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Melissa Ramos

George Fox University, mramos@georgefox.edu

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“You Shall Write on the Stones”: Deuteronomy 27 and the Inscribing of Ritual Curses
Melissa Ramos – UCLA
(Society of Biblical Literature: San Diego, 2014)

Introduction

In Deut 27 Moses commands the elders of Israel, once they have crossed the Jordan and arrived at Mount Ebal, to erect large stones and write on them את-כל-דברי התורה הזאת “all the words of this torah.” I would like to begin by asking the question “What was written on the stones?” In the narrative, what formed the content envisioned in such an inscription? This question is important for the discussion of how chapter 27 fits into the broader compositional schema of Deuteronomy.

One common understanding of chapter 27 is that the chapter is an “interpolation” or a segment of material that interrupts the flow of chapters 11-28.¹ With circuitous language, interruptions, and repetitions, chapter 27 is clearly a composite text. However, an examination of the question of what was written on the stone stele described in chapter 27 suggests that 27 is less of an added afterthought to 12-26 and instead a pivotal passage that connects the legal material of 12-26 with the ritual practice of covenant oath, including the blessings and curses. I will argue that the covenant ceremony of chapter 27 is the centerpiece of 12-26, rather than an added segment that disrupts the narrative and confuses the movement of the discourse of Moses.

¹ See, for example, J. Lundbom, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013: 737.

The first part of the paper will present a literary analysis of chapter 27 verses 1-8 in the light of the use of framing devices within Deuteronomy itself, and the change in interlocutors. This part of the paper looks for clues within the text itself of what the author envisioned as the content of the stone inscription. The second part of the paper will examine the context of the material record of blessing and curse inscriptions in the wider ancient Near East, especially inscriptions on stone stele and on plaster, similar to what is described in Deut 27. This part of the paper asks the question “What kinds of things were people writing on stones and on plaster in the ANE?” Both parts of the paper will provide evidence that chapters 11-28 should be understood as a unit, and as the contents of the stone inscription described in 27:1-8.

Part I: Framing Devices and Changes in Interlocutor

Scholars have long observed two prominent features of Deut 27 suggesting disruption in the flow of the narrative. First, the circuitous language fraught with interruptions and repetitions. Second, the change in interlocutor, where the material in chapters 11-26 is framed as a first person speech by Moses to the gathered assembly, while in the opening verses of chapter 27 we see a change to a third-person narrative of the actions of Moses.

Framing Devices: Deut 27 and its Connection with 11-26

Two framing devices serve as examples of the artful interweaving by the author of Deuteronomy of the ritual material in chapter 27 with the legal material in chapters 11-26 that precede it. First, an *inclusio* is formed with the distinctive phrase “a land flowing with milk and honey” in chapters 11, 26, and 27. Second, an *inclusio* framing chapters 11 and 27 where the covenant ceremony in Shechem is described. These two examples suggest that the repetitions and

interruptions in the flow of chapter 27 are, in fact, purposeful use of repetition of material from prior chapters to form a connection for the listener between the material in 11-26 and the covenant ceremony in 27.

The first example of the use of a framing device is found in one of the first few verses of chap 27, where interruption and repetition can be observed (see #1 on handout).

27:2-3a

והיה ביום אשר תעברו את-הירדן אל-הארץ אשר-יהוה
אלהיך נתן לך והקמת לך אבנים גדולות ושדת אתם בשיד:
וכתות עליהן את-כל-דברי התורה הזאת

Break in the narrative 27:3b-c

בעורך למען אשר תבא אל-הארץ אשר-יהוה אלהיך נתן לך
ארץ זבת חלב ודבש כאשר דבר הוהי אלהי-אבותיך לך:

Resumption 27:4

ויה אתבעברכם-הירדן תקימו את-האונים האלה
אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם היום בהר עיבל ושדת אותם בשיד

Verses 2-3 begin with the anticipation of crossing of the Jordan “on that day” to inherit the land gifted by “adonai your God”, followed by the command to erect large stones, cover them in plaster, and write on them all the words of this Torah. The end of verse 3 then has a break in the narrative, an addition of common deuteronomic tropes about entering the land and inheriting. The highlight of this insertion is the phrase “a land flowing with milk and honey” which is in bold in the handout. Then in verse 4, there is a resumption and the narrative reverts back to the initial setting of crossing the Jordan and a second command to erect stones and to cover them with plaster.

