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THE BLESSING AND THE CURSE IN THE TALMUDIC PERIOD

by

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of the requirements for the  
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and Ordination.

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ע הורני...

הצאן שאדם מכבד את אביו ואם אלו אלו הקב"ה

מעשה אני עליהם כאלו דרתי היניהם וכהדוני...

קידושין ע:

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## Digest

This thesis presents an analysis of the blessing and the curse in the Talmudic period. The blessing is defined as any statement of beneficial wish uttered by God or man; while the curse is taken in opposition to the blessing and is to include those wishes of evil intent which <sup>a</sup> may be spoken by God or man. No attempt has been made to deal with formal benedictions, prayers, or petitions.

The blessing and the curse are analyzed after a classification of the material according to subject matter. This approach has been chosen in preference to a chronological or linguistic method of analysis. Within the framework of each chapter all blessings and curses which the author was able to find are carefully treated and those conclusions which have been derived from this treatment are presented.

The final chapter of the thesis is devoted to a presentation of some general conclusions drawn from this material. It may be concluded that there is no discernable development in connection with these phenomena during the period under discussion. There is no detectable variation in the treatment of these phenomena between Babylonia and Palestine; nor can one discover a single school or a segment of this period which evinced a special interest in these phenomena. It becomes quite obvious that the rabbis

during this entire period held no belief in the efficacy of the blessing and the curse. Concern with efficacy was only expressed while dealing with Biblical times or in those few cases in which the Torah left them no choice of position as the rite of the suspected adulteress. It may be clearly demonstrated that the rabbis held no belief in the power of these phenomena, however the attitude of the common people cannot be ascertained as insufficient material is available.

It is the purpose of this paper to deal with the blessing and the curse during the Talmudic period. Within the frame of this paper the blessing may be defined as any statement of beneficial wish uttered by God or man; the agent to whom such a wish is addressed may be named or omitted. This paper will not deal with formalized benedictions, prayers, or petitions which may also use the word בְּרָכָה in their introduction. The curse is taken in opposition to the blessing and is to include those wishes of evil intent which may be spoken by God or man.

The literature which this paper utilizes stems from approximately the first century to the seventh century of our era. It includes the Mishna, Tosefta, Mek'alta de-Rabbi Ishmael, Sifra debe Rab, Sifre debe Rab, Babylonian Talmud, Palestinian Talmud, and Midrash Rabba. The Tannaitic sources often reflect the thought of earlier times, but only on rare occasions can such material be definitely dated. Some of this literature was edited considerably later than the period under discussion, notably sections of the Midrash Rabba, but much of this material stems from previous centuries as may be seen by the numerous earlier scholars who are quoted. Major sections of this work were edited during the sixth and seventh centuries<sup>1</sup> and so form a valuable source for this paper.

The material of this essay will be treated under



1. H. Strack. Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash, pp. 211-222.  
 I. H. Weiss. 1777/ 717 717, III, p. 261 f.  
The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, pp. 538-540.
2. A - Amora. BA - Babylonian Amora. T - Tanna. The numbers (1-7) which follow immediately after these letters indicate the generations during which these scholars lived.
3. Bornstein. "Amoräer" (Encyclopaedia Judaica), vol. 2.  
 L. Ginzberg. "Tannaim and Amoraim" (The Jewish Encyclopedia), vol. 13.  
 H. Strack. Op. cit., pp. 105-134.  
 M. Mielziner. Introduction to the Talmud, pp. 22-55.
4. Tosefta Aboda Zara 8:4, Sanhedrin 46 a, 56 a, Yerushalmi Sabbath 49 a, etc. It should be noted that all references to the Palestinian Talmud in this paper indicate the Zhitomir edition.

Both blessing and curse are encountered rather frequently in the Bible. The blessing of God, "be fruitful and multiply" (Gen. 1:22), is already found in the story of the creation. Myths formed around the blessing and the curse explained the peculiarities of the serpent, woman's pain in child birth, the constant difficulties in tilling the soil, and other matters. The laying of the hands seems to form a part of the rite of blessing (Gen. 48:13); the dying father or leader appears to have special powers of blessing (Gen. 47, Deut. 33). He who is blessed by God becomes a blessing to others (Gen. 12:2); yet the blessing and the curse of God work in strange ways so that Obed Edom (II Sam. 6:12) is blessed because of the ark of God while Uzzah (II Sam. 6:7) and others (I Sam. 5:6 f.) suffer through it. The blessing of God is eternal (I Chron. 17:27); even the curse of Joshua (Joshua 6:26) is valid centuries later (I K. 16:34). It seems that a blessing may not be altered after it has been pronounced (Gen. 27), yet Rebekah states that she will take the curse which Jacob might receive upon herself (Gen. 27:13); it seems that Micah is also able to alter the curse laid upon him (Jud. 17). In later times we find blessings and curses spoken by kings, prophets, and priests. Parallels to certain of these blessings and curses may be found in the literature of the ancient

1.

Near East and of Greece .

