

Deuteronomy 27:14–26

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This section contains a list of twelve curses that the Levites were to recite to the Israelites. Upon hearing each curse, the Israelites are to respond by saying 'Amen.'

This section continues Moses's instructions to the people for a ceremony they are to conduct once they have crossed the Jordan and taken possession of the land near Shechem that contained Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. At this point, the people are still on the west side of the Jordan River, in the land of Moab (see map on sidebar).

Eventually, the Samaritan people would choose Mount Gerizim as their holy mountain, and would contest Jerusalem as a primary site for worship. This is referenced by the Samaritan woman whom Jesus spoke with at Jacob's Well in John 4, when she states:

"Our fathers worshiped in this mountain, and you *people* say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship"
(John 4:20).

(Samaria was also called Israel when the kingdom split in two parts, with the southern kingdom being ruled by David's descendants. The southern kingdom was called Judah).

This passage is the first of two sections containing curses that were to be pronounced at the planned ceremony. The second section of is in Deuteronomy 28:15 – 68. In between these two sections is a group of blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1 – 14). This passage here is comprised of twelve curses that the Levites were to declare to the people. Though the twelve curses probably represented the twelve tribes, the Levites would *answer and say to all the men of Israel with a loud voice* (v. 14). To speak *with a loud voice* would guarantee that everyone would hear and thus be without excuse. After hearing each curse, the people were to respond with the word "Amen", signifying their agreement to obey.

This would be a further ratification of the provisions of the covenant they had just ratified between the nation and Yahweh, their Suzerain ruler (Matthew 26:17). It would be somewhat like initialing specific provisions of a modern contract, so you could not later claim “I did not read that part.” Israel is to make very specific agreement that they have agreed to a covenant with God that contains specific curses upon them if they breach their agreement.

The first curse deals with an Israelite’s relationship to his sovereign LORD. It concerns idolatry done in secret. Moses stated that *cursed is the man who makes an idol or a molten image* (v. 15). The word for *cursed* (Heb. “*ārar*”) is one of many Hebrew words translated “to curse.” This word implies being banned from receiving some benefit. Here, it would mean that the one(s) committing idolatry would be banned from being blessed by the sovereign LORD. The word for *idol* (Heb. “*pesel*”) refers to something (wood or stone) that was hewn into the likeness (or image) of a human or animal. A *molten image* (Heb. “*masseka*”) has the meaning of “molten image,” something made by pouring liquid metal into a cast.

Any likeness of a deity made in any way was *an abomination to the LORD*. That which is *an abomination* is abhorrent and detestable to God’s holy character. It was *the work of the hands of the craftsman*, not the Creator LORD, and he *sets it up in secret*. Publicly, the person might worship the LORD and then secretly worship an idol, including an idol that was supposed to represent the LORD (Deuteronomy 4:15–18). An example of someone doing this can be found in Judges 17:1 – 5.

Such idolatry (the worship of man-made images) is discussed first because it was a violation of the first two commandments (Deuteronomy 5:7–10). The worship of an idol implies that the LORD God of Israel was not worthy of one’s complete loyalty. That is why the author said that any *idol or a molten image* was not to be worshiped because it is *an abomination to the Lord*, a detestable act.

Because the Suzerain (Ruler) God often described Israel as His wife (Hosea 2:2–23), the worship of idols by Israel was a form of infidelity. As such, anyone making an idol, *the work of the hands of the craftsman*, and setting it *up in secret* was to be *cursed*. The phrase *in secret* is added because few Israelites would set up an idol publicly since they knew this was prohibited by the Mosaic Law.

Then, to acknowledge their understanding and agreement to the curse's declaration, *all the people would answer and say, 'Amen.'* The term *amen* literally means "surely" or "truly" and is a strong affirmation of the truth, meaning "so be it!" or "let it be so." It is a full affirmation that the people agree that this is a worthy consequence for breaching their agreement with God.

The next ten curses deal with human relationships. The first one in this group has to do with honoring one's parents. Moses stated, *cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother* (v. 16). To *dishonor* (Heb. "qāla") means to treat with contempt, to disgrace, or to hold in low esteem. In a word, to *dishonor* means to consider worthless. The people of God were commanded to honor (regard as valuable) their parents (Deuteronomy 5:16).

This was expressed by showing love, obedience, and support to their parents. The fifth commandment was to honor and obey parents, so it was a top priority within God's covenant with Israel. Children were to honor and obey parents, even as Israel was to honor and obey God. As representatives of God's authority, parents deserved to be honored.

Such a level of obedience was so important that the Mosaic Law allowed parents to deliver any rebellious or stubborn child over to the community for capital punishment, when the parents lost all hope of correction for that child (Deuteronomy 21:18–21). Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, 'Amen,'* indicating their full agreement.

The next curse involved a law previously stated in Deuteronomy 19:14. A curse was declared on anyone *who moves his neighbor's boundary mark* (v. 17). To move a *boundary mark* (evidence of ownership) was essentially theft, taking another's property (presumably done in secret) to enlarge one's own field. This was not permitted among the Israelite community. This was a violation of the commandment not to steal. Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, 'Amen,'* indicating their full agreement that this curse was proper for such illegal activity.

