CHAPTER 3
THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF THE CURSE

The use of “the curse” in the Psalms, as elsewhere in Scripture, though shocking to our modern Western sensibilities, arises out of a cultural milieu in which cursing was an integral part of life—both domestic and international, personal and covenantal. This is evidenced by the numerous extant examples of treaty curses, inscriptional curses, and incantations to undo curses, among others. Indeed, it is proper to speak of a common ancient Near Eastern curse tradition, from which also the psalmists of Israel drew.

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1 Gevirtz well defines that, by the term “curse” in this context, we are to understand not the profane oath or interjectory exclamation, “but rather the deliberate, considered expression of a wish that evil befall another.” Stanley Gevirtz, “West-Semitic Curses and the Problem of the Origins of Hebrew Law,” VT 11 (1961): 140.

2 The curse even figured prominently in one of the most popular compositions in the Old Babylonian scribal curriculum, which chronicled the rise and fall of the first great Mesopotamian empire: the Curse of Agade. Jerrold S. Cooper, The Curse of Agade (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 5. This composition concludes with a horrific litany of curses on the city by the gods, which includes:

Enlil, may the city that destroyed your city, be done to as your city.

... ........................................
May the cattle slaughterer slaughter his wife,
May your sheep butcher butcher his child,
May your pauper drown the child who seeks money for him!
May your prostitute hang herself at the entrance to her brothel,
May your cult prostitutes and hierodules, who are mothers, kill their children! Ibid., 61.
The curse played a significant role in the daily life of the ancient Middle East. In all areas of private as well as communal life (social-economic, juridical, cultic, political) the practice of cursing was applied. The curse was to bring the truth to light (in juridical procedures, e.g., in the ordeal), force obedience (with treaties and regulations), frighten off thieves, plunderers and vandals (with inscriptions on graves, boundary stones and buildings), guarantee honesty (in economic transactions), etc. The oath, which was uttered under a vast number of circumstances, is a form of self-cursing. The deity could also employ the curse as a preventive measure or in punishment.3

Thus, the mere presence of curses or calls for divine vengeance as are found in the Psalms would not have aroused the moral indignation of the ancient Israelite. They were not in and of themselves shocking or hateful outbursts. Rather, in his world the distinction was made between a “legitimate” and an “illegitimate” curse—the one proper, and the other reprehensible. The illegitimate curse was uttered out of malice against an innocent party for personal gain, or “as a private means of revenge to smite a personal enemy,”4 often in secret and with the aid of magic. The legitimate curse, on the other hand, was uttered fundamentally for egregious infraction of the moral order, and often in a public forum with appeal to deity.5 Notably, it is this latter kind that we find uttered in the Imprecatory Psalms. Moreover, in the Psalms “it is precisely the godless enemy to whom such illegitimate curses are attributed (Ps. 10:7, 59:13, 62:5, 109:17, 28). The psalmist, with his imprecatory prayer, does not commit the same sin as his enemies. His prayer,


5 Examples of the use of such “legitimate curses” from the cultural milieu of the ancient Near East are noted in the material which follows.
including the curse formulations, is fundamentally of another nature and posits justice against injustice, the appeal of God in contrast to the cursing of the godless.\(^6\)

Furthermore, in the community of Israel, as in the broader ancient Near East as well, the legitimate curse was an expression of human powerlessness, utilized when people were unable to adequately help or protect themselves. It was the voice of the oppressed, the victim, and the unjustly accused, among others, directed against powerful or unconvictable offenders.\(^7\) Indeed, it was the ultimate means of ensuring that the will of God, divine judgment, and divine acts of vengeance proclaimed in the judicial system, in ethics, and in religion were executed. When viewed in this light, the so-called Imprecatory Psalms and other imprecatory texts, which seem so vicious and strange to the modern reader, are seen to be expressions of faith in the just rule of Yahweh in situations in which the covenant member or community can see no other source of help or possible means of securing just treatment.\(^8\)

**The Function of Imprecation in the Ancient Near East**

*Treaty curses.* Ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties, as a genre, generally conform to a consistent pattern, the basic elements of which are (1) the preamble, which introduces the setting and the suzerain, extolling him in grandiose terms; (2) the historical

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\(^6\) Peels, *The Vengeance of God*, 238.


prologue, 9 which delineates the past relationship between the two parties;10 (3) the stipulations, which form the core of the covenant, and state the obligations imposed upon, and accepted by, the vassal; (4) a statement concerning the storage and transmission of the treaty document; (5) the list of witnesses, principally divine, who would be invoked to enact due punishment should the covenant be broken;11 and (6) the blessings and curses—blessings for obedience to the covenant and curses for disobedience. The purpose of these promised blessings and curses was to ensure the vassal’s loyalty to the sovereign and to the covenant. Although the suzerain played an active role in bestowing favor and enacting retribution vis-à-vis his vassal, the blessings and curses outlined in this section of the ancient Near Eastern treaty specified not primarily what the suzerain would do “in the event of either faithfulness to or violation of the treaty, but rather, the actions of the gods either for or against the vassal.”12 This lays the groundwork in the mind of the faithful