The Biblical statements may contain elements which point to magic or superstitious belief in early Israelite times, "but we look in vain for any record of a state of society in which the practice of magic was openly tolerated by enlightened worshippers of Yahwe: all that we can find is the memory of a time when magic and religion were to some extent rivals, and the record of persistent attempts to eradicate magical practices from the community."<sup>2</sup>

It may be readily seen that the blessing and the curse are of significance in the study of the development of Biblical thought. Many modern scholars have occupied themselves with the numerous problems connected with this study. Among them may be found Guillaume, Hempel, Jacob, Mowinkel, Pedersen, Westermarck and others. These men have come to very different conclusions, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss them.

The blessing and the curse also occur frequently in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. The treatment of that subject does not lie within the scope of this paper; a brief discussion of it is not possible as no adequate secondary literature on this topic exists.

1. J. Hempel. "Die israelitische Anschauungen von Segen und Fluch im Lichte altorientalischen Parallelen" (ZDMG 79, 1925).
2. A. Guillaume. Prophecy and Divination, p. 238.

The blessing of God spoken by the priests is without doubt one of the most significant blessings to be found in this literature. It was of great importance in the days of the Temple and has remained so unto the present day. This blessing was pronounced daily in the Temple ritual; on the Day of Atonement, on fasts, and during the Ma'amadoth the blessing was pronounced four times.<sup>1</sup> After the destruction of the Temple, the blessing continued as a part of the daily service in the synagogue and also continued to be pronounced four times on the Day of Atonement in Palestine,<sup>2</sup> while it was only uttered three times in Babylonia.<sup>3</sup> This blessing still forms a vital part of the festival services in Western countries; it is inserted in the Musaf service. In Spain and Holland it is pronounced on every Sabbath, while it is still used daily in such oriental countries as Yemen. The blessing remains a portion of the liturgy of liberal Jews, but it is no longer a function of the priests.<sup>4</sup>

The priestly blessing (Num. 6:22-:27) has been discussed by modern Biblical scholars. Although they would differ on minor matters, there is general agreement that this blessing may be assigned to P; some would say that its composition was influenced by the Psalms. It is generally claimed that the main emphasis of this blessing lay in the three-fold repetition of the name of God.<sup>5</sup>

Later we find the blessing mentioned in the Book of Ben Sirach (50:20). It is interesting to note that this blessing along with several other portions of the Bible was not translated in the early versions of the Targumim. A translation does exist in our present day versions.<sup>6</sup>

The legislation concerning this blessing which is found in the Mishna would indicate to us the important part which it played in the ritual of that time. It was to form a high point in the service of the Temple and synagogue, therefore the manner in which the blessing was to be bestowed as well as the way in which it was to be received was closely regulated.

The priest who pronounced these sacred words had to be free from all blemishes which might bring shame upon the blessing. It was required that his limbs must be free from all physical irregularities and discolorations whether these were due to birth or to the occupation of the priest. Only if such blemishes were well known to everyone in the city could he be allowed to recite the blessing.<sup>7</sup> No suspicion of intoxication was allowed to rest on the priest; this led to the omission of the blessing during the afternoon service where such a case might arise.<sup>8</sup> A priest involved in a serious crime such as manslaughter was also not allowed to recite the benediction.<sup>9</sup> Every priest who

did not fall into one of these categories was obligated<sup>10</sup>  
to ascend the platform and recite the blessing.

The manner in which the blessing was to be pronounced was strictly regulated. The priests were to ascend the platform in the synagogue at the prompting of the Hasan. They were not permitted to wear sandals, so that they might not trip and thus decrease the dignity of the ritual; this was reported by R. Johanan b. Zaccai (T - 1).<sup>11</sup> They were to turn to face the congregation and to bless them  
 פ'נ'י פ'נ'י פ'נ'י,<sup>12</sup> moreover they were to stand during<sup>13</sup>  
 the entire ritual and to lift their hands. Yet if the priest did lift his hands, he needed to be certain of his ability to return to the correct place in the Tefillah.<sup>14</sup> ✓  
 The manner in which the hands were to be raised was discussed in this literature. The priest was first obliged to wash his hands;<sup>15</sup> in the Temple he then raised his hands above his head, while in the provinces he only raised them to the level of his shoulders; the High Priest was not permitted to raise his hands higher than the breast-plate.<sup>16</sup>  
 According to another source he was allowed to raise them to the height of his frontlets, but according to the view of R. Judah (T - 3) he may raise them even higher.<sup>17</sup> The hands<sup>18</sup>  
 were to be spread during the recitation and the fingers were to be outstretched, but this was not to be done until the priest turned to face the congregation.<sup>19</sup>

The blessing was to be recited in a loud voice, but a later discussion modified this statement and concluded that it was to be in a conversational tone;<sup>20</sup> nevertheless the legend arose that the name of God could be heard in Jericho during the bestowal of the blessing.<sup>21</sup> The moment during which the priest was to ascend the platform was fixed, so that one had to do so during the prayer Eloheynu of the Amidah or forfeit one's right to the recitation for that occasion; it was necessary to begin the ascent during this prayer, but one did not need to reach the platform during it.<sup>22</sup>

The priest was to be fully aware of the holiness of the blessing which he was to recite, therefore he was to recite certain prayers during his ascent to the platform and at the time during which he turned to face the congregation; the prayers are given in the Talmud.<sup>23</sup> When the blessing was bestowed in the provinces the people who received it were to recite certain prayers as well; it was a matter of controversy whether these prayers were to be recited between the verses, or along with them, or at the time of the mention of the name of God.<sup>24</sup>