Especially the use of the phrase ארץ זבת חלב ודבש “a land flowing with milk and honey,” in the interruption is purposeful and forms a tie between the beginning of the segment of material in 12-26 and the opening commands in 27. While this phrase is a common one in the Hebrew Bible, the phrase occurs only five times in Deuteronomy in chapters 11, 26, and 27.² This more selective use in Deuteronomy frames major segments of legal material and serves as a deliberate framing device to connect the material in 27 with the framework of 12-26.³ Thus, the composite nature of 27:1-8 reflects a purposeful interweaving of new material introducing the covenant ritual, as well as framing devices that connect the ritual oath with the overall momentum of the narrative from chapters 11 onward.

The second example of a framing device in the narrative is the *inclusio* that brackets chapters 11-27 with the description of the covenant ritual including the oral reading of the blessings and curses on Mounts Ebal and Gerizim (see #2 on handout). Both segments from chapters 11 and 27 present the blessing and curse element of the covenant oath in terms of “obeying” the מצוות, the “commandments,” and include the setting of the covenant ceremony on the mountains that surround Shechem:

See I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments... and the curse, if you do not obey... You shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal... (11:26-28, 29)

Then Moses and the elders of Israel charged all the people as follows: Keep the entire commandment I am commanding you today... When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim for the blessing of the people... And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse... (27:1, 12-13)

² The phrase occurs in Deut 6:3; 11:19; 26:9, 15; and 27:3. The phrase is more widespread in the HB generally occurring 67 times

³ While this phrase also occurs in 6:3, it seems also to serve the purpose of connection and transition between the material of the Decalogue and the paranaetic material that follows, similar to the schema presented above for framing blocks of legal and ritual material.

As you can see on the handout, both chapters describe the covenant ceremony in the same way, yet there is a lengthy gap between the first mention of the covenant ceremony on the mountains in chapter 11, and it is not mentioned again until the full script is given for the performance of the Levites in chapter 27. Thus, the use of this *inclusio* structure suggests that the covenant ceremony presented in 27-28 is seen by the author as a cultic ratification of the laws given in 12-26 prior framed by the envelope structure in 11 and 27.

The Question of Interlocutor Change: Deut 27 and its Connection with Chapter 28

The shift in the speech frame in Deut 26-27 from first-person to third-person narration appears to introduce a break in the material (see #3 on handout). This change in interlocutor has created some debate about the identity of the speaker in Deut 28. In 27:14 a script is presented for the Levites to follow during the oral performance of the oath ceremony, with parts for the priests to speak aloud and parts for the gathered assembly to speak aloud. However, the speech reverts back to first-person speech by Moses similar to what we find in Deut 5-26. Thus, the question remains whether the blessing and curse formulae in chapter 28 are a continuation of the script begun by the Levites in 27, or a continuation of the speech of Moses from 26.⁴ It seems unnecessary, however, to choose one or the other. The narrative, as it is presented in Deuteronomy, unfolds as a speech within a speech: the speech of Moses and a script for the oral performance of the oath ceremony by the Levites to be performed at a later date in Shechem.

⁴ N. Lohfink, "Moab oder Sichem – wo wurde Dtn 28 nach der Fabel des Deuteronomiums proklamiert?," *Studies in Deuteronomy: in Honour of C.J. Labuschagne on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*. F. García Martine et al, eds. VTS 53. Leiden: Brill, 1994): 139-153. H. Steymans, *Deuteronomium 28 und die adê zur Thronfolgeregelung Asarhaddons: Segen und Fluch im Alten Orient und in Israel*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 145. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995: 202-207. While Lohfink contends that Deut 28 continues the speech of the Levites, Steymans posits 28 as the words of Moses, a "sprechakte." Steymans finds grounds for viewing Moses as the liturgist who blesses and curses Israel speaking on behalf of gathered assembly within ANE treaties, particularly the Succession Treaty of Esarhaddon.

By way of comparison and inquiry into changes of interlocutor in ancient near eastern texts more broadly, the Sefire Treaty from northern Syria in the 9th century BCE provides a helpful corollary. The treaty begins with a third-person narration of the parties of the treaty and its witnesses. However, toward the end of the treaty the frame changes to first-person speech for the interlocutor and second-person pronouns and verbs for the listeners who are parties to the treaty.⁵ An example of this is printed in the handout at #4.

