

FERTILITY AS BLESSING AND INFERTILITY AS CURSE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND THE OLD TESTAMENT

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1. INTRODUCTION

The subjects of fertility and infertility on the one hand and of blessing and curse on the other are both of such importance in the Ancient Near East and the Old Testament that justification for the study of the relation between the two subjects is hardly necessary. Pederson, who drew attention to the importance of the blessing in Israel, stated that the power to multiply was the premier way in which the blessing manifested itself (Pederson 1926: 204). It was regarded as the most important blessing that a woman could receive (*Ibid.*, 207-208). The curse was the opposite of the blessing, with one of the gravest curses being the failure of a person to create posterity (*Ibid.*, 440).

Curses and blessings are of frequent occurrence in the Ancient Near East. Important written documents or inscriptions were protected by shorter or longer curse-formulae (Fensham 1962a: 2). Curses were used in treaty texts to ensure the keeping of the treaty or the protection of the treaty text. They were associated with oaths and used for the protection of property and institutions (Scharbert 1958: 16). The blessing of God in the Old Testament extended to animals, the patriarchs, humanity as a whole, the ancestors of Israel, individuals, the believers in general, posterity and family, Israel and the tribes, even gentiles (*Ibid.*, 20, 21). Without God's blessing no undertaking could be successful (Psalm 127).

Fertility was especially linked with three spheres: bumper crops, thriving livestock and a growing family (Hoffner 1966: 326). The most important of these was human fertility. Prosperity with regard to crops and livestock would be small compensation to a person without offspring (*Ibid.*, 327). A person without children was therefore regarded as being less than a complete human being.

In Israel many children were an honour and infertility was seen as a trial or chastisement from God, or even as a disgrace (De Vaux 1976: 41). The longing for offspring played an important part in the history of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in Genesis. Hanna's vow to consecrate

her son to God must also be understood in the light of her desire to have a son (*Ibid.*, 465). This paper will discuss the relation between blessing and curse and fertility and infertility in treaty and covenant texts, with regard to the protection of documents, inscriptions and buildings and in historical, mythological and legendary texts.

2. TREATY AND COVENANT TEXTS

Since the publication of Mendenhall's articles in 1954 (1954a and 1954b), a vast number of studies have appeared dealing with the structure of the treaties from the Ancient Near East, their contents and the possible relation between the treaties and the covenant in the Old Testament. The best survey of this material, with an extensive bibliography, is given by McCarthy (1978). Although the treaties do not have a uniform structure, the genre presents certain basic elements that occur in all the extant treaties. This includes an introduction naming the parties to the treaty, the stipulations of the treaty, a list of the gods that were involved as witnesses to the treaty and curses that were pronounced upon the violator of the treaty. In addition to these basic elements some of the treaties exhibit some non-essential elements. The most important of these were an historical prologue and blessings — next to the curses — in the Hittite treaties (Korosec 1931: 12-14). The precise form of the different elements in the structure may also vary in different periods. While the curses in the Hittite treaties from the second millennium B.C. usually consisted of a relatively short, standard formula, the Assyrian and Aramaic treaties from the first millennium contained elaborate curses. In these curses (and in the blessings of the Hittite treaties) fertility and infertility played no minor role.

This can clearly be seen in Fensham's exposition of common trends in Ancient Near Eastern curses (Fensham 1963). Amongst curses directed against the person of the violator of a treaty or another kind of agreement curses pertaining to the death of the cursed person and to the lack of offspring are the first to be defined (*Ibid.*, 158). These curses include the following: the seed of the transgressor will be snatched away, his name will be destroyed, his name and seed will not endure or be named, he will have no son and his name and seed will vanish (*Ibid.*, 159). In the Hittite treaties with the short curse and blessing formula the subject of fertility as such is not mentioned. It is, however, stated that the son of the king that violates the treaty, will die while the gods will protect the son of the king that keeps the treaty. A typical example of such a curse and blessing formula is the one in the treaty between the Hittite king Mursilis and Duppi-Tessub of Amurru:

The words of the treaty and the oath that are inscribed on this — 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.

But if Duppi-Tessub honors these words of the treaty and the oath that are inscribed on this tablet, may these gods of the oath protect him together with his person, his wife, his son, his grandson, (and) his country (Pritchard 1969: 205).

In some of the texts the subject is touched on more directly, though still briefly, as in the treaty between Muwatallis and Alaksandus of Wilusa. In both the curses and the blessings direct reference is made to the seed of the vassal (McCarthy 1978: 2). In the treaty between Tudhaliyas IV and Ulmi-Teshub of Dattasa mention is made not only of the king's son, but also of children in general. The reference to house and country is expanded to include the king's threshing floor, garden, field, orchard, cattle, crops and prosperity (*Ibid.*, 305, 306). The curses and blessings of the treaty between Suppiluliumas and Kurtiwaza are very elaborate. The curses include that Kurtiwaza should have no children even from a second wife and that the Hurri men with their wives, children and country should have no seed if they violate the treaty. The seed and name of the king would be exterminated (Pritchard 1969: 206).

