

Deuteronomy 32:23-27

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The Suzerain (Ruler) God says He will use various tools such as famine, disease, war, wild beasts, and venomous snakes to carry out His judgment on His disobedient vassals, Israel.

Moses continues to set forth the Song of Moses for Israel to sing and remember their covenant with Him. This is just prior to the time when Moses will die, and Joshua will lead the people across the Jordan into the Promised Land.

As the LORD sentenced Israel for abandoning Him (vv. 19-22), He then turned from the symbol of judgment with fire to the imagery of a warrior to explain how His judgment would be carried out. He began by saying, *I will heap misfortunes on them; I will use My arrows on them* (v. 23). The verb “to heap” (Heb. “sāpā”) means “to multiply” or “to pile up.” The term for *misfortunes* (Heb. “rā’ōwṭ”) can be translated as “evil” or “wickedness” ([Genesis 6:5](#)). Here, it is best translated as “misery” or “calamities” brought by the Suzerain God upon His covenant for disobedience, pursuant to the terms of the treaty Israel had agreed to follow ([Exodus 19:8](#)) but now had broken.

To implement this, the LORD said that He would *use My arrows on them*. Because His covenant people had rejected Him in favor of false and insignificant gods ([Deuteronomy 32:15-18](#)), they would be the victim of His *arrows*. Because they had forsaken God’s command to love their neighbors, and instead had sunk to the pagan ways of exploitation, God would judge them even as He judged the Canaanites for their wickedness. What form these *arrows* took is described in the next verse.

The Israelites would experience the LORD’s arrows as being *wasted by famine, and consumed by plague* (v. 24). The *famine* would be caused by crops being destroyed by bad weather or some other natural catastrophe. These climatic changes would cause poor harvests, leading to a lack of food ([Genesis 41:29-31](#); [2 Kings 4:38](#)). Because such conditions were often unpredictable, the faithful people of God understood the necessity of trusting their Suzerain

(Ruler) God to provide for them ([Psalm 33:18-19](#); [37:19](#)). In such a case, absence of famine was a blessing from the LORD ([Ezekiel 34:29](#)).

Here, *famine* is one of the *arrows* the warrior-King promised to use against His covenant people if they disobeyed His covenantal precepts ([Deuteronomy 28:48](#)). This was “the deal” that Israel agreed to. The first generation agreed ([Exodus 19:8](#)). Then God restated the covenant to this second generation hearing the speech of Moses that is most of the text of Deuteronomy, and they ratified the treaty ([Deuteronomy 26:17](#)). Therefore, these judgements of God are necessary and expected, as God keeps His word, although He is rich in mercy and slow to anger ([Exodus 34:6](#)).

The word *plague* (Heb. “reshep”) is rendered “pestilence” in other translations. Also, it is the name of the god of pestilence in Ugaritic literature. Ugarit was a Canaanite port city north of Israel in what is now Syria. So it could apply to destruction from enemies. It could also potentially apply to attack by demonic forces.

This is followed by *bitter destruction*, a reference to epidemic or natural disasters. The word *destruction* (Heb. “Qeteb”) could refer to the damage done by the pestilence. Not only will the curses of Israel sinking into exploitation come from natural consequences and the removal of God’s protection—the LORD will also allow natural disasters to befall them (again, according to the treaty covenant into which Israel, as the vassals, had entered in to with God, the Suzerain Ruler). This was according to the curses for disobedience of [Deuteronomy 28:21-22](#)). This Song of Moses is to serve as a reminder of the terms to which Israel had agreed.

In addition, the LORD would also *send the teeth of beasts with the venom of crawling things of the dust* to destroy Israel. These terms refer to wild animals such as lions and bears, and venomous snakes. These were the animals the Suzerain God would send to harm or kill His covenant people as punishment for violating His laws, pursuant to the terms of the covenant agreement into which the people had entered, and agreed to ([Deuteronomy 28:15-68](#)).

Describing the scope of His punishment, the LORD now said, *Outside the sword will bereave, and inside terror* (v. 25). The terms *outside* and *inside* (a merism inferring the totality of all that is between) imply that God’s judgment would occur everywhere—both in the streets and in people’s homes. The

word *bereave* (Heb. “Shākal”) is often translated “to make childless.” Given the importance of having children to carry on the family name in Israelite society, this was an especially ominous consequence.

Parallel to this were those in their homes who would be seized by *terror*. The word *terror* (Heb. “’ēmâ”) has the connotation of overwhelming dread (see [Proverbs 20:2](#)). God’s judgment would include *both young man and virgin, the nursling with the man of gray hair*. This is also a merism that pictures that nobody would be spared, young to old and everyone in between. Again this stanza is a reminder of the provisions of the covenant to which the people had agreed. It was a reminder that they would choose their own consequences, and an exhortation to choose wisely.

In the last two verses of this section, the LORD reminds Israel that He reversed His decision to do away with the entire nation of Israel. He said that He would *cut them to pieces and remove the memory of them from men* (v. 26) because they had acted corruptly toward Him (see v. 6). His intention was to annihilate His faithless people from the face of the earth. This is covered earlier in Deuteronomy, when Moses interceded with God. God relented of His desire to destroy Israel and start anew to keep His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob through Moses ([Deuteronomy 9:13-14](#)).

The LORD stated that He would have done away with His people *had I not feared the provocation by the enemy* (v. 27). Doing so would cause the other nations to misinterpret what was happening. This was the essence of Moses’s intercessory prayer to God, asking Him to relent of destroying Israel. Moses argued that Egypt and the surrounding nations would misinterpret, and think God was not able to deliver ([Exodus 32:11-14](#)).

So God relented because these foreign nations (Israel’s *adversaries*) would misjudge the situation and conclude that their *hand is triumphant, and the Lord has not done all this*. From their perspective, they would think their armies were superior to Israel’s army and their gods superior to Israel’s God. Thus Israel is invited to recall that they narrowly escaped destruction, and heed the warning to walk in obedience to God, and follow the commands of the covenant into which they had agreed.

Yahweh decided to show great compassion, grace, and mercy to Israel to turn His wrath toward the enemies. The God of Israel would not allow the enemy to triumph or misjudge His actions because He would not give His glory to other

insignificant gods or His “praise to graven images” ([Isaiah 42:8](#)). However, this Song of Moses makes clear that God will eventually uphold the terms of the covenant, and Israel will reap what they sow. Israel will determine whether they are blessed or cursed by their own decisions, their own actions.

Biblical Text:

²³ **‘I will heap misfortunes on them;**

I will use My arrows on them.

²⁴ ***‘They will be wasted by famine, and consumed by ^[9]plague***

And bitter destruction;

And the teeth of beasts I will send upon them,

With the venom of crawling things of the dust.

²⁵ **Outside the sword will bereave,**

And inside terror—

Both young man and virgin,

The nursling with the man of gray hair.

²⁶ **I would have said, ‘I will cut them to pieces,**

I will remove the memory of them from men,’

²⁷ **Had I not feared the provocation by the enemy,**

That their adversaries would misjudge,

That they would say, ‘Our hand is triumphant,

And the Lord has not done all this.’