9 Walton notes that there are two basic elements that distinguish the Hittite treaties of the second millennium B.C. from the Syrian and Assyrian treaties of the first: (1) the Hittite family of treaties is characterized by the use of the historical prologue to an extent not found elsewhere; and (2) the treaties from Syria and Assyria show a much greater emphasis on the curses that are used to enforce the treaty. John H. Walton, Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989), 101. This two-fold observation lends credence to the opinion that the Book of Deuteronomy is a mid-second millennium B.C. covenant document, for it bears a form strikingly similar to that of the early Hittite covenants. This issue is relevant here, for the Imprecatory Psalms, at many significant junctures, hark back to the promised divine vengeance and curses of the Deuteronomic covenant.

10 Emphasis is placed here both on the suzerain’s power and on his kind acts on behalf of the vassal. The vassal, then, is expected both to be grateful in his acceptance of the treaty terms as well as fearful of violating them.

11 The Song of Moses in Deut 32 fits into this “witness” category, for it affirms Yahweh’s ability to enforce the terms of the covenant. Of particular significance are vv. 39-43, in which Yahweh takes an oath to exact vengeance on behalf of his people. Ibid., 104.

12 Ibid.
Israelite that the fulfillment of the curse must be left up to God. It is out of this understanding that the Imprecatory Psalm is uttered.

The covenant curses of the ancient Near East are pronounced upon the totality of the vassal’s life and the lives of his family, as the Hittite treaty between Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru concisely demonstrates: “should Duppi-Tessub not honor these words of the treaty and the oath, may these gods of the oath destroy Duppi-Tessub together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, his house, his land and together with everything that he owns.” These curses, here stated in Hittite brevity, are expanded in exhaustive and often hideous detail in the Assyrian vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon (dated 672 B.C.), parallels of which may be found in Deuteronomy 28. The distilled essence of

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13 Mercer observes that “when a curse was pronounced it often comprised in its malediction the whole activity of a man’s life. His every work and interest were placed under a ban. Not only the man himself but also his seed was doomed to destruction.” Samuel A. B. Mercer, “The Malediction in Cuneiform Inscriptions,” JAOS 34 (1914): 302. For Scriptural example of the curse extended to the next generation, cf. Pss 109:10-15; 137:8-9.

14 ANET, 205.

15 There are several copies of this treaty—the most complete copy of which was made “with a chieftain of the Medes names Ramataia of Urukazaba(r)na. The remaining texts were duplicates except that they named different city-governors, or chieftains, as the other party to the agreement.” D. J. Wiseman, The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon (London: British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1958), 1.

16 Weinfeld avers that, because of the striking similarity of subject matter and sequence between these two texts (especially when comparing lines 419-30 of Esarhaddon’s treaty with Deut 28:26-35), this “attests that there was a direct borrowing by Deuteronomy from Assyrian treaty documents.” Moshe Weinfeld, Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 121-22. However, Hillers observes that none of these parallels appears to be the product of “simple copying, but the possibility of influence of treaty-curses on Israelite literature, or of mutual influence, or of dependence on common sources, cannot be disregarded.” Delbert R. Hillers, Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets, Biblica et orientalia 16 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1964), 78. Rather, “the point to be grasped is that both in Israel and elsewhere there were living and primarily oral traditions of curses on which writers and speakers might draw for various
the pronounced curses, however, is the request that Ashur, king of the gods, “[decree for you] evil and not good.”17 The following excerpts from the extensive curses of this treaty flesh out what this synopsis entails:

May he never grant you fatherhood and attainment of old age.18

[May Sin], the brightness of heaven and earth, clothe you with [a lep]rosy; [may he forbid your entering into the presence of the gods] [or king (saying): ‘Roam the desert] like the wild-ass (and) the gazelle.’
[May Shamash, the light of the heavens and] earth [not]
[judge] you justly (saying): ‘May it be dark in your eyes, walk in darkness’.\textsuperscript{19}

[May Ninurta, chief of the gods,] fell you with his swift arrow; [may he fill the plain [with your corpses]; may he feed your flesh to the eagle (and) jackal.

[May Venus, the brightest of the stars,] make your wives lie [in the lap of your enemy before your eyes]; may your sons [not possess your house]; may a foreign enemy divide your goods.\textsuperscript{20}

\begin{quote}
May they make your ground (hard) like iron so that [none] of you may flourish.

