

To Bless or to Curse

Our choice to either bless or curse Israel and the God of Israel determines our fate, as individual and as nation, as this bible study of the words bless and curse shows.

By M.E. van Gelder

To bless or to curse is a personal choice that yields profound life changing consequences, restoration or destruction. The first prophecy in scripture which implied a direct relationship between restoration and/or destruction of nations and individuals based on the choice to either bless or curse is recorded in Genesis 9:25-28. Shem by his actions was blessed, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem." Whereas Ham, the father of Canaan, by his actions was cursed, "Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers." The Stone Edition of the Tanach commented, these verses are the most far-reaching prophecy ever uttered, for in it Noah encapsulated the entire course of human history (Scherman, 1996, p. 20). In other words, the course and destiny of human history is intertwined with its decision to bless or to curse. Let's examine this assumption a bit further by looking to the scriptures, what does it mean to bless or to curse? Is the relationship of restoration or destruction observable in the lives of others based on their choice to bless or to curse the God of Shem?

What it means to "Bless"

Approximately 4,000 years ago God made a promise to Abraham, a descendant of Shem (Gen 11:10-26). Abraham means 'Father of A Multitude,' and God made Abraham to be the father of a multitude of nations (Wooten, 2006, p. 1). God promised Abraham a land, a seed, a nation, blessings, and divine protection. God said, "I will bless those who bless you and curse him who curses you" (Gen 12:3, Jewish Study Bible). The Hebrew word to bless is *barekh*, which comes from the root word *barakh*. The word denotes spiritual and physical enrichment, abundant in quality and/or quantity because of the posture of the heart. *Barakh* literally means, "to kneel," giving honor, preference, deference and service to another (Teplinsky, 2004, p. 29). In summary, the God of Shem will personally bless and restore those individuals and/or nations with fruitfulness and prosperity, spiritually and physically, who give honor and preference to Israel, the descendants of Abraham, by offering her a helping hand because they have postured their heart towards Israel's God.

What it means to "Curse"

The Hebrew word for curse is *arar*; it means to bind with a spell, to hem in with obstacles, to render powerless to resist. The word used to curse thee is *qalal*; it means to be small, to be lessened, to be insignificant, of small worth, execrate, to bring a curse upon oneself (Zodhiates, 1994, p. 2303, 2361). When these thoughts are united together it paints a disturbing picture. Those who *curse you* connotes one who would impose a barrier, belittle, hate and call down judgment on Abraham and his descendants. The verse could be translated, "The one who treats you lightly, stops you from fulfilling your calling, belittles you, I must curse (Teplinsky, 2004, p. 43). The words, 'I must curse', denotes spiritual and physical misfortunes which gives way to utter misery and despair, for God Himself is doing the judging and pronouncing the curse upon the individual and/or nation. In summary, the one who curses Israel and her God binds themselves in a spell that renders them powerless to resist their own destruction.

To Bless or Curse reveals the soul

Why are some individuals blessed and others cursed when it comes to the subject of Israel and her God? It appears that through the course of history God has used Israel as a point of division in the souls of men in order to test and expose the inner thoughts of their heart. God's

sifting process divulges a person's position in life; it ultimately reveals if they stand for God or against Him, thus it forges one's fate and destiny. In Exodus 22:21 and 23:9 God instructed Israel not to mistreat or oppress the alien. Instead, the Israelites were to extend compassion, protection, civil rights, justice and even love the alien in their midst (Teplinsky, 2004, p.219). However, the law also explicitly stated, "whoever sacrifices to any god other than the Lord must be destroyed" (Exodus 22:20, New International Version). The Law presupposed that the alien first submit to the God of Israel and the covering of His people, which then gave way to divine protection and blessings realized in their life. To gain a better understanding of this concept we will examine the outcome of two foreigners mentioned in scripture, Rahab the Canaanite (Jos 2, 6), and Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, (Isa 36-37).

Rahab – The Blessor

Rahab was a prostitute who lived in Jericho, the land of the Canaanites. After the death of Moses, Joshua became the commander of the army of Israel. He sent two spies to look over the land of Canaan, especially Jericho, before he began the military conquest for the land. When the spies entered Jericho they came to Rahab's house. The king of Jericho got word that spies had entered Rahab's house, he ordered her to bring them out and turn them in. Instead of heeding the word of the king, the fear of the God of Israel fell upon Rahab. She hid the spies and instructed them how to safely flee from Jericho.

I know that the Lord has given this land to you and that a great fear of you has fallen on us, so that all who live in this country are melting in fear because of you. We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites, east of the Jordan whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone's courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that you will show kindness to my family because I have shown kindness to you (Jos 2:8-13, NIV).

Rahab admitted the Lord had given them the land, she submitted to the God of heaven and earth, Israel's God, and consequently showed kindness to the spies. Her action saved the lives of the spies from the wrath of the king of Jericho, for she postured her heart by kneeling to Israel's God, thus she gave honor, preference, deference and safe passage to the spies. In short, she blessed Israel and Israel's God. In turn when the city of Jericho fell to the Israelites, the spies saved her life and the lives of her entire family (Jos 6:23-25). Rahab lived among the Israelites until the day of her death; and she was blessed, for her name is listed (Matt 1:5) in the Davidic family lineage of kings (Mat. 1:1-16) (Luk. 3:23-37); based on the family's genealogy, she was an ancestor of Jesus, the rightful King of Israel.

