



Left: Incantation bowl. A protective spell was written on the inside of the bowl and it was buried upside-down. The inscribed bowl had two purposes: to ward off evil spirits and to serve as a trap for any demons that came near.

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Right: Palace ruins at Ur. While the Scriptures offer no indication that Abraham was royalty, his homeland was one of wealth and influence. When Abraham was still at Ur, the Lord promised to bless those who blessed him and to curse those who cursed him.

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AND BLESSINGS in the Old Testament

By Wayne VanHorn

TODAY THE TERMS *CURSES* AND *BLESSINGS* carry little or no weight with most people. Most associate curses with profanity while associating blessings with brief prayers before meals or perfunctory words said by religious leaders. In the Old Testament, however, to *curse* or to *bless* carried much weight. The purpose of this article is to look at the earliest appearances of the terms *curse* and *bless* along with the corresponding Old Testament terminology, with a view toward discerning the meaning of these important concepts.

To understand these concepts correctly, we must keep them in their appropriate context. The overarching context of all *curses and blessings* in the Old Testament was the covenant relationship between the Lord and Israel. In essence, a curse was a word of malediction uttered against anyone who would violate the stipulations of the covenant agreement between the Lord and the people of Israel. Curses could come in the form of hardships, excommunication, or even death depending on the severity of the offense. Conversely, a blessing was a word of empowerment whereby those loyal to the Lord and to His covenant received divine help in their endeavors. Blessings could ensure that a crop would



produce a bountiful harvest, an army would be successful in battle, or a wife would be fertile and bear children.

What Do We Mean by Curses?

The most important Hebrew terms for “curse” are *’arar*, *qalal*, and *charam*. The first of these terms, *’arar*, means “to bind (with a spell), hem in with obstacles, render powerless to resist.”¹ This term usually appears as a passive participle indicating that the action was done to the subject by someone more powerful and that the curse had lasting affects.² The first of some 40 appearances of this word in this form is in Genesis 3:14, where the Lord pronounced the serpent “cursed.” This text graphically illustrates the effects of *’arar*. The serpent, presumably able to move uprightly in human fashion before the curse, was consigned to ambulate on his belly from that point onward. Also his apparent gift not only to speak but to formulate crafty and persuasive arguments was reduced to eating dust all the days of his life.

The second important word for curse, *qalal*, means “to take lightly,” “to esteem lightly,” or “to render as insignificant or trivial.”³ Our concepts of slighting someone or showing contempt for them adequately express the idea of *qalal*.

One of the best texts that demonstrates the difference between *’arar* and *qalal* is Genesis 12:3. When the Lord established His covenant relationship with Abram, He promised “whoever curses you I will curse” (NIV). The first appearance of “curse” in this statement renders the Hebrew word *qalal*, “to take lightly” or “to slight.” The second appearance of the word “curse” renders the Hebrew term *’arar*, meaning “to bind” or “to hem in.” Thus the Lord was providing Abram

with the ultimate form of security by promising to bind up or to thwart anyone who slighted him.

The third important word for “curse,” *cherem*, referred to anything that was “set apart or devoted.”⁴ However, in the context of the covenant relationship between the Lord and His people, if someone or thing was devoted to a false god, they were to be devoted to destruction at the hands of God’s people. This word and its corresponding verb, *charam*, are important terms for understanding the language and actions of the Hebrew people as they entered the promised land. The inhabitants were considered *cherem* since they were devoted to false gods. The one true God devoted them to utter destruction (Ex. 22:20; Josh. 11:20).

What Do We Mean by Blessings?

The primary Hebrew term for “bless” is *barak*, meaning “to empower and enable” when used to express the actions of superiors toward subordinates (patrons toward clients)—or “to express gratitude and acknowledgment of a gift or blessing” when used to express the actions of subordinates towards superiors (clients toward patrons).⁵ The noun form of the word is *berek*, meaning “knee.” Scholars are divided as to whether an association exists between the ideas of blessing and kneeling, an image favorable to the idea of a subordinate kneeling in honor of his superior in order to

LESSON REFERENCE

BSFL: Genesis 2:15–3:24

CURSES AND BLESSINGS IN NON-HEBRAIC CULTURES

The concept of curses and blessings was not unique to Israel. Many ancient cultures had various forms of curses and blessings embedded in their rituals. In 1946-1947, archaeologists discovered the longest extant Phoenician inscription in the city of Karatepe, Turkey. This inscription is important because it contains both blessings and curses that parallel those found in the Old Testament.