Just as rain does not fall from a brazen heaven\textsuperscript{21} so may rain and dew not come upon your fields and your meadows; may it rain burning coals instead of dew on your land.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Just as a starving ewe puts [the flesh of her young] in her mouth, even so may he feed you in your hunger
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Deut 28:29, “You will be groping around at midday like a blind man gropes around in the darkness.” The curse of blindness was a common ancient Near Eastern curse motif. Ps 69:24 echoes, “May their eyes grow too dim to see.” Furthermore, in the Ugaritic tale of Aqht, upon learning of the death of his son Aqht, Dan’el cries out against those who had a part in his son’s death. Among the curses uttered is: ‘\textit{wrt. yštk. b ‘l}, “May Ba’lu make you blind.” Manfried Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín, \textit{The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places (KTU: Second, Enlarged Edition)}, Abhandlungen zur Literatur Al-Syriens-Palästinas und Mesopotamiens, vol. 8, ed. Manfried Dietrich and Oswald Loretz (Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995), 60 (KTU 1.19 IV 5). Margalit, however, believes that contextually it is better to translate this phrase as “May Baal stop-up thy well-spring(s).” Baruch Margalit, \textit{The Ugaritic Poem of AQHT, BZAW}, ed. Otto Kaiser, vol. 182 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 164, 416-17.

\textsuperscript{20} Cf. Deut 28:26-35, in which likewise the curses of war’s carnage, skin diseases, blindness, rape, and pillaging prominently figure.

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Deut 28:23, “The sky over your head will be bronze, and the ground beneath you iron”; and the reverse imagery in Lev 26:19, “I will make your sky like iron and your ground like bronze.”

\textsuperscript{22} Cf. Ps 140:11, “Let burning coals fall upon them!” and the emended Ps 11:6, “May he rain on the wicked coals of fire and brimstone” (the MT evidences, it would seem, an early and inadvertent transcriptional error; cf. chap. 2, n. 52 above).
with the flesh of your brothers, your sons (and) your daughters.\textsuperscript{23}

\[\text{[As oil enters your flesh,}
\text{just so may they cause this curse to enter}
\text{into your flesh,}\textsuperscript{24} \text{[the flesh of your brothers],}
\text{your sons and your daughters.}\textsuperscript{25}\]

As in the ancient Near Eastern treaty curses, called down upon the vassal who breaks covenant with his suzerain, so also in many of the Imprecatory Psalms. The curses found therein are frequently voiced because the psalmist views his enemy as having grossly violated the covenant, and consequently, as deserving of the covenant’s curses. And as the treaty curses were viewed as extending not only to the offender but also to his children, so also the curses in the Psalms are seen to extend at times to the enemy’s posterity (notably Psalms 109 and 137).

Furthermore, in the ancient Near East, word was often united with ritual, to enhance the effect of the pronounced curse. In the late fifteenth century B.C. Hittite soldier’s oath, ritual is utilized to reinforce and dramatize the curse: “He sprinkles water on the fire and speaks to them as follows: ‘Just as this burning fire is snuffed out–whoever breaks these oaths, even so let these oaths seize him! Let this man’s vitality, vigor and future happiness be snuffed out together with (that of) his wife and his children! Let the

\textsuperscript{23} Cf. the more extended treatment of the curse of familial cannibalism in Deut 28:53-57.

\textsuperscript{24} Cf. Ps 109:18, “He wore cursing as his coat; so may it enter into his body like water, and into his bones like oil.”

\textsuperscript{25} Wiseman, \textit{The Vassal-Treaties of Esarhaddon}, 60-78. The curse is seen to extend naturally to the family and descendents of the contracting party.
oaths put an evil curse upon him!” So also, in the mid-eighth century B.C. Assyrian treaty between Ashurnirari V and Mat‘îlu of Arpad, a spring lamb is brought out

. . . to sanction the treaty between Ashurnirari and Mat‘îlu. If Mat‘îlu sins against (this) treaty made under oath by the gods, then, just as this spring lamb, brought from its fold, will not return to its fold, will not behold its fold again, alas, Mat‘îlu, together with his sons, daughters, officials, and the people of his land [will be ousted] from his country, will not return to his country, and not behold his country again. This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mat‘îlu, it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mat‘îlu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off, and its knuckle placed in its mouth, [ . . . ], the head of Mat‘îlu be torn off, and his sons [ . . . ].