The Levites then declared *cursed is he who misleads a blind person on the road* (v. 18). This curse is probably based on the precept in Leviticus 19:14. To mislead a *blind person* while he or she was *on the road* would put that person in physical danger. It also would show one's indifference to the welfare of other Israelites and, as such, was a violation of Leviticus 19:18, the command

to love one's neighbor as themselves. This command was the embodiment of the application of the Mosaic Law. The primary application of loving others was to love those (like the blind) who could not repay your kindness. Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, 'Amen,'* indicating their agreement that this curse was proper.

Verse 18 was concerned with someone who was physically vulnerable. The next curse involved those who were socially vulnerable. Here, the Levites shouted *cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow* (v. 19). An *alien* was a foreigner who resided in the land of Israel, making it his permanent home. An *orphan*—a child without a father—was vulnerable because he did not enjoy the protection of the male figure (father), as is the case in a normal family. Similarly, a *widow*—a woman who has lost her husband by death and remains unmarried—was without the physical protection and provision of a husband. People who were in these situations were especially vulnerable and could be easily taken advantage of. The Israelites were commanded to protect them and provide for them as the LORD did (Deuteronomy 10:18; 24:19-21). Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, 'Amen,'* indicating that this curse was appropriate, and that they were in agreement.

The next three curses involve banned sexual situations. The first curse in this group relates to incest. The Levites were to proclaim *cursed is he who lies with his father's wife* (v. 20). This is related to the prohibition of incest in Deuteronomy 22:30, as well as Leviticus 18:6-18. The reason given here is that such an act would *uncover his father's skirt*. The phrase *uncover your father's skirt* is a euphemism describing the dishonoring of the father by having sexual relations with his father's wife. Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, 'Amen.'*

This negative command reiterated what the Suzerain (Ruler) God had prohibited in the book of Leviticus that says *You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife; it is your father's nakedness* (Leviticus 18:8).

The next curse states that *cursed is he who lies with any animal* (v. 21). This sin (called bestiality) was so serious that its penalty was capital punishment (Exodus 22:19; Leviticus 18:23, 20:15f). The statement "*he or they shall surely be put to death*" (e.g., Leviticus 20:16) is intense in the Hebrew text. Such a sin violates God's order of creation in which He created men and women in His own image and separated them from animals (Genesis 1:26-28; 2:18-25).

Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, 'Amen'*

Another form of incest was dealt with in the next curse, which said *Cursed is he who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or of his mother* (v. 22). In Leviticus, the Suzerain God told His vassals that such an act was a *disgrace* and the people involved were to *be cut off in the sight of the sons of their people* (Leviticus 20:17). Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, 'Amen.'*

The next curse related to sexual immorality state that *Cursed is he who lies with his mother-in-law* (v. 23). This prohibition had been given in the book of Leviticus (Leviticus 20:14), and the seriousness of this sexual sin is seen in the punishment—the people involved were to be put to death and then cremated (*burned with fire*). Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, 'Amen.'*

The curse in verse 24 deals with bodily harm inflicted on one's neighbor secretly. It stated that *Cursed is he who strikes his neighbor in secret* (v. 24). The verb translated *to strike* (Heb. "nāka") means "to strike" or "to smite." Just like in the first curse (v. 15), this act was done *in secret*. Jewish tradition said this provision referred to slander. This seems to fit the context, given that the *strike* is said to have been in *secret*; a physical *strike* could not really be given secretly. Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, 'Amen.'*

As with the previous curse concerning harming another person in secret, the following curse dealt with someone accepting a bribe to commit murder in secret, a violation of the sixth commandment (Deuteronomy 5:17). It specified that *Cursed is he who accepts a bribe to strike down an innocent person* (v. 25). Earlier, to take a bribe meant to accept some form of payment to render an unjust or unfair decision (Deuteronomy 16:19). This curse addressed the issue of someone taking a bribe to kill an *innocent* (blameless) person. Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, 'Amen.'*

The next curse provided a summary statement for all the curses in this chapter. It reads, *Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them* (v. 26). The phrase *the words of this law* probably refers to the entire book of Deuteronomy. James might have had this provision in mind

when he wrote, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one *point*, he has become guilty of all” (James 2:10). Having heard and agreed to the proclamation of the curse, *all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’*

God’s people were constantly reminded to obey God’s covenantal precepts to receive His blessings. Any Israelite who failed to obey the covenant would suffer great consequences and the people would say *amen* because the Suzerain God had already warned them.

Biblical Text:

14 The Levites shall then answer and say to all the men of Israel with a loud voice,

15 ‘Cursed is the man who makes an idol or a molten image, an abomination to the Lord, the work of the hands of the craftsman, and sets *it* up in secret.’ And all the people shall answer and say, ‘Amen.’

16 ‘Cursed is he who dishonors his father or mother.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

17 ‘Cursed is he who moves his neighbor’s boundary mark.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

18 ‘Cursed is he who misleads a blind *person* on the road.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

19 ‘Cursed is he who distorts the justice due an alien, orphan, and widow.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

20 ‘Cursed is he who lies with his father’s wife, because he has uncovered his father’s skirt.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

21 ‘Cursed is he who lies with any animal.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

22 ‘Cursed is he who lies with his sister, the daughter of his father or of his mother.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

23 ‘Cursed is he who lies with his mother-in-law.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

24 ‘Cursed is he who strikes his neighbor in secret.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

25 ‘Cursed is he who accepts a bribe to strike down an innocent person.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’

26 ‘Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’