Even the response of Amen was governed by strict rules, so that the Hasan may not say Amen until he is certain that the priests have finished their blessing; nor may the priests continue until the response has been made.<sup>25</sup> This problem

would not arise according to another source which required the Hasan to recite the verses before they were spoken by the priests.<sup>26</sup> R. Shimi of the Fort of Shihori reported that in a synagogue where the entire congregation consisted of priests some would ascend the platform while others remained to respond with the Amens.<sup>27</sup>

During one period the priestly blessing was connected with several other portions of the liturgy in the synagogue, so that the individual who recited the Sh'ma and its benedictions and read from the prophets might also recite the priestly benediction; in case this person was a minor, his father or his teacher performed this for him.<sup>28</sup> After<sup>29</sup> puberty a priest was permitted to recite the benediction; a priest who believed in this and the other priestly rituals would receive his dues even if he did not possess sufficient knowledge of them to participate in them.<sup>30</sup>

There was a marked difference in the recitation of the blessing in the Temple and in the provinces. It was spoken without interruption in the Temple while it was recited in three verses, each followed by the response of Amen, in the provinces.<sup>31</sup> The Name of God was to be used only in the Temple and a substitute name was used in the provinces.<sup>32</sup> The Tannaitic literature already claims that the knowledge of the exact pronunciation of the Name was restricted to the High Priest at the time of Simon the Just; he spoke it ten times

during fasts.<sup>33</sup> The Name was taught only once during a seven year period and then only to fully mature men.<sup>34</sup> R. Tarphon (T - 2) stated that he attempted to discover the pronunciation of the Name during its recitation by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement, but he was unable to do so as the singing of the priests concealed it.<sup>35</sup> At an earlier time the knowledge of the Name must have been fairly common as it was reported that the priests recited the blessing during the Ma-amadoth.<sup>36</sup>

The priestly blessing was valid not only for fully mature Israelites, but also for women, children, slaves, and strangers.<sup>37</sup> All those who stood before the priests during its recitation were included while those who stood behind them were excluded.<sup>38</sup> People standing at the side of the priests, hidden behind partitions, or standing behind taller individuals were included in the blessing.<sup>39</sup> The blessing was recited only in the presence of ten men.<sup>40</sup> According to the opinion of Adda (BA - 2) who quoted R. Simlai (A - 2) all the worshippers ascended the platform in a synagogue composed entirely of priests; R. Zera (A - 3) claimed that they then recited the blessing for those working in the fields.<sup>41</sup> This would indicate that the presence of those to be blessed was not necessary. This opinion differs from that of R. Shimi previously quoted.<sup>42</sup>

The role of the priests during the bestowal of the

blessing was that of an agent of God; they should therefore refrain from becoming too proud of their role.<sup>43</sup> As they were only agents, they were not permitted to change the blessing or to make additions to it.<sup>44</sup> Only as the priests blessed Israel did they become blessed;<sup>45</sup> yet the High Priest recited the blessing separately over the priests.<sup>46</sup>

Although the priests only transmitted the blessing to the people, this task was not to be regarded lightly or refused easily; therefore R. Joshua b. Levi (A - 1) stated that a priest who would not ascend the platform for the blessing transgressed three positive commandments. He need not do so at all times, but he must ascend occasionally otherwise he would be suspect of being disqualified by birth.<sup>47</sup> This regulation seems as necessary to protect the honor of the priest as that of the blessing. As the blessing is no sacrament, its validity when given by an unqualified priest was not discussed.

The meaning of the priestly blessing was discussed at length in the Aggadic portions of this literature. Every blessing which a man might desire is read into it and substantiated as far as possible through Biblical verses or analogies. It is done with great ingenuity and demonstrates the value which the rabbis placed on these verses; the blessing of peace is most fully developed in these Midrashic sections.<sup>48</sup> Several scholars, R. Isaac b. Nahmani (A - 3) and R. Simon b.

Pazi (A - 3) seek to associate the numbers three, five, and seven with the verses of this blessing which contain the corresponding number of Hebrew words.<sup>49</sup> The priestly blessing is named with other sections of the Bible such as the story of Ruben, of Tamar, of the second story of the calf, and of David and Amnon which are read, but not interpreted.<sup>50</sup> The priestly blessing has little in common with the other sections and was probably not to be interpreted because of the aura of holiness which surrounded it.

One may easily see that the rabbis were interested in maintaining the dignity of the priestly benediction and ordained regulations mainly for this purpose. The vast majority of these regulations applied to the blessing as it was to be recited in the synagogue; only for the sake of contrast is the blessing as it was recited in the Temple mentioned in most cases. The moment during which the blessing was recited was considered especially holy, so that anyone troubled by a dream which he could not clearly remember was to stand before the priests when they spread their hands for the blessing; it was thought that this would remove some of the individual's anxiety.<sup>51</sup> In spite of such statements and the numerous regulations which surrounded the blessing one wonders about the real importance of the blessing when one reads that laborers were permitted to recite the

Sh'ma, the Amida, the blessings before and after the meal,  
but they were not permitted to raise their hands for the  
priestly <sup>52</sup>benedictions. There was a greater interest in the  
efficiency of labor than in holiness.

