
 - The military siege discussed in vv. 47-57 means a renewal of cruel bondage; scholars generally believe the passage refers to Assyria; Isaiah uses similar language (far off nation, unknown language, fierce-looking people; see Is 33:1 for an example)
 - ⇒ The consequences here are unspeakable – cannibalism so bad mothers eat babies
 - The physical ailments in vv. 58-68 reflect a spiritual sickness (vv. 64-67); there is no rest without God – wandering (vv. 64-65), worrying (vv. 66-67)
 - ⇒ Returning “in ships to Egypt” refers to slavery at the hands of men

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2) Moses' 3rd Address to the Israelites – A Call to Commitment to God (Chapters 29, 30):

This section provides a “summation of God’s past dealings with Israel, [it] restates the present occasion of covenant offer and acceptance, and addresses the options of covenant disobedience and obedience respectively” (Merrill, 375).

- a) Moses summons the tribes to be reminded of what God has done for them; history is presented in 29:1-8
 - God reminds them of their past bondage and salvation; he has provided for them (v. 5), given them victory (vv. 7-8), despite their refusal to have faith (v. 4) and His sign posts (v. 6)
- b) They have present obligations (vv. 9-15); *therefore*, “carefully follow...”
 - The purpose of this ceremony is affirmation (vv. 12-13)
 - And they have a future commitment (v. 15); the benefits extend well beyond the present generation
 - Vv. 19-21 show that there are consequences for individual disobedience, similar to what we saw in the curses in Chapter 27.
 - Disobedience from following other gods results in a **bitter, poisonous root** (v. 18), but even disobedience reveals God’s true nature to other nations (vv. 24-28)
 - ⇒ Note the impact of this particular individual disobedience – it becomes group
- c) In verse 29, Merrill believes that the “secret things” refer to the fact other nations would question why God had done this to His chosen people, but that the Israelites were now fully aware of the consequences of their choices, and the choice was theirs to make
 - Ezek 37:1-28; even dry bones can be infused with life by God to serve a role as the witnesses of the Lord’s power to heal and save
- d) Finally, in Chapter 30 we see the love displayed by God for His people in restoring them after they have chosen disobedience
 - The first part, through v. 10, show through the covenant reaffirmation that **repentance brings restoration**; the Lord would do this (v. 6)
 - Romans 4:1-12 refers to Abraham’s circumcision of the heart; however, the passage here is probably referring to a future time when the Lord will heal Israelite hearts and bring the nation into full relationship with him
 - Romans 10:6-8 closely follows vv. 11-14 here; God’s will and purpose for us are clear
 - ⇒ There is no need for us to search for truth; we do not need to go and find the meaning, nor do can we be confused about it
 - ⇒ Finally, vv. 19-20 represent a legal witnessing process

This is God’s word of life and death for the Israelites and for us. While our faith is as small as or smaller than mustard seed, our faith is our basis for our demonstration of obedience to His word. One repeated theme here is turning to other gods. We need to remember daily that the Word is here and near us, and not lose sight of God’s grace and mercy towards us.