The curses of the Assyrian treaties dating from the first millennium B.C. were much more elaborate, often with individual gods associated with specific curses. In the treaty between Ashurnirari V and Mati'ilu of Arpad the extant curses in the damaged text deal mainly with the fertility of animals and of the land, with famine as the result of violating the treaty. The young of oxen, asses, sheep and horses would all suffer because of a lack of milk. The land would be destroyed by Adad through hunger, want and famine. The people would have to eat the dust as rain would cease. The farmers would not be able to sing a harvest song, there would be no vegetation on the lands nor water in the springs. In a rather damaged portion of the text mention is also made of infertility amongst Mati'ilu wives (*Ibid.*, 533; cf. also Weidner 1932).

Extensive curses relating to infertility appear in the vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon (cf. Wiseman 1958). They concentrate on human infertility and infertility of the land. There are basically two groups of curses in these treaties, namely curses dealing with the alteration or

destruction of the tablet (lines 410-493) and curses pronounced upon a violator of the treaty's stipulations (lines 513-668). In the first group Ashur is called upon to deny fatherhood to the king (415-416, *Ibid.*, 60), Zarpanitu to destroy his name and seed (435-436, *Ibid.*, 60) and Belet-ili to put an end to birth in the land (437-438, *Ibid.*, 62; Pritchard 1969: 538). In the second group Girra is called upon to incinerate the king's- descendants (524-525, Pritchard 1969: 539). The king's descendants must disappear from the land (537-544, 663-664, *Ibid.*, 539, 541). Infertility in the land is dealt with extensively (440-452, *Ibid.*, 538). Adad is called upon to put an end to vegetation, to destroy the land through storms and locusts, resulting in want and famine (*Ibid.*, 538). Rain and dew must also stay away from the land (530-533, *Ibid.*, 539).

Curses with the same intent as these in the treaties mentioned appear in the Sefire treaties. In the treaty between Assurnirari and Mati'ilu there is a curse stipulating that there would not be enough milk for the young of the oxen, asses, sheep and horses. This same theme appears more extensively in the Sefire treaties with regard to man, cattle, sheep and horses. It is expressed as follows with regard to man: If seven wet-nurses should anoint their breasts and suckle a boy, may he not be satisfied. With regard to animals: If seven mares/cows/ewes should feed a foal/calf/lamb, may he not be satisfied (I Sefire A21-24, Van Rooy 1977: 73). Animal infertility is also mentioned at the end of a damaged part in I Sefire A21. The common curse that the descendants of the violator of the treaty would not inherit a name does also occur in I Sefire C24-25, in the section of the treaty dealing with the protection of the inscription (*Ibid.*, 83). The infertility of the land is the subject of a series of curses in I Sefire A25-29, where Hadad (just as in the vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon) is called upon to destroy the vegetation through hail. To this is added that locusts and other pests must transform the land into a desert so that no vegetation should be visible (*Ibid.*, 73). That Hadad would sow salt in Arpad and its vicinity also relates to infertility (I Sefire A36). Salt causes infertility of the soil and the pronouncement of the curse of infertility is here accompanied by the sowing of salt as a ritual act (Fensham 1962b: 50).

As regards the Old Testament, the distinction between two types of covenant between God and his people or an individual must be kept in mind. There are covenants in which God undertakes obligations and covenants in which He stipulates obligations for his people (Mendenhall 1962: 717-721, Weinfeld 1970). In the former blessings

are promised to man and the latter has structural similarities with the vassal treaties, including curse and blessing formulae relating to the keeping or violating of the covenant. An example of the former is the covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12, 15 and 17), in which the subject of Abraham's descendents is of utmost importance. It is a central part of God's promise to Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:2; 15:4-5; 17:2, 4-6). The promise that his son will sit on his throne is also an important part of the covenant with David (II Sam. 7:12-16).

As regards the other type of covenant the curses and blessings of Deuteronomy 28 are of great importance (cf. McCarthy 1978: 179-180 for the structure of this chapter). The blessings are enumerated in 28:1-14 and the curses in 15-68. Two groups of blessings can be distinguished, namely those with the formula *barûk 'attâ* (blessed are you) with the agent unmentioned (3-6) and those with the Lord as subject (7-14). Amongst the first group blessings relating to fertility have an important part: Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your beasts, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock (4, RSV). The same is true of the second group: And the LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your body, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your ground, within the land which the LORD swore to your fathers to give you (II, RSV). Even the rain, without which the vegetation can not flourish, comes from the Lord (12).