1. Mishna Taanith 4:1.
2. Taanith 26 b.  
Elbogen, I., Der jüdische Gottesdienst in seiner geschichtlichen  
Entwicklung, p. 71.
3. Elbogen, Op. cit., p. 72.
4. Ibid., p. 423.
5. Gray, B. G., "Numbers", International Critical Commentary.  
Baentsch, B., "Numeri", Handkommentar zum Alten Testament.
6. Elbogen, I., Op. cit., p. 189.
7. Mishna Megilla 4:7, Tosefta Megilla 4:29 f.
8. Taanith 26 b.
9. Berachoth 32 b.
10. Tosefta Sota 7:8, Yerushalmi Berachoth 36 b.
11. Rosh Hashana 31 b, Sota 40 a.
12. Tosefta Megilla 4:21, Sifre Noso 39.
13. Sifre Noso 39.
14. Mishna Berachoth 5:4, Sota 38 b.
15. Sota 39 a.
16. Mishna Sota 7:6.
17. Mishna Tamid 7:2.
18. Targum Jonathan Numbers 6:23.
19. Sota 39 b.
20. Sota 38 b.
21. Mishna Tamid 3:8.
22. Sota 38 b.
23. Sota 39 a, b.
24. Sota 39 b, 40 a, Chagiga 16 a.

25. Sota 39 b.
26. Sifre Noso 39.
27. Sota 38 b.
28. Mishna Megilla 4:5
29. Chullin 24 b.
30. Chullin 132 b, 133 a.
31. Mishna Tamid 7:2.
32. Ibid., Sota 38 a, Sifre Noso 39, 43.
33. Yoma 39 b, Menachoth 109 b, Tosefta Yoma 2:4.
34. Kiddushin 71 a.
35. Ecc. Rabba 3:11.
36. Mishna Tamid 5:1.
37. Sifre Noso 43.
38. Rosh Hashana 35 a, Sota 38 b.
39. Sota 38 b.
40. Mishna Megilla 4:3.
41. Sota 40 a.
42. Sota 38 b.
43. Sifre Noso 43.
44. Rosh Hashana 38 b.
45. Chullin 49 a, Num. Rabba 11:8, Sota 38 b.
46. Sota 41 a.
47. Sota 38 b.
48. Sifre Noso
49. Sanhedrin 10 b.

50. Mishna Megilla 4:10.
51. Berachoth 55 b.
52. Berachoth 16 a.

In a similar category as the priestly blessing are several important formulated curses which are mentioned and discussed in this literature. The blessings and the curses which were spoken upon Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim (Deut. 11:29-:32, 27:11-:26, Josh. 8:33-:35) are described in some detail. The literature limits itself to their description and does not concern itself with their meaning at all.

The ritual is described in the following manner: the tribes were to be divided into two groups, so that six tribes were to ascend Mount Gerizim and six Mount Ebal. The ark, the priests and the levites were to remain in the valley and pronounce the blessings facing Mount Gerizim; the response of Amen was given by the whole people. The same ritual was to be repeated with the priests and levites facing Mount Ebal and uttering the curses.<sup>1</sup> The Tosefta version of this rite poses the question of the place of the levites; it seems that only their elders remained with the priests while the remainder stood upon the mountains with the people. The division of the people is also discussed in a more exact manner there.<sup>2</sup> The discussion in the Talmud presents both the version of the Mishna and that of the Tosefta, while Rabbi states that the elders of the priests, levites, and Israelites stood below.<sup>3</sup> The blessing and the curse are compared in this literature; Biblical verses

are used to expand the text; it is stated that both the blessing and the curse must be spoken in a loud voice, in the holy language, in general and particular, and must be answered by the response of Amen. At this point the Talmud embellished the narrative further through naming the number of events which took place on the same day and stated that this was due to a miracle.

R. Judah b. Nahmani (3rd century) suggested a novel interpretation for the entire section; all of it has reference to the adulter<sup>4</sup>er and the adultress.

It is interesting to note none of the sources mention the Samaritans to whom Mount Gerizim was holy. There is not the slightest reference to them in this connection.

Another ritual connected with the curse was that of the suspected adultress; this was of great importance as it was used during the time of the Second Temple. Each portion of this rite, the time during which it might be used, the method of writing the scroll, etc, was carefully regulated. The whole discussion revolves around the description given in the Bible (Num. 5:11-31).

Nothing could obviate the need for this rite; even the Day of Atonement would not atone for it as this was not a sin known to God alone, but the adulterer was also aware of it. Furthermore Rabba (BA - 3) stated that the sacrifice of the suspected adultress was brought for the purpose of

ascertaining her <sup>3</sup> fault, not for the expiation of her sin; therefore it was not concerned with the Day of Atonement at all. R. Oshaya (A - 1) pointed out that the Biblical verse pertaining to this read "all their sins", but not "all their uncleanliness".<sup>5</sup>

The entire day was considered valid for this ritual.<sup>6</sup>  
 R. Eliezer stated that a man must warn his wife before two witnesses, but that he might force her to drink the water of the suspected adulteress on the evidence of one witness or on his own evidence; R. Joshua claimed that he must warn her before two witnesses and may force her to drink only on the evidence of two witnesses.<sup>7</sup>