The Syrian/Aramean mid-eighth century treaty between Bir-Ga‘yah, king of KTK, and this same Mat‘îlu (vocalized below as Matî‘el), king of Arpad, witnesses to a profuse display of curses should the vassal betray the suzerain—including curses upon the land of Arpad, ritually underscored curses against the person of Matî‘el and his nobles, and

26 ANET, 354.

27 ANET, 532. McCarthy notes that rites such as these “are simply a form of curse” and are “aimed at one end: symbolizing and effecting the ruin of the oath-breaker.” Dennis J. McCarthy, Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 151. The oath-taker shares in these covenant dramas in the acting out or witnessing of “what he calls down on himself should he be faithless. Word and vivid rite have become very much one.” Ibid., 149.

curses against any who would mar or fail to guard the inscribed treaty. After introducing the gods of the two nations as witnesses to the treaty comes a list of “futility” curses on the land and fertility of Arpad. It is of import to note that the fulfillment of these curses is under the purview of the witnessing gods. For example, the treaty says, “(And) [may Ha]dad [pour (over it)] every sort of evil (which exists) on earth and in heaven and every sort of trouble; and may he shower upon Arpad [ha]il-[stones]! . . . May the gods send every sort of devourer against Arpad and against its people!”

Following this come a litany of curses with accompanying rites. For example, “Just as this wax is burned by fire, so shall Matî[el be burned by fi]re. . . . [Just as] this calf is cut in two, so may Matî’el be cut in two and may his nobles be cut in two.” The treaty concludes with a curse on any who would deface the treaty inscription: “Whoever will not guard the words of the inscription which is on this stele or will say, ‘I shall efface some of his (its) words’ . . . on any day on which he will do so, may the gods overturn th[at m]an and his house and all that (is) in it.”

Inscriptional curses. In addition to their role in ancient Near Eastern treaties, curses—though without accompanying blessings—are characteristically found in inscriptions.


30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 187. Though the phraseology is not strictly imprecatory, it is of interest to note that the Book of Revelation concludes in words strikingly reminiscent of the ancient inscriptive curses that accompanied certain treaty documents, gravely warning any who would tamper with its words: “If anyone should add to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone should take away words from this book of prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book” (Rev 22:18-19).
on tombs, statues, and boundary stones (kudurru) as warnings against would-be violators, thus protecting the materials to which they were attached. In these, they “appear to be the last resort in situations when conventional means fail to provide needed security: where hidden tombs cannot defeat the cleverness of grave robbers, where respect for the dead does not prevent the living from jealously effacing a predecessor’s name from a record of his or her accomplishments,” or where the promise of economic gain overshadows common respect for another’s property. Thus, in consonance with the Imprecatory Psalms, inscriptional curses were uttered out of a context of powerlessness, and their fulfillment was directed at deity. Therein it is the gods who are either explicitly or implicitly the

32 “The bulk of kudurru-inscriptions are to be dated . . . roughly from the latter half of the Second Millennium BC to the first half of the First Millennium. The kudurru was made to protect private property and especially the boundaries of property by extensive curse-formulae in the name of various gods. Any person who should damage the monument or cause the monument to be damaged, would inflict on himself all the curses of the inscription.” F. Charles Fensham, “Common Trends in Curses of the Near Eastern Treaties and Kudurru-Inscriptions Compared with Maledictions of Amos and Isaiah,” ZAW 75 (1963): 158.


34 For example, the funerary inscription of Sin-zer-ibni warns: “Whoever you are (who) shall remove this image and couch from its place, may ŠHR and ŠMŠ and NKL and NŠK tear out your name and remainder of life! And (with an evil) death may they kill you! And may they cause your seed to perish!” Gevirtz, “West-Semitic Curses and the Problem of the Origins of Hebrew Law,” 148.

35 On a late-eighth century B.C. tomb at the entrance to the village of Silwan (Siloam), adjacent to Jerusalem, the following words are inscribed: “This is (the tomb of Sheban)iah the royal steward. There is no silver or gold here, only (his bones) and the bones of his maidservant with him. Cursed be the man who opens this.” John C. L. Gibson, Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions, vol. 1, Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 24.
ones called to enforce the curse should the threatenings be ignored; they do not of themselves “magically” come into force.36

Incantations to undo curses. The legitimate curse in ancient Mesopotamia, which sought to protect from harm, or to repair and recoil harm, “was a highly developed legal and religious ceremony, universally practiced and respected. It not only figured in ceremonies of great occasions, but also penetrated into the everyday life of the people.”37 Witness to this prevalence is found, for example, in the mid-twelfth dynasty Egyptian Execration Texts,38 but it figures most prominently in the various series of Assyrian incantation rituals—the three principal collections of which are Maqlû, Šurpu, and Utukki Limnûti. By means of these rites, the sufferer seeks release from the effects of a curse placed upon him either by a malevolent witch, demon, or some other unknown cause.

36 Contra Fensham, who believes that if, in particular, “the stipulations on a kudurrû should be transgressed, the religious function in the form of punishment would immediately come automatically into force. The curses were regarded as coming into operation directly after the transgression as a kind of magical process.” Fensham, “Common Trends in Curses of the Near Eastern Treaties and Kudurrû-Inscriptions Compared with Maledictions of Amos and Isaiah,” 157.