והן תשמוען ותשלמן עדיא אלן
 ותאמר גבר עדן הא אנה לאכהל לא שלה יד בך וליכהל ברי לישלה יד בברך

But if you obey and observe this treaty and say, ‘I am an ally,’ I will not be able to raise a hand against you; nor will my son be able to raise a hand against your son. . .
 (Sefire B VI:23-25)

והיה אמ-שמוע תשמע בקול יהוה אלהיך
 לשמר את-כל-מכותיו אשר אנכי מצוך היום ונתנך יהוה אלהיך עליון על כל-גויי הארץ

If only you will obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth.
 (Deut 28:1)

Observe the use of similar language for respecting the oath agreement with the verb לשמוע. And also a noteworthy observation is that both the Sefire treaty and Deut 27:1 are framed as direct, or first-person speech, on the part of the king or leader.

Now, although the Sefire Treaty includes material framed as the words of the king, it seems unlikely that the king himself would have read or performed the treaty aloud. More likely this was the work of ritual practitioners who also performed the physical manipulation of objects that accompanied the curses. Thus the treaty worked in some ways as a script of sorts for use by

⁵ See, for example, Sefire I B lines 21 ff. Line numbers from J. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire; Biblica et Orientalia 19* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967).

ritual practitioners, as well as a set of inscribed stipulations written on a stele as a public reminder of the subjugation of the kingdom to a more powerful empire.⁶ Similarly, Deut 27 presents a ritual oath ceremony to be performed by ritual practitioners, the levitical priests. The stipulations were also inscribed on stone stelae erected for public display as reminders of the oath made to a higher power. Thus, the change in Deut 27-28 from third-person narration to first-person direct address seem less surprising in the context of ANE treaties, and particularly western treaties such as Sefire and Baal of Tyre. Furthermore, the duality of the framing device of Moses' speech within a speech, or a script within a speech, fits nicely with the model of the Sefire treaty where the written material serves as a script of sorts for the oral performance, although crafted to represent the words of the leader of the kingdom.

So in this first part of the paper I have attempted to demonstrate that, although Deut 27 begins with a change in interlocutor, and the narrative does not flow all that smoothly, nonetheless chapters 11-26 and 27-28 form an organic whole. And furthermore, that this change in interlocutor may reflect the desire of the author to integrate two speeches together, the speech of Moses in the book of Deuteronomy as a whole, and the script for the speech of the Levites to be performed in the covenant ratification ceremony in Shechem.

Part II: The Inscribing of Curses on Stone and Plaster

A different method for addressing the question of what was written on the stele described in chapter 27:1-8, is to ask what kinds of things people were writing on stones in the ancient Near

⁶ The holes for display in the copies of the Succession Treaty and their placement in temples suggests ritual use. For example, see J. Scurlock "Getting Smashed at the Victory Celebration, or What Happened to Esarhaddon's So-Called Vassal Treaties and Why," in *Iconoclasm and Texts: Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond* (ed. N. N. May; Oriental Institute Seminars 8; Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2012).

East. During the Iron II period, in particular, inscriptions bearing curse and blessing formulae flourished. Many exemplars of blessing and curse formulae can be cited in the southern Levant, from the Ketef Hinnom amulets to the pithoi inscriptions of Kuntillet 'Ajrud, to tomb, sarcophagus, and stele inscriptions containing curses against those who would deface them. One of the notable features of blessing and curse inscriptions from the Iron II period is that they were made for display purposes. The STE tablets are examples of this, found in the Nabu Temple in Nineveh. The display function of the STE tablets has been brought to the forefront in the work on the Tel Tayinat excavation where an exemplar of the STE was found with holes for display, and also the tablets from the assemblage were crafted in an "amulet" type of shape. Likewise the command of Moses in Deut 27:1-8 prescribes the building of an altar, and the erection of a stone inscription bearing the words of "this Torah." Furthermore, the display in a cultic location of these objects suggests that they were not administrative records, but were seen as objects with ritual power.

In this second half of the paper I want to focus on inscriptions written on stone and plaster that feature blessings and curses, since that is the type of object depicted in Deut 27: 1-8. These inscriptions also seem to have been made for display purposes, erected in a location that suggests some sort of cultic practice took place in the find site.