The Karatepe Inscription was apparently written by King Azatiwada on the occasion of dedicating a city and fortress that he had rebuilt. In the text of this inscription, the king called himself a “servant of Baal” who had been “blessed by Baal.”¹ He acknowledged how Baal had blessed him by allowing him to be a successful king, enumerating several accomplishments associated with the Baal’s blessings as a reward for faithful service. Such accomplishments included territorial expansion and production of ample crops to feed his people. He even enlarged and strengthened his army “by the grace of Baal and the gods.” Other blessings noted were victory over his enemies, reduction of crime within his kingdom, establishment of peace with neighboring kings, and the provision for lasting social stability. He also made travel safe. During Azatiwada’s time roads that formerly were unsafe for men were safe enough for “a woman [to] walk by herself . . . by the grace of Baal and the gods.”

The clear intent for linking the king’s success to the blessings of Baal was to remind the people that his reign had divine sanction. King Azatiwada placed the inscription “Azatiwadaya” on the base of a statue of Baal and on the gates of the city, invoking a curse for the gods to efface the king and nation who would covet the city or eradicate the king’s name, Azatiwada, from the inscription. **B**

1. The complete inscription can be found in Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Readings from the Ancient Near East* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 162-163; or in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, James B. Pritchard, ed., 3d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 653-654.

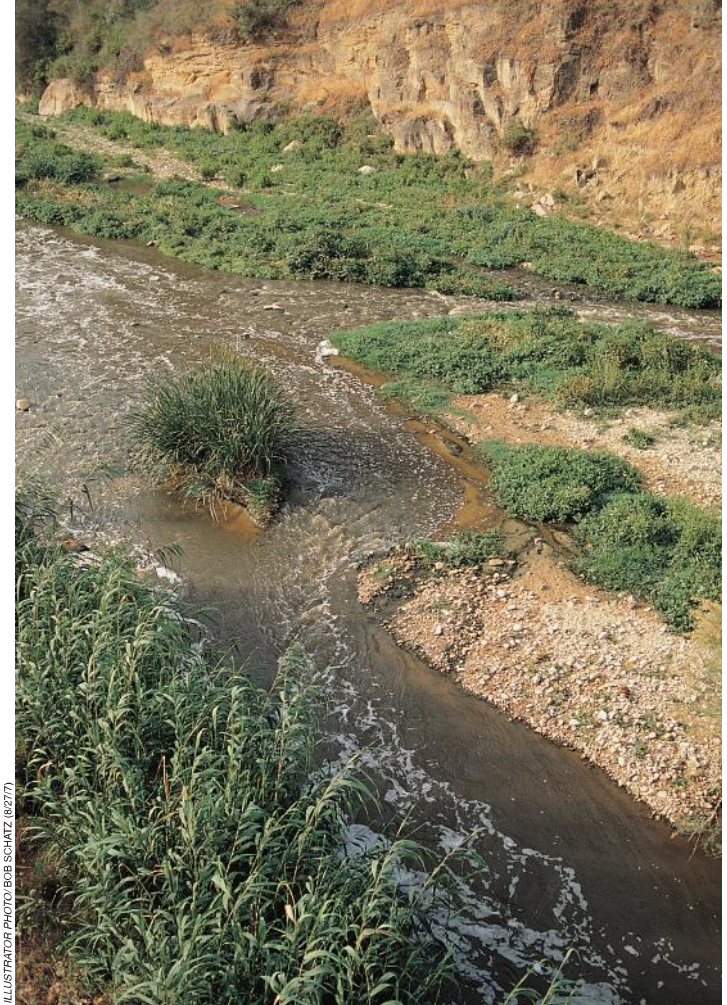
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Left: Baal, the Canaanite weather god, from Minet-el-beida. He wears the

high crown of Upper Egypt and dates from the 15th–14th centuries B.C.