38 From the Old Kingdom period through the Roman era, Egyptian priests “performed official ritual cursings of the potential enemies of Egypt. The ceremonies included the breaking of red pots and figurines inscribed with formal ‘Execution Texts’ listing Nubians, Asiatics, Libyans, living and deceased Egyptians, as well as generally threatening forces. The texts themselves contain no explicit curses, but instead serve to identify the fate of the enemies with that of the destroyed pot or image.” William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds., Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World, vol. 1, The Context of Scripture (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 50.
In the series Maqlû, “the longest and most important Mesopotamian text concerned with combating witchcraft,” a curse “is pronounced upon those who have bewitched the complainant and thus caused him to suffer.” The ritual begins with a description of the supplicant’s status of suffering brought about by the supposed witch’s curse:

I have called upon you Gods of the Night:

Because a witch has bewitched me,
A deceitful woman has accused me,
Has (thereby) caused my god and goddess to be estranged from me (and)
I have become sickening in the sight of those who behold me,
I am therefore unable to rest day or night,

Because evil did she perform against me, and baseless charges has she conjured up against me,
May she die, but I live!


41 Abusch, “The Demonic Image of the Witch in Standard Babylonian Literature,” 32-33. Notice the similarity of symptoms (and the locus of their cause in “baseless charges”) between this series and the Psalms of Lament, of which the Imprecatory Psalms and the Psalms of Illness are a part. The similarity is such that Mowinckel located the array of Illness Laments in a like Sitz im Leben: they were recited to counteract the curses of the psalmist’s enemies. These נב affid were “practitioners of magic”—whether officially or unofficially—who, by means of powerful words and gestures, sought to destroy the psalmist and had caused his illness. Cf. Sigmund Mowinckel, Psalmenstudien, I, Åwän und die individuellen Klagepsalmen (Amsterdam: Verlag P. Schippers, 1966), 29-31; and idem, The Psalms in Israel’s Worship, vol. 2, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), 3-7. However, although such a mentality and activity were common in the larger cultural context, it is far from certain that this is what is represented in the psalms. Indeed, whereas the element of sorcery or witchcraft may constitute a minor element in the psalms, given this milieu and similarity of language, such is nowhere rendered explicit. In addition, the key phrase, נב affid, rather than designating those who “practice sorcery,” appears to be used in a more generic fashion as those who “practice iniquity”—whether it be oppression, bloodshed, cursing, slander, etc.
The climax of this complex ceremony is the declarative wish which seeks, in effect, to reverse the original curse:42 “Die Zauberin, die mich bezaubert hat: mit dem Zauber, mit dem sie mich bezaubert hat, bezaubere du sie!”43 Voiced again: “May the curse of my mouth extinguish the curse of your mouth!”44 And, as its name “burning” implies, wax or wooden figurines of the sorcerer or—more often—the sorceress who bewitched the supplicant are melted or burnt in the fire, and the conjurations that compose this series address, with very few exceptions, either these witches—in effigy—or the fire-god who is to destroy them.45

The series Šurpu, on the other hand, though it also means “burning,” is a rite of personal purification from an unknown offense rather than the retributive sympathetic magic of Maqlû.46 In this ceremony, the sufferer seeks release from the ill effects of some

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42 Cf. Ps 7:17, “Let the trouble he has caused recoil on his head.”

43 “The witch who bewitched me, with the witchcraft with which she bewitched me, bewitch her!” Gerhard Meier, Die assyrische Beschwörungssammlung Maqlû (Berlin: Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft 2, 1937), 12. Meier renders well the verbal playfulness of the Akkadian: fkaššaptu takšip-an-ni kiš-pi takšip-an-ni kišš-pṣi.


46 Although burning plays a less significant role in this series as compared to Maqlû, the Šurpu ritual is nonetheless “an act of sympathetic magic; it consists of the burning of various objects that symbolize the sins and sufferings of the patient,” by means of which he is liberated. Ibid., 1.
presumable sin of omission or commission, by which he has “offended the gods and the
existing world-order.”

An evil curse like a gallû-demon has come upon (this) man,
dumbness (and) daze have come upon him,
an unwholesome dumbness has come upon him,
ever curse, oath, headache.
An evil curse has slaughtered this man like a sheep,
his god left his body,
his goddess . . . usually full of concern for him, has stepped aside.
Dumbness (and) daze have covered him like a cloak and overwhelm him incessantly.
Marduk noticed him,
went into the house to his father Ea and cried out:

‘I do not know [what] to do, what would quiet him’.
Ea answered his son Marduk:

‘Go, my son Marduk!
Take him to the pure house of ablutions,
undo his oath, release his oath,
that the disturbing evil of his body,
—he it the curse of his father,
—he it the curse of his mother,
—he it the curse of his elder brother,
—he it the curse of a bloodshed unknown to him—
by pronouncing the charm of Ea the oath
may be peeled off like (this) onion,
stripped off like (these) dates,
unraveled like (this) matting.
Oath, be adjured by the name of heaven, be adjured by the name of the earth!’