Sefire

This 9th century treaty stele from Northern Syria provides an example of the two elements of the object described in Deut 27:1-8: an oath treaty that was inscribed on a stone stele.⁷ Although the

⁷ Most Neo-Assyrian treaties were inscribed on clay tablets, however, at least one exception to this, need to check Parpola's book again. One inscription is stone tablet.

location and setting where the Sefire stele was erected is unknown, its size and content suggest that it was made for display purposes. The Sefire Treaty in Aramaic is perhaps the strongest parallel to the stelae described in Deut 27:1-8 since the treaty genre shares many features with Deuteronomy overall.⁸ In particular, some of the formulaic curse language in the Sefire stele shares parallels with curse formulae in Deut 28.⁹ An important observation for this paper also is that this treaty contains 3 elements also shared with Deut 12-28: legal stipulations for the treaty and its parties, curses to be meted out upon those who violate the terms of the oath, as well as hints of a ritual performance of the treaty with the magical manipulation of objects (see #5 on handout).

The Sefire treaty also seems to contain a script of sorts for the performance of the curses. For example, in the Sefire treaty we have curse lines such as: “Just as this wax is burned by fire, so may X city be burned...” The burning of wax figurines, the ritual breaking of weapons, and the manipulation of objects accompanied the ceremony in which the ritual oath was ratified. All three of these same elements are shared in Deut 11-28: a set of legal stipulations (chapters 11-26), an oath ratification ceremony (chapter 27), and a performance of the curses where they were read orally by ritual practitioners (chapters 27-28).

Inscriptions in Caves Featuring Curse Language in Iron II Judah

⁸ See, for example, J. Fitzmyer, *The Aramaic Inscriptions of Sefire*. Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1967. Fitzmyer’s study also includes plates of the stele itself.

⁹ See, for example, C. Koch, *Vertrag, Treueid und Bund: Studien zur Rezeption des altorientalischen Vertragsrechts im Deuteronomium und zur Ausbildung der Bundestheologie im Alten Testament* (New York: de Gruyter, 2008), 235ff.

Not only were inscriptions on stone featuring curses written on stele in the wider ancient Near East, but both curses and blessings inscribed in caves in Judah from the Iron II period.¹⁰ The Ein Gedi and Beit Lei caves in Judah are both sites with blessing and curse formulae inscribed on the stone of cave walls. The Ein Gedi a cave inscription was made by applying ink directly to a natural deposit of calcite, similar to plaster, on the cave wall.¹¹ The Beit Lei cave contains lapidary inscriptions carved onto the face of the cave stone, along with iconographic depictions of various human figures and objects.¹² The verbs employed in both cave inscriptions to bless and curse are written in the same style as the blessings and curses in Deut 27:15-26 and 28:3-6. Both the Ein Gedi cave inscription and these curse formulae from Deuteronomy 27-28 employ passive participles to lead off each line with either a blessing or a curse: (see #6 on handout)

אָרֵר אֲשֶׁר יִמְחָה
Cursed is the one who defaces...
בָּרַךְ בְּגֵי מֶלֶךְ
Blessed be BGY king...
(Ein Gedi Cave)

אָרֵר הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יַעֲשֶׂה פֶסֶל...
Cursed is the one who makes an idol..
(Deut 27:15)
בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה בְּעִיר וּבְרוּךְ אַתָּה בַשָּׂדֶה
Blessed are you in the city and blessed are you in the field.
(Deut 28:3)

אָרָרָהוּ
he cursed him
(Beit Lei Cave)

Particularly the curse lines from the Ein Gedi cave and Deut 27:15 show striking parallelism with the use of the curse formula אָרֵר אֲשֶׁר or “cursed is the one who...”, followed by verbs in the

¹⁰ For a general survey of lapidary inscriptions from ancient Israel see Z. Zevit, *The Religions of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches*. New York: Continuum, 2001: 350-438.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 351. A natural layer of calcium carbonate formed an uneven surface used by the writer to apply the ink inscription.