As in all ritual blessings and curses the response of Amen is required. It is a matter of discussion toward what portion of the ritual this response is directed; some would claim that it was connected to the oath, others to the fact that she was not unfaithful by this man, or by any other man, or that she was not unfaithful in general.<sup>8</sup> R. Meir (T - 3) claimed that through it she would promise not to be unfaithful in the future as he thought that the water would still be effective many years later.<sup>9</sup>

The scroll used in the ritual was the subject of long discussion.<sup>10</sup> Both the scroll and the offering were prepared for a particular woman, so that if she were to refuse to drink the water, or to confess, the scroll must be hidden

as it contains the holy Name and the offering must be scattered upon the ash-heap. Some claimed that one forced the woman to drink even against her will.<sup>11</sup> If she stated that she was unclean during the rite, the same procedure was followed.<sup>12</sup> R. Judah (T - 3) stated in the name of R. Meir (T - 3) that one must be certain not to use ink containing vitriol when writing this section as it must be capable of being blotted out.<sup>13</sup> We may see that this rite was used rather frequently in the Temple as we are told that Helena donated a golden tablet containing the paragraph of the suspected adulteress to the Temple along with a set of golden candelabrum.<sup>14</sup>

The rabbis ordained that this whole section should be recited in the language which the woman understood and need not be said in Hebrew.<sup>15</sup> They insisted that the whole matter should be explained to her in some detail, but the reason which was given for this was not the protection of the woman, but so that the bitter water and the curse might not become discredited.<sup>16</sup> The bitter water is embellished with legend, so that the adulteress is not only tested by the water, but she was already warned through water at Sinai. There Moses cast the dust of the golden calf into the water of the brook. The analogy is drawn as the same Hebrew phrase is used in both places.<sup>17</sup> This also hints at the connection between adultery and idolatry which was frequently made.

It is interesting to note that the holy Name is blotted

out in the process of this ritual; according to R. Judah (T - 3) this was later seized upon by Ahitophel who advised David that he too might use the Divine Name in a manner which would lead to its being blotted out.<sup>18</sup>

The Tannaim thought that the curse attached to the rite would be fulfilled in the manner of the lex taliones. They stated that the organ which had been affected first by the adultery would also suffer first from the curse, so the thigh would fall, then the belly would be affected and the curse would continue.<sup>19</sup> This was not to signify that the remainder of the body would go unpunished, but merely indicated the order of punishment.<sup>20</sup>

The chief interest of the rabbis in this ritual was that of portraying it in a manner grim enough to frighten all away from adultery. R. Akiba (T - 2) emphasized the terrible results in a Midrashic manner.<sup>21</sup> The main way through which this result was gained was the stress placed upon the immediate effectiveness of the curse. The suspected woman was pictured as having barely finished the bitter water and her face became yellow, her eyes bulged, and her veins began to swell. They were forced to remove her from the Temple so that she might not pollute the area. Naturally this did not happen too often, so to account for the numerous cases in which no immediate effect was noticeable it was claimed that any merit which the woman possessed could stave

off the curse for a time up to three years. Ben Azzai (T - 2) even insisted that a girl be made aware of this fact, so that she might know why the bitter waters had not taken effect if she need ever face this rite, but the more realistic R. Eliezer pointed out that such instruction would only lead to lechery; according to a statement of R. Joshua a woman has more pleasure through one Kab <sup>with</sup> ~~of~~ lechery than through nine Kabs <sup>with</sup> ~~of~~ <sup>22</sup> modesty. R. Simon pointed out the weakness of this type of interpretation as it was possible that no woman would be declared innocent through this trial by ordeal; all would continue to be suspected and so many innocent parties would face this calumny. <sup>23</sup> Rabbi (T - 4), however, stated that her death will be slow and that she will not be able to bear children, but will waste away. <sup>24</sup>

The social affect of the ritual would be the greatest as all would swear by her and would use her as a constant curse. <sup>25</sup> As mentioned previously the rabbis used adultery as a cause <sup>26</sup> for other sins and stated that it led to idolatry as well as to the cursing of ones parents. <sup>27</sup>

It seems that much of the discussion connected with the result of the curse and the bitter water is academic as it would not be possible to allow a trial by ordeal to be interpreted in such a vague manner; all who were tested would be guilty and would have to suffer social ostracism. This clearly

shows an attempt to save a ritual which no longer fitted to the times and which it was impossible to explain in a rational manner. Little concern for justice was shown, but the effort to save the rite was made.

Many other instances in which the blessing and the curse of God are discussed occur; it is generally done in connection with a Biblical verse in a Midrashic manner; conclusions which are not connected with the verse in any manner are then drawn from it. R. Eliezer commented upon the verse "And the Lord blessed Obed-Edom and all his house....because of the ark of God;" he pointed out that the blessing of God was given here merely for the care given the ark, so how much more would that man who fed and clothed a scholar who studied the law be worthy of blessings. R. Judah b. Zebidah continued by claiming that the blessing actually referred to Hamoth and her eight daughters-in-law, each of whom had sextuplets at one time.<sup>28</sup> Many similar examples might be mentioned, but they tell us little of the significance of the blessing and the curse. These examples are discussed in the chapter which deals with the meaning of the blessing and the curse.