In Utukki Limnûti, “Evil Spirits,” the third major collection of Mesopotamian
magical incantations, the afflicted pleads for deliverance from the curse of bodily illness,
believed to have been caused by demonic influence:

47 Ibid., 3.

48 Ibid., 30-31. In like manner, the Lipšûr litanies are performed to undo a curse: e.g.,
“May the curse recede like the water from the body of NN” . . . “May a bird take the curse up to the
Evil fiends are they!
From the Underworld they have gone forth,
They are the Messengers of Bel, Lord of the World.
The evil Spirit that in the desert smiteth the living man,
The evil Demon that like a cloak enshroudeth the man,
The evil Ghost, the evil Devil that seize upon the body,
The Hag-demon (and) Ghoul that smite the body with sickness,
The Phantom of Night that in the desert roameth abroad,
Unto the side of the wanderer have drawn nigh,
Casting a woeful fever upon his body.
A ban of evil hath settled on his body,
An evil disease on his body they have cast,
An evil plague hath settled on his body,
An evil venom on his body they have cast,
An evil curse hath settled on his body,
Evil (and) sin on his body they have cast,
Venom (and) wickedness have settled on him,
Evil they have cast (upon him).
The evil man, he whose face is evil, he whose
   mouth is evil, he whose tongue is evil,
Evil spell, witchcraft, sorcery,
Enchantment, and all evil,
Which rest on the body of the sick man.49

Notice even here, in an incantation ostensibly directed against demons, that the human
element of cursing through word and magic is yet connected.

The Power of the Curse

It has been commonly alleged that, in the practice of the larger ancient Near
Eastern world, the curse was viewed as “automatic or self-fulfilling, having the nature of a
‘spell,’ the very words of which were thought to possess reality and the power to effect the

desired results.”50 Or, as Sigmund Mowinckel succinctly states: “Der Fluch wirkt ganz ex opere operato.”51 It is “ein giftiger Stoff . . . eine verheerende Macht, die alles das zerstört, was sie triff.”52 According to ancient opinion, in this view, the power of the curse was inherent in its form,53 and the more powerful the speaker, the more powerful the curse.54

A certain measure of support has been legitimately claimed from the Mesopotamian incantation series in which, even though there is periodic appeal to deity to effect the curse’s release, the essence of the incantations is magic. By means of established


51 “The curse operates entirely ex opere operato.” Sigmund Mowinckel, Psalmenstudien, V, Segen und Fluch in Israels Kult und Psalmdichtung (Amsterdam: P. Schippers, 1966), 74. Although Mowinckel views the curses in the Psalms largely in common with the curses of the surrounding culture, i.e., that they are uttered in the context of religious ritual to counteract the curses of sorcerers uttered against them, he mollifies this remark by insisting that “we are not justified in concluding from this that the psalmists thought that without the will and help of Yahweh the word of cursing by itself could deliver them from the enemy.” Sigmund Mowinckel, The Psalms in Israel’s Worship, vol. 1, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas (New York: Abingdon Press, 1967), 202-03.

52 The curse is “poisonous stuff . . . a disastrous power, that destroys everything it strikes.” Mowinckel, Psalmenstudien, V, 61.


54 Blank applies this to the imprecatory prayer: “men can appeal to God to curse one whom they wish cursed—and consider such a one more effectively cursed.” Blank, “The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath,” 80.
word and rite, the desired release is (ostensibly) effected. Reflecting upon this intimate connection between fervent prayer and symbolic act, Scharbert expresses the prevalent impression “that people in the ancient Near East actually believed that the gods could be forced by such formulas and acts to intervene in the manner desired.”55

However, whereas there is a measure of evidence that the broader ancient Near Eastern world embraced to some extent a magical view of the power of the curse—particularly with regard to the curses of witches and the incantations to undo these curses, this was by no means embraced wholesale. Indeed, and fundamentally, it was believed that the gods were the ones under whose jurisdiction lay the execution of at least the formal legitimate curses. This is evidenced by a number of extant treaty and inscriptional curses. Therein, the curses are either explicitly stated or implicitly understood to be enacted by the gods, rather than by virtue of some inherent power in the words themselves. It was not the curse formula per se, but the authority of the gods in which the power of the curse lay. For example, in the mid-eighth century B.C. treaty between Bir-Ga’yah and Matî’el addressed earlier, the litany of futility curses threatened (should Matî’el cease to observe the covenant stipulations) are said to fall under the purview of the gods called as witnesses to the treaty:

“[May Ha]dad [pour (over it)] every sort of evil . . . . May the gods send every sort of