The curses in Deuteronomy 28 are much more elaborate than the blessings. A number of curses are formulated with the formula *'arûr 'attâ* (16-19). Then there are curses with the Lord as subject (20-29, 35-37, 48-49, 59-68) and curses that will be executed by men or animals (30-34, 38-44 and 49-57). Amongst the curses with the formula *'arûr 'atta* is one corresponding closely to the blessing in verse 4, omitting only the reference to "the fruit of your beasts" (18). In this curse and the corresponding blessing the three main aspects of fertility — human, animal and botanical — are summarised in one sentence. This is also true of the blessing of verse 11.

In the curses with the Lord as subject or executed by men or animals, these three aspects occur again, but are more elaborate. Reference is also made to the life-giving rain. The rain will stay away, resulting in drought if the people violate the covenant (22-24). In spite of much exertion the crops of the cultivated lands, vineyards and olive groves would be poor (38-40). Enemies sent by God will destroy the fruit of beasts and the fruit of the land (51). Even the numerous people will decrease in number (53, 62). Many of these curses have strong

similarities to curses in the vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon (cf. Frankena 1965: 144-150 for these and other correspondences between Deut. 28 and the vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon). These similarities point to the relation of the covenant curses in the Old Testament to an extensive tradition of curses in the Ancient Near East. Many other curses of a similar character occur in the Old Testament, in contexts relating to the covenant (cf. Deut. 11:3-17; 29:22-23; 30:5, 9) and in the writings of the prophets (Hag. 1:1-11; 2:15-19; Is. 4:2; 5:10; 24:1-7; 30:23-25; 32:9-29; Jer. 3:3; 9:10; 12:10-13; 23:3; Ezek. 36:7-12; 29-30; Hos. 2:21-22; Joel 1:16-20; 2:14, 19, 21-26).

3. CURSES AND BLESSINGS IN INSCRIPTIONS AND DOCUMENTS

Reference has already been made to the practice of protecting inscriptions and important documents with a series of curses. This was a common practice for a long period of time in the Ancient Near East. One of the best-known examples is in the Codex Hammurabi's epilogue, consisting of the last five columns of the codex. This has a relatively short blessing formula pronounced over the man who keeps the laws and does not alter them (about 16 lines). This is followed by an extensive series of curses against the man who does not keep the laws, but abolishes, distorts or alters them, or who destroys the name of Hammurabi (more than 270 lines from rev. col. xxvi 17 till the end of rev. col 28).

Amongst the curses famine appears, as well as the disappearance of the cursed person's name and memory. Enki is called upon to dam up the waters so that there will be no grain. The damming up of the rivers in Mesopotamia would have had same result as drought in Syria and Palestine, but still Adad is called upon to keep the rains back and to dry up the fountains. Nintu must deny the violator an heir, not let him receive a name or let him beget a male descendant (cf. Pritchard 1969: 177-180). The same kind of curses occurs often in Mesopotamian inscriptions. In the long introduction to some of Adad-Nirari I's inscriptions curses pronounced on the violator of the inscription include the destruction of that person's seed and the injunction that want, famine, hunger and drought will plague his country (Luckenbill 1968: 28-29).

In his study of the origin of apodictic laws in the Old Testament Gevirtz (1961) paid attention to quite a number of curses relating to the protection of the inscriptions in West Semitic inscriptions. These curses are not as elaborate as those mentioned above, but there are

quite a few references to the destruction of a man's seed (Yehawmilk 15, Selim-sezib 14, DNL 5 - cf. Gevirts 1961: 145-146). The same appears on funerary inscriptions (Sin-zer-ibni 11, Tabnit 7-8, Esmun 'azar 8-9 - cf. Gevirts 1961: 148-149). To this can be added a few other Aramaic inscriptions (Zakir B27-28, Nerab ii 10, Tema i 13-15 and Guzneh 4-5 - cf. Gibson 1975: 12-13, 97, 149-150, 154).

The Phoenician inscription of Karatepe (cf. Gevirts 1961: 142-143) has unfortunately been damaged at the section dealing with the curses, but in other places reference is made to fertility, especially as a blessing from the gods (cf. Ai 5-6, Aii 7-8, 11-13, Aiii 7-9, Civ 6-10 - cf. Gibson 1982: 46-55). The last two examples named above are important as they refer to the fertility of men, animals and plants.