According to R. Johanan every word of blessing and curse which goes forth from the mouth of God takes effect; there is no difference between the conditional sentence and the direct statement. He quoted the narrative of Moses which stated that

God promised Moses that he would create a great new people from him; this took effect even though God did not destroy Israel. A Biblical verse which proved the point was quoted.<sup>29</sup> God was, however, able to increase a blessing if he so desired.<sup>30</sup>

The rabbis also desired to demonstrate that God can effect much through small means; R. Levi showed that God blessed Israel with twenty-two letters while he used only eight to curse them; on the other hand Moses cursed the people with twenty-two letters and blessed them with eight.<sup>31</sup> Similarly God did not carry a curse further than was necessary to inflict punishment; in this way he acted contrary to man who would deprive his enemy of his livelihood, but when God was angered by the serpent he permitted it to obtain a livelihood. He cursed the woman,<sup>32</sup> but nonetheless everyone is running after her.

The blessings and the curses which were directly given by God were thought to be immediately effective. These were composed of examples which had occurred many centuries previously and so presented no problems. Whenever the Biblical tale did not present us with their conclusion, the rabbis were able to provide one and even succeeded in keeping it in a Biblical context through the clever use of analogies and Biblical verses. The blessings of God which were still used during the time of some of these scholars

presented them with an entirely different problem. The priestly blessing is left without any statements as to its effectiveness and its meaning is discussed in a purely Midrashic manner. As this could not be done with the suspected adultress an unsuccessful attempt to redeem the honor of the curse is made. It does not seem that the belief in the effectiveness of the blessing and the curse held by the **babbis** was very strong.

2

1. Mishna Sota 7:5, 8:9-:11.
2. Tosefta Sota
3. Sota 33 b-37 b, Sifre R'eh 11:29, 55, Yerushalmi Sota 30 a
4. Sota 37 b.
5. Kherithoth 26 a.
6. Megilla 20 b.
7. Sota 31 a b.
8. Kiddushin 27 b, Sifre Noso 5.
9. Tosefta Sota 2:2.
10. Sota 17 a.
11. Mishna Sota 3:3.
12. Ibid.
13. Erubin 13 a.
14. Mishna Yoma 3:10.
15. Mishna Sota 7:1, Shebuoth 39 a.
16. Sota 32 b.
17. Num. Rabba 9:47.
18. Maccoth 11a, Sanhedrin 90 b, Berachoth 56 a.
19. Sota 9 b, Num. Rabba <sup>c</sup>:23.
20. Sifre Noso 18, Num. Rabba 9:18.
21. Num. Rabba 9:21.
22. Mishna Sota 3:4.
23. Sota 22 b.
24. Mishna Sota 3:5.
25. Sifre Noso 18, 5:27, Num. Rabba 9:18, :35, :40.

26. Sota 37 b.
27. Num. Rabba 9:21.
28. Berachoth 63 b, 64 a.
29. Berachoth 7 a.
30. Deut. Rabba 1:13.
31. Baba Bathra 88 b, 89 a.
32. Yoma 75 a.

A frequent use of the curse in almost all societies is that of blasphemy; every religion has therefore found it necessary to protect its deity or the name of its deity from blasphemy. The direct curse of the deity is only one form of blasphemy, but in order to understand the subject all of its aspects will have to be discussed.

During this period the Name of God was of paramount importance; the use of the Divine Name was carefully guarded during those occasions as the priestly blessing and the ceremony of the suspected adulteress when it was necessary to use it. As we have seen, its use was only permitted in these ceremonies at the Temple, but not in the synagogue; the Name became surrounded with an aura of great holiness and was eventually forgotten because of the highly restricted usage. Some scholars would trace the restrictions against the use of the Divine Name to Biblical sources, either to Exodus 20:7 or to Lev. 24:10-<sup>1</sup>16, but it is hardly likely that there was much concern about this in Biblical times as we find the Name of God often used in oaths. Some of the Aggadic material of this literature mentions Biblical figures who blasphemed; Adam<sup>2</sup> and Esau<sup>3</sup> were among them. Similarly Dathan and Abiram<sup>4</sup> and Goliath<sup>5</sup> are spoken of as being punished for their blasphemy. Naturally much is made of the blasphemy of Job.<sup>6</sup>

The Tannaitic scholars noticed the lack of a Biblical

prohibition against blasphemy and therefore stated that some ordinances were not committed to writing as they were considered to be commonly accepted; all of these regulations were included in a Biblical verse (Lev. 18:4).<sup>7</sup>

There are several categories of blasphemy; among them one finds such as magic which according to Zutra b. Tobia (BA - 6) who followed a tradition of Rab (BA - 1) was punishable by death. It seems that there was a tradition that it was possible to slay a man through the use of a substitute for the Divine Name in incantations or quite definitely through the use of the Divine Name.<sup>8</sup> A legend reports to us that Moses slew the Egyptian without a weapon; he merely pronounced the Divine Name against him.<sup>9</sup> Similarly when Og uprooted a mountain and threw it upon Israel, Moses simply took a pebble, pronounced the Divine Name upon it and thus kept the mountain from falling upon the people.<sup>10</sup> The mispronunciation of a word in the liturgy fell under this category, therefore all likely to read incorrectly were not permitted to recite the prayers.<sup>11</sup> The free translation of a Biblical verse was also considered as blasphemy.<sup>12</sup> Other scholars included various unjust actions within this category,<sup>13</sup> as well as adultery.<sup>14</sup>