Sennacherib – The Curser

In contrast, scripture tells another story about Sennacherib whom God cursed. Sennacherib was the king of Assyria (705-681 BCE) during the reign of king Hezekiah (715-686 BCE) of Judah. In the 14th year of Hezekiah's reign (701 BCE), Sennacherib assembled his army at Lachish, he attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. He sent his field commander along with a large army to Jerusalem with a message of conquest that ridiculed the God of Israel.

Have I come to attack and destroy this land without the Lord? The Lord Himself told me to march against this country and destroy it... Do not let Hezekiah mislead you when he says, "The Lord will deliver us." Has the god of any nation ever delivered his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of

Sepharvaim? Have they rescued Samaria from my hand? Who of all the gods of these countries has been able to save his land from me? How then can the Lord deliver Jerusalem from my hand? (Isaiah 36:10, 18-20, NIV)

When king Hezekiah heard these words he tore his clothes for it was a day of great distress. He sent some of his officials to inquire of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah spoke to Hezekiah's officials:

This is what the Lord says: Do not be afraid of what you have heard... those words with which the underlings of the king of Assyria have blasphemed me. I am going to put a spirit in him so that when he hears a certain report he will return to his own country and there I will have him cut down with the sword (Isa 37:6-7, NIV).

The king of Assyria left Lachish to fight in Libnah. There he received a report that Tirhakah, the Cushite king of Ethiopia was marching to fight against him (Scherman, 1996, p. 930). Sennacherib sent a message to Hezekiah, it was an abusive taunt, "Do not let the god you depend on deceive you when he says, 'Jerusalem will not be handed over to the king of Assyria'" (2 Kings 19:10, NIV). He reminded Hezekiah he would return and Jerusalem would fall to Assyria.

When Hezekiah received the letter, he went to the Temple of the Lord, spread the letter out and prayed to the God of Israel. God sent word to him through the prophet Isaiah:

Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib, this is the word the Lord has spoken concerning the king of Assyria: He will not enter this city or shoot an arrow here. He will not come before it with shield or build a siege ramp against it.... I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant (Isa 37:21, 33-35, NIV).

The angel of the Lord went forth and slaughtered 185,000 men in the Assyrian army camp. Dead bodies littered the ground, thus the king of Assyria was forced to break camp and returned to Nineveh, the capital of Assyria. One day while the king was worshiping his god in the temple of Nisroch his own sons, Adrammelech and Sarezer, killed him with a sword then fled to the land of Ararat.

Unlike Rahab, who admitted and submitted to Israel's God and His divine purpose, Sennacherib blasphemed Israel's God by belittling and making His name insignificant among the gods of the nations. The land that God had given to Israel, God's promise to Abraham (Genesis 17:8), Sennacherib was about to overthrow deporting all the conquered population to a faraway land, thereby thwarting God's plan and establishing his own self interest. Sennacherib cursed Israel and in turn God cursed the Assyrian king. The angel of the Lord slaughtered 185,000 Assyrian soldiers and Sennacherib's own sons murdered him with a sword in the temple of his god. Sennacherib's life was marked by spiritual and physical misfortune, which produced despair, for God Himself brought the judgment that ultimately destroyed his life and his legacy.

Conclusion

The relationship of restoration and blessing is an observable event in scripture as seen in the life of Rahab, the prostitute. Rahab postured her heart by kneeling to Israel's God. In doing so she honoured Israel's spies, she gave them preference over the demand from the king of Jericho, and her actions saved the lives of the spies. Her helping hand blessed Israel, and in turn she was blessed and honoured by the God of Israel. The relationship of destruction and

despair is also observable in the life of Sennacherib, the king of Assyria. Instead of kneeling to Israel's God, he blasphemed by belittling and besmirching, for he attempted to make His name and His word insignificant among the gods of the surrounding nations. Sennacherib's actions unwittingly bound him in a spell of his own making that cursed him, for he tried to stop God's divine plans and purpose for Israel by establishing his own objectives. In the end, he was rendered powerless to resist the fate of God's judgment concerning his life, and was murdered by his own sons. Today individuals and nations are faced with the same choice. The course of human history is intertwined with the decision to either bless or curse. Ultimately, our choice uncovers the inner thoughts of our heart with respect to Israel's God; thereby we select our fate, restoration or destruction.

Works Cited

Barker, Kenneth and others (Eds.). *The NIV Study Bible* (1985). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Berlin, Adele and Brettler, Marc Zvi. (Eds.). *The Jewish Study Bible* (2004). Oxford: University Press.

Hertz, Dr. J. H. (Ed). *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs* (2nd ed.). (1960). London: Soncino Press.

Scherman, Rabbi Nosson and others, (Eds.). *The Tanach* (The Artscroll Series/ Stone Edition). (1996). New York: Mesorah Publications, Ltd.

Teplinsky, Sandra. *Why Care About Israel?* (2004). Grand Rapids: Chosen Books.

Wooten, Batya Ruth. *Redeemed Israel: Reunited and Restored* (2006). Saint Cloud, FL: Key of David Publishing.

Zodhiates, Dr. Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Old Testament* (1994). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.