4. HISTORICAL, MYTHOLOGICAL AND LEGENDARY TEXTS

As regards the material from the Ancient Near East attention is only given to the texts from Ugarit, in which in a special way something remained extant "of the religious life and thought of the early western Semites" (Caquot and Szyzner 1980: 7). The religion of Ugarit was mainly a fertility cult with a direct link between the fertility of the gods and the fertility of the land (Craigie 1983: 35). The fact that the Anat-Baal cycle is related to a cultic festival and especially to an autumnal new year festival is well-known (cf. Hvidberg 1962: 52-55; De Moor 1972: 4-16). In the fertility cycle Baal played a prominent part in relation to human procreation, the fertility of flocks (Cassuto 1962: 84-85) and the outpouring of rain. This can be seen in the link between the request that a house must be build for Baal and his sending of the rains at the right time (KTU 1.4 V:6-9).

In El's dream after Baal's death he saw the rain coming again and deduced from this that Baal must be alive again (KTU 1.6 III: 1-21). Gray's comment that "Baal (was) 'the lord' *par excellence* of the fertility-cult of Canaan" (1964:122) is to the point.

The importance of human fertility is at the heart of the legends of Keret and Aqhat. In the Keret texts fertility is clearly regarded as a divine blessing, with the obtaining of a male descendant directly related to the blessing of El (KTU 1.15 II:11-28; cf. also KTU 1.15 III:2-21 and Hempel 1961: 55 n. 118). Daniel, who did not have a son, received El's blessing through the mediation of Baal whereafter a son was born to him (KTU 1.17 I: 15-37). After Aqhat's death seven infertile years were part of the curse pronounced upon the land (KTU

1.19 I: 38-46). Amongst the curses pronounced by Daniel upon the towns that he held responsible for his son's death, is one pertaining to the descendants of one of the towns (KTU 1. 19 III: 53-54).

In Israel fertility was also linked to the blessing of God. He gives blessings in offspring for man and beasts, in the produce of the soil, grain, wine and oil (McKenzie 1952:124). What Israel shared with its neighbours was the relationship between divine beneficence and nature's blessing on the one hand and divine hostility and nature's hostility on the other (*Ibid.*, 132). The difference is, however, the important recognition that blessings are bestowed upon those who keep the covenant and punishment upon those who break it (*Ibid.*, 134). Obedience and fertility go hand in hand. It is often repeated that if Israel keeps God's command, He will send the rain in its time, with subsequent blessings in the realm of nature (Deut. 11:13-15; Lev. 26:3-5). A good example can be found in Deut. 7:12-14: And because you hearken to these ordinances, and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love which he swore to your fathers to keep; he will love you, bless you, and multiply you; he will also bless the fruit of your body and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your wine and oil, the increase of your cattle and the young of your flock, in the land which he swore to your fathers to give to you. You shall be blessed above all peoples; there shall not be male or female barren among you, or among your cattle (RSV).

This blessing was also requested in prayer by men to men, as was the case with Rebecca by her brothers (Gen. 24:60), Jacob by Isaac (Gen. 27:28; 28:1-4) and Joseph by Jacob (Gen. 49: 25-26). It was promised by God to men (Gen. 1:28; 9:1-7 - cf. Hempel 1961: 32). In contrast with this, infertility was a punishment for sins (Hos. 9:14; Jer. 5:23-25; Gen 4:11-12). A whole country could even suffer in this way for the sins of individuals (cf. I Sam. 21:1-14), as happened in the legend of Aqhat.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates to what extent the subject of fertility as blessing and infertility as curse lived in the hearts and minds of the people of the Ancient Near East. Without this much of the myth and ritual of the Ancient Near East can not be understood precisely because it was directed to fertility, while in Israel petition and sacrifice often had the same aim.

Summary

Fertility and infertility are amongst the most important subjects in curses and blessings in the Ancient Near East and in the Old Testament. Fertility was especially linked to three spheres: bumper crops, thriving livestock and a growing family. This paper treats the subject in treaty and covenant texts, in curses and blessings in inscriptions and documents and in historical, mythological and legendary texts to demonstrate to what extent the subject lived in the heart and minds of the people of the Ancient Near East. This lies at the background of much of the myth and ritual of the Ancient Near East and of petition and sacrifice in Israel.

Résumé

La fécondité et la stérilité figurent parmi les sujets les plus fréquents sur le plan des malédictions et bénédictions aux pays du Proche-Orient antique et dans l'Ancien Testament. La fécondité touchait à trois domaines: des recettes abondantes, un bétail croissant et une famille nombreuse. Cette étude traite le sujet comme il paraît dans les textes de traité et d'alliance au sujet des malédictions et des bénédictions dans les inscriptions et les documents, dans les textes de nature historique, mythologique et légendaire. Le but de cette étude sera donc de démontrer à quelle mesure ce sujet était vivant aux coeurs et aux pensées des gens du Proche-Orient antique. C'est ce qui est à la base de beaucoup de mythes et de rites du Proche-Orient antique et de beaucoup de requêtes et d'offrandes en Israel

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