A type of blasphemy which is found in the Bible consisted of allowing a corpse to remain hanged overnight; this was a curse against God (Deut. 21:23). In order to explain

this an analogy was drawn to a case of two brothers. One of them became the king of a country while the other became a robber; the robber was finally caught by the king and hanged. Nonetheless, as he was the king's brother it would be an insult to permit him to hang longer than was necessary.<sup>15</sup> A Mishna interpreted the verse in the following manner: it asked the reason for the hanging. The man must have been hanged because of blasphemy; therefore, the Name of God would be further profaned if he were to hang overnight and remind all men of his crime.<sup>16</sup>

A blasphemy was considered such a serious crime that one was not able to withdraw it unpunished after it had been uttered. Normally any statement which is withdrawn a moment after it has been uttered is considered void, but this was not to be followed in the case of blasphemy.<sup>17</sup> The punishment for the crime was to consist of Kareth to be enforced through the death penalty,<sup>18</sup> but the party had to receive warning beforehand. If blasphemy had been committed erroneously, a sacrifice would have to be brought according to the view of R. Akiba (T - 2).<sup>19</sup>

The definition of this act was, however, so narrow that it became almost impossible to commit the offense. The generally accepted view stated that only the Divine Name itself, which was forgotten soon after the destruction of the Temple,<sup>20</sup> was to be included in the category. There

were other opinions which would include various substitute names;<sup>21</sup> R. Meir (T - 3) even stated that anyone who used substitute names such as Alef Daleth, Yod He, Shaddai, Zevo-oth, the Merciful, the Gracious, the Long Suffering and of Great Kindness, or any other similar name. R. Meir similarly maintained that if one used a Biblical phrase as a curse, one was guilty of blasphemy.<sup>22</sup> Other scholars as R. Joshua b. Karcha (T - 3) stated that only the four letter Name of God was to be included; this was proved by him through quoting the phrase spoken by witnesses who had heard the blasphemy - "May Jose smite Jose". The use of a four letter substitute name in this case implied the use of the four letter Name of God to R. Joshua.<sup>23</sup> Another source would even exclude the party who substituted the euphemism *772* for the curse.<sup>24.</sup>

The Name was only allowed to be spoken publicly on the rarest occasion; thus the scholars even apologized for Ezra's use of the Divine Name in blessing the Lord before the people. According to R. Giddel (BA - 2) this was permitted only because of the emergency of the time. It was also reported that R. Haniniah b. Teradion (T - 2) suffered martyrdom as he pronounced the Name of God publicly; he suffered in this manner even though he was studying the law during the period when this was prohibited by the Romans. His wife was similarly punished as she did not

prevent him from using the Name of God.<sup>25</sup> Such legends were used to demonstrate the holiness of the Divine Name. Yet these scholars did not permit themselves to become too obsessed by an idea, so another source mentions the fact that it was permissible to curse by the Name of God at the time of God's anger; this was told in connection with the story of Balaam.<sup>26</sup>

The Name was considered as so holy that it was only divulged to men in the prime of life; these persons had to stand in a clean place and it needed to be on water, so that there might be no occasion for eavesdropping. Originally it was revealed to all the priests, but later when sinners increased it was only divulged to those of especially good conduct. Finally only the High Priest knew it and pronounced it while a choir of priests sang.<sup>27</sup> The Name must have been rather generally known during the time that the ordinances of the Mishna came into existence as we are told that all those who hear the name misused must tear their garments and that the judges must do likewise when they hear it pronounced at the conclusion of the trial.<sup>28</sup> According to the opinion of Samuel (BA - 1) it was only necessary to tear ones garments when one heard a blasphemy of a Jew, though this would be disproved through the Biblical tale of Hezekia (II Kings 18:37). At the present time it was no longer necessary to do so for substitute names, but they

had been included at one time. R. Hiyya (T - 5) taught that one need not even do so for the Divine Name itself, as he claimed that ones garments would constantly be in tatters if one practiced this.<sup>29</sup> In order to avoid unnecessary repetition of the blasphemy or the curse substitute names were used throughout the trial; at the conclusion of the trial the witnesses were asked to testify before an empty courtroom; the judges then tore their garments, but the witnesses did not need to do so as they had done this when they heard the blasphemy pronounced by the defendant.<sup>30</sup> Only the first witness pronounced the Name; the remainder testified that they had heard similarly.<sup>31</sup>

The punishment for this sin could not be suspended by the Day of Atonement or through penitence; only a combination of all of these and death brought about atonement.<sup>32</sup>

The penalty inflicted by a court consisted of death through stoning to be followed by the hanging of the victim.<sup>33</sup> Some sages claimed that it would be sufficient if the sinner were punished through lashes, but this is rejected.<sup>34</sup> It seems

that it stoning by zealots without a trial was considered permissible as well.<sup>35</sup> If the court was unable to inflict punishment, R. Judah b. Shalom (A - 5) indicated that Divine punishment consisting of leprosy would be inflicted.<sup>36</sup> The Midrash claimed that Titus was punished through the insignificant gnat after his blasphemy of God.<sup>37</sup> Only the party

which committed the offense was to be punished;<sup>38</sup> this would contradict the report of the punishment of the wife of R. Haniniah b. Teradion (T - 2). A further punishment which was to be inflicted was exclusion from the world to come according to the Abba Saul (T - 2).<sup>39</sup>