55 Scharbert, “דsaldo,” TDOT, 1:416. Brichto rightly remarks that the religion of Israel stands in stark contrast to this ideology: for whereas Mesopotamia is steeped in magic, Israel is unrelenting in its campaign against it; and whereas in Mesopotamia even the gods are subject to the forces of magic, in Israel Yahweh is supremely independent of outside power—indeed the source of all power. Herbert Chanan Brichto, The Problem of “Curse” in the Hebrew Bible, JBL Monograph Series, vol. 13 (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1968), 212.
devourer against Arpad and against its people!” Moreover, the scope of divine enforcement extended even to the treaty inscription itself: “Whoever will not guard the words of the inscription which is on this stele or will say, ‘I shall efface some of his (its) words,’ . . . may the gods overturn th[at m]an and his house and all that (is) in it.”

Support for a magical understanding of the power of the curse in the ancient Near East has been further sought from the Hebrew Scriptures and the religion of early Israel. Two passages frequently claimed to evidence this magical view of the curse (and blessing) in the life of ancient Israel are Judges 17:1-2 and the account of Balaam in Numbers 22–24. In the former passage, it is relayed that Micah’s mother had uttered a curse against a thief who had stolen from her a large sum of money. Upon her son’s confession that he was the culprit, she immediately cries out: בְּרָעָה גֵּטָּה לְֹהַּיָּ, “Blessed be my son by Yahweh!” Blank believes this to be a forcible illustration of counter-magic—that a curse may be effectively neutralized by administering a blessing as an antidote. However, even if that supposition be granted (and it is far from certain that it may rightly be so), it is important to note that this passage by no means recounts orthodox Israelite theology, as the context elucidates. Verses three and following relate the relativism and idolatry characteristic of syncretism. And indeed, there has always been in Israel’s history the tendency toward syncretism, and Yahweh has ever denounced it. Thus, if a proposition

57 Ibid., 187.
58 Blank, “The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath,” 94.
is to be legitimately established, it must be done via genuine expressions rather than perversions of Israelite religion.

In the latter passage, the Moabite king Balak pleads a summons to the famed Balaam:59 “Come now, curse for me this people. . . . For I know that whomever you bless are blessed, and whomever you curse are cursed” (Num 22:6). 60 It has been commonly inferred from this that Balaam possessed an unusual aptitude to produce, by mere utterance, profound effect for blessing or cursing. That this was the pagan perception of Balaam’s abilities may partly be granted. However, the preponderance of evidence identifies Balaam as a diviner,61 and further suggests that he belonged to a class of Akkadian diviners known as bārû, who were believed to accurately ascertain the will of the gods by means, typically, of the examination of the entrails or liver of a sacrificed animal.62

59 The record of his reputation exceeds the limits of Scripture, for in an Aramaic text discovered at Deir ‘Allah in Jordan and dated circa 700 B.C., mention is made of a certain Balaam, son of Beor, who is described as a “seer of the gods” (hînḥ. ’ḥnn) and known for his ability to curse. J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, eds., Aramaic Texts from Deir ‘Alla, Documenta et monumenta orientis antiqui, vol. 19, eds. W. F. Albright and J. Vandier (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 173-82.

60 Cf. Num 22:12, in which Yahweh warns Balaam: “Do not curse the people, for they are blessed.”

61 Balaam is called “the diviner” (םְפִיקָן) in Josh 13:22. Note also the (fee for) divination (םְפִי) extended to Balaam by the emissaries of Balak in Num 22:7 to entice his services, as well as his description as “seer of the gods” (n. 59 above). In the language of 2 Pet 2:16, Balaam is styled a “prophet.”

62 Mitchell argues that, as a bārû, “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.” Christopher Wright Mitchell, The Meaning of BRK “To Bless” in the Old Testament, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, ed. J. J. M. Roberts, vol. 95 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 92. Similarly, cf. Robert R. Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 132-33; 147-50. Allen in large measure concurs with this assessment of Balaam’s caste, although he posits the possibility that in the figure of Balaam one finds the combination of both bārû (diviner) and
In this scenario, the desire of Balak is for Balaam, with his superior knowledge of his craft and proven record of success, to ascertain the divine will (and also influence that will to his favor). Perhaps, then, the apparent power of Balaam’s curse, as evidenced by his reputation, was in his ability to “manipulate” the intent of the gods—something he found himself blatantly unable to do with Yahweh. Moreover, since this account records a pagan king’s perception of a pagan diviner’s power to curse, repeatedly thwarted and overturned by Yahweh, it is more germane to the larger ancient Near Eastern understanding than it is specifically to the understanding of ancient Israel.