¹² *Ibid.*, 405-437.

imperfect or jussive form. The use of parallel verbs and similar linguistic structure suggests that this type of curse might have been in wide use in written texts during the late Iron II period. The Beit Lei cave in particular with its inscriptions paired with drawings of people and objects suggests a ritual context to the blessing and curse texts carved into the stone. While the iconographic depictions are difficult to interpret, the human figures depicted seem to include a figure in a petitioning posture perhaps in prayer, and also a lyre player, with a hand posture similar to the lyre player found on the pithoi inscriptions in Kuntillet Ajrud. While the purpose of the cave or the inscriptions and drawings are uncertain, it seems likely that the blessing and curse inscriptions there, along with the iconographic images were connected to some sort of cultic practice that took place in the cave. Thus, as with the Sefire treaty, the inscribing of blessings and curses in the Beit Lei cave, and perhaps the Ein Gedi cave also, was connected with ritual practice.

Deir Alla Plaster Inscription

The command of Moses in Deuteronomy 27:1-8 to write “all the words of this Torah” on stones also includes the directive to cover the stones in plaster. Evidence for this tradition of ink inscriptions written on plaster can be found at both the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud and Deir Alla excavation sites. The curved edges of some of the fragments of the Deir Alla plaster inscriptions suggest that the inscription might have been attached to an object, such as a stone stele.¹³ Both sets of plaster texts are very fragmentary and, thus, difficult to decipher, the Deir Alla text has some affinities with the cultural trend of inscribing curses during the Iron II period. The Deir Alla inscription about “Balaam son of Beor” is not only fragmentary, but cryptic as well, and so it is difficult to

¹³ J. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Allā*. Harvard Semitic Monographs 31. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980: 3; Get Franken and Ibrahim, *ADAJ* XXII (1977-1978): 65-68.

say what exactly is the primary content of the inscription. And while the readable fragments of the inscription contain no curse formulae like those seen in treaty texts or Deut 27-28, the Deir Alla plaster inscription is nonetheless one that seems to feature Balaam son of Beor forecasting gloom and doom. One particular fragment published in Hoftijzer's 1976 volume is of particular interest for this survey of curse and blessing formulae. This small fragment contains curse language with strong parallels to curse passages in the Hebrew Bible: (see #7 on handout)

—לקב.נקב.כפוה.ו.—
(Deir Alla Combination IX a3)

While this verb for cursing לנקב is not one found in Deuteronomy 27-28, it is a verb found in Numbers 23:8 in the Balaam cycle: (see handout)

מה אקב לא קבה אל ומה אזעם לא זעם יהוה:
How can I curse someone whom God has not cursed, and how can I denounce someone whom
God has not denounced?
(Num 23:8)

Note particularly the negative particle לא in the Hebrew text and ל in the Deir Alla text followed by the participle form of לנקב. This same verb also appears in Job 3:8 in a parallel construct with ארור, the verb employed in Deut 27 for pronouncing a curse. While Deir Alla does not contain any direct parallels with Deut 27, it certainly shares parallels with the Numbers 23:8 narrative of Balaam son of Beor who is hired to curse the Israelites, and instead blesses them. Again, this tradition of inscribing curses on stone and plaster is evidenced by the Deir Alla text, even if in a small fragment. Furthermore, the room where the plaster fragments were discovered seems also to be an Iron Age sanctuary of some sort.¹⁴ The plaster inscriptions thus also seem to be connected with cultic practice, similar to the other inscriptions discussed.

¹⁴ See, for example, P.K. McCarter, "The Balaam Texts from Deir 'Allā: The First Combination," *BASOR* (1980): 49.

Conclusion

I began the paper asking the question “What was written on the stones described in Deuteronomy 27?” The use of framing devices, the speech within a speech motif, and the flourishing tradition of inscribing ritual curses and blessings during the seventh century BCE all suggest that the author of Deuteronomy envisioned three things on the stones: legal stipulations such as those in Deut 12-26, and blessings and curses such as those in Deut 27-28. Also the covenant ceremony described in Deut 27 fits nicely with the cultic practice and setting that seemed to accompany the ratifying of treaties and the inscribing of blessings and curses during the Iron II Period. In fact, the display of inscriptions bearing blessings and curses in cult sites seems to have been an integral part of the creation of the stele or clay tablet or wall inscription. The setting and content for such objects suggest that they did not function as administrative records, but as objects of ritual power. The inscribed object or wall was a means of increasing the efficacy of the blessing and curse, and imbuing the object with ritual power. The object itself would have served as a visual reminder to the community of the oath that was sworn, the curses spoken aloud and/or performed, and the consequences of violating the oath agreement.