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receive or to acknowledge a blessing. The first occurrences of the term *barak* appear in the opening creation account where the Lord blessed fish, birds, people, and the Sabbath Day (Gen. 1:22,28; 2:3). With regard to the fish, birds, and people, the idea of empowerment can be seen clearly through the accompanying commands to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth. God was enabling His creatures to fill up His vast creation. God granted as a blessing their capacity and success for fulfilling this command.

The second Hebrew word for bless is *ashar*, meaning “to go straight” or “to be happy.”⁶ The basic idea is that people who advance straight in the way of the Lord are blessed or happy. Psalm 1 begins with this word “Blessed” (KJV) or “Happy is the man” (HCSB). His happiness or blessedness is tied to his delight in and study of the law of the Lord (v. 2). The nation of Israel was considered blessed or happy because the Lord had saved them (Deut. 33:29). Additionally, Solomon’s men and servants were described as blessed or happy (*ashar*) because they got to hear Solomon’s God-given wisdom, thus the Lord was to be blessed or praised (*barak*) for putting Solomon on the throne (1 Kings 10:8-9).

A Look at Genesis 2:15–3:24

With these terms and concepts in place, let’s look at our focal passage, Genesis 2:15–3:24. This story commenced with the Lord putting Adam in the garden to watch over it. The Lord made Eve as a helper and mate for Adam. We see the concept of blessing in God’s generosity of letting Adam and Eve eat freely from all the trees of the garden (2:16). The single



Left: The Jabbok River between Jerash and Amman. Near this river Jacob wrestled with "a man" (Gen. 32:24).

Right: The Lord gave to Moses the priestly blessing that Aaron was to offer to the Israelites: "The LORD bless you and protect you; the LORD make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD look with favor on you and give you peace" (Num. 6:24-26, HCSB).

Right: This object, a commemorative stela from the Marduk temple at Babylon, has some of the characteristics of a kudurru (boundary stone), including curses on anyone who may deface it. But it was set up in honor of a private individual, an official in the Marduk temple, by his son. The figures represent father and son together. Their shaven heads show that they are both priests. Dated about 900-800 B.C.



Above: "Temptation Seal" from Mesopotamia; 23rd cent. B.C. Depicts figures holding out hands

on either side of a date palm tree. A serpent is behind one figure. Though similar to the Genesis 3:1-13 account,

the seal shows figures seated and fully clothed. The man's horned headdress may indicate he represented a deity.

hand, can face the prospect of God's blessings because of Jesus' work on the cross. How appropriate for us to recall the words of the third verse of the Christmas carol by Isaac Watts "Joy to the World."

prohibition Adam and Eve had to abide by was not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The serpent beguiled Eve, resulting in her eating the forbidden fruit along with her husband. Because the serpent twisted God's words, beguiled Eve, and led her into sin, God cursed the serpent with perpetual humiliation (sliding on his belly), frustration (his eloquent speech was replaced with eating dust), and enmity between him and his seed and the seed of the woman. Additionally, the ground was cursed. Instead of being fertile and productive, it would yield mainly thorns and thistles. The statement to Adam "you will eat bread by the sweat of your brow" (3:19, HCSB) reflects the toil Adam would experience in growing food to sustain his life and the life of his family.

To be cursed is to be hindered and thwarted in every way. To be blessed means to be empowered to succeed in any endeavor. The serpent received a perpetual curse that ultimately resulted in his destruction along with all who follow his rebellious ways. People, on the other

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.

(No. 87, *The Baptist Hymnal*, 1991)

May Christ's blessings flow through us and remove the effects of sin's curse from our lives. **B**

1. H., V. P. H., "arar" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (TWOT), R. Laird Harris, ed., vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 75.
2. Ibid. Forty of the sixty-three appearances are in the passive participle form.
3. J. Scharbert, "קקלח על קולל" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry, eds., vol. 13 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 37-44.
4. Leon J. Wood, "haram" in TWOT, vol. 1, 324-325.
5. John N. Oswalt, "barak" in TWOT, vol. 1, 132-133.
6. Victor P. Hamilton, "ashar" in TWOT, vol. 1, 80-82.

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