Additionally, the observation that Hebrew curse formulas favor the passive construction (notably הָרִיךְ, “cursed be”) is further said to evidence an understanding of the inherent power in the curse—that no divine agency is needed to fulfill it. However,

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63 The curses of Balaam, then, become predominantly declarations of divine intent. This informs our understanding of Num 23:8, nestled amidst his first oracle from Yahweh, in which Balaam confesses his inability to curse apart from the prior determination of Yahweh to curse. For, as a bārī, Balaam can ostensibly do no more than divine the will of the God under whose auspices Israel lay.

64 Notice the tie between Balaam’s divination and “sorcery” (诐呁) (Num 23:23; 24:1). The context of Num 22–24 suggests a complexity to the identity and activity of Balaam, and to the ancient Near Eastern phenomenon of cursing.

65 Blank writes: “Apparently, then, no external agent was assumed and, apparently, the spoken curse was itself and alone conceived to be the effective agent. This is the significance of the habitual preference for the passive construction in the curse formula and the consequent absence of any reference to an external agent, demonic or divine.” Blank, “The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell, and the Oath,” 78.
this supposition overlooks the larger testimony of the Old Testament, in which Yahweh himself is portrayed as either the implicit or explicit agent behind the curse. Indeed, in the theology of orthodox Israel, nothing operates independently of him. He is the ground of all being and the source of all power—including the power of blessing and cursing. Apart from his will, no curse is effected;\(^{66}\) and in his sovereignty he can transmute cursing into blessing\(^ {67}\) and blessing into cursing.\(^ {68}\) In this regard, Scharbert, himself a hesitant advocate of the magical view of the power of the curse, cautions against the adoption of “a purely magical understanding of the curse formula”\(^ {69}\) in the religion and community of ancient Israel. He does so by noting one such usage of the passive רָעָה formula in which the agency of Yahweh is by no means concealed. In his estimation, the use of the phrase רָעָה (“Cursed be the man before Yahweh”) in the ancient Hebrew text of Joshua 6:26 “justifies the conjecture that the activation of misfortune was closely connected with an intervention of Yahweh.”\(^ {70}\) Most significantly, however, in the inaugural promise to Abraham, which forms the basis upon which Yahweh’s covenant with his people

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\(^{66}\) Cf. Num 23:8, “How can I curse when God has not cursed?” and Num 23:20, “He has blessed, and I cannot change it.”

\(^{67}\) E.g., Deut 23:6, “However, Yahweh your God would not listen to Balaam, but Yahweh your God turned the curse into a blessing for you, because Yahweh your God loves you.”

\(^{68}\) Cf. Yahweh’s stern admonition to his priests in Mal 2:2, “‘If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to give honor to my name,’ says Yahweh of Hosts, ‘then I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings—indeed, I will curse them, because you have not so set your heart.’”

\(^{69}\) Scharbert, “רָעָה,” TDOT, 1:412.

\(^{70}\) Ibid. Indeed, in the later passage which relates the fulfillment of this curse, it is commented explicitly that Yahweh is the one who spoke this curse through Joshua and implicitly that he is the one who brought it about (1 Kgs 16:34).
throughout the Scriptures is built, the active construction of רוחא is used, with Yahweh the explicit actor. Therein, Yahweh emphatically places upon himself the prerogative for the enforcement of curses uttered against his people. In Genesis 12:3 Yahweh declares:

"He who curses you I will curse." And it is this declaration that forms the foundation for all personal curses appealed to out of the covenant context.

Thus, in the life of Israel, and for the heirs of her religion, the effect of the spoken curse depends wholly on the will of Yahweh. Moreover, as will be demonstrated, the Hebrew curse is either a veiled or blatant appeal to this God of justice to exact the punishment due for the guilt of the one cursed. For this cause, the Hebrew proverb can confidently assert: “Like a fluttering sparrow, like a darting swallow, so an undeserved curse does not come to rest” (Prov 26:2). Thus, in contrast to the broader concept of the curse in the ancient Near East—which allowed the curious blend of both divine and automatic enactment, the curse in Israel entirely loses its magical character. What remains for her is a sovereign, just, and compassionate covenant God.

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71 Although both קָרַב and כָּרַב bear a measure of semantic overlap in that they both mean “to curse” (cf. the interchange in Deut 28:15, 45; 28:16-19), the former may carry the lesser nuance “to treat with contempt” (cf., e.g., Ex 21:17), whereas the latter is characteristically the more severe and often refers to a divine judicial sentence (cf., e.g., Deut 27:15-26).

72 Thus, the opinion of even that staunch opponent of word-magic, Anthony Thiselton, is in part deficient, for although he rightly avers that among the faithful in Israel the one who utters a curse is in practice invoking God, he yet apparently believes that the effectiveness of the curse depends in large measure both on the strength and status of the speaker who pronounces the curse, as well as on the receptivity of the person who is being cursed. Anthony C. Thiselton, “The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings,” JTS 25 (1974): 295.