The regulations against blasphemy were included among the Noahide laws;<sup>40</sup> several versions would even include the use of substitute names for gentiles.<sup>41</sup> Thus the literature reports that Pharaoh, Sennacherib, and Titus were punished for their blasphemy by God.<sup>42</sup> Other gentiles were to be decapitated;<sup>43</sup> they could be tried by one judge, needed no warning given to them, and could be found guilty on the evidence of one witness.<sup>43</sup> A gentile could escape punishment by converting to Judaism; when the much more difficult trial procedure had to be invoked.<sup>44</sup>

It seems that cases of blasphemy were rare and that the people did not curse by the Name of God; the text of no such curses have come down to us. Blasphemy of the Name of God was not feared even from those that were about to be executed by the court, therefore they were not to be gagged.<sup>45</sup> Whenever a conflict between the sanctification of the Name and its profanation arose, it was considered more important to sanctify it than to refrain from profanation.<sup>46</sup> Although the use of substitute names was

not legally punishable, the offender was warned by the court.<sup>47</sup>

It may be easily seen that the whole matter of cursing and profaning the Name of God was important as long as the exact pronounciation of the Name was still commonly known. The later discussion by the rabbis demonstrates their piety, but has no practical implications. With this pious outlook they are able to explain the martyrdom of good men, but on the other hand they also remain somewhat puzzled by the uses of the Divine Name in the Bible.

The treatment of the use of the Divine Name and its disappearance shows us the interpretation of history general among scholars of this entire period. They looked upon it as steadily becoming worse; each age represented a degeneration from the previous one.

1. K. Kautzsch. Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments, p. 44,  
p. 99.  
K. Marti. Geschichte der Israelitischen Religion, p. 60.  
M. Kalish. Exodus.
2. Num. Rabba 13:3.
3. Ex. Rabba 42:7.
4. Num. Rabba 18:4.
5. Ibid.
6. Ex. Rabba 30:11.
7. Yoma 67 b.
8. Sabbath 75 a.
9. Ecc. Rabba 3:11.
10. Ex. Rabba 1:29.
11. Deut. Rabba 1:25.
12. Nedarim 87 a.
13. Kiddushin 49 b.
14. Yoma 86 a, Sanhedrin 82 a.
15. Sanhedrin 46 a, Tosefta Sanhedrin 9:7.
16. Sifre Ki Set-zeh 21:23, Mishna Sanhedrin 46 a, Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 21b, Sanhedrin 46 a.
17. Nedarim 87 a.
18. Sifre Mishpotim 22:27, Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 26 b.
19. Kerithoth 1:1, :2, Kerithoth 3 b, 7 b.
20. Sanhedrin 60 a, Kerithoth 7 a b, Sifra Emor 24:13-:15.
21. Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 26 b.
22. Mishna Shebuoth 4:13.
23. Sanhedrin 60 a.

24. Sifra Emor 24:11.
25. Aboda Zara 18 a, Yoma 69 b.
26. Berachoth 7 a.
27. Ecc. Rabba 3:11.
28. Mishna Sanhedrin 7:5, Yerushalmi Moed Katon 83b, Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 25a, Sanhedrin 60 a, Moed Katon 26 a.
29. Moed Katon 26 a, Sanhedrin 60 a.
30. Sanhedrin 60 a, Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 25 a.
31. Ibid.
32. Yoma 86 a.
33. Mishna Sanhedrin 6:4, Sanhedrin 45 b, 53 a, Sifra Emor 24:13-:15.
34. Teruma 3 b, 4 a.
35. Mishna Sanhedrin 9:6
36. Num. Rabba 7:5.
37. Ecc. Rabba 5:8.
38. Num. Rabba 18:11.
39. Aboda Zara 18 a, Mishna Sanhedrin 11:1.
40. Sanhedrin 57 a.
41. Sanhedrin 56 a.
42. Sanhedrin 94 a b, Ecc. Rabba 5:8.
43. Sanhedrin 71 b.
44. Ibid.
45. Erubin 19 a.
46. Num. Rabba 8:4.
47. Kerithoth 7 a, b, Sifra Emor 24:13-:15.

"Scripture equates the curse of father and mother with that of God."<sup>1</sup> This ethical dictum is followed by the rabbis in their legislation concerning the cursing of parents. While elucidating the Biblical verse they, however, surround it with so many restrictions so as it make it almost inoperative. Some sources indicate that only when both father and mother are cursed together is the culprit punishable.<sup>2</sup> Others claimed that only one party need be cursed; this point of view was accepted for legal purposes;<sup>3</sup> all children, even hermaphrodites and those of doubtful sex, fell within these regulations.<sup>4</sup>

If a person was of doubtful parentage according to some sources one is liable through cursing either party who might be ones father.<sup>5</sup> Others claimed that it was necessary to curse both of them together;<sup>7</sup> while some scholars went further and stated that he was also not liable to punishment at that time if he was only warned against cursing one father; if he had been given warning<sup>8</sup> concerning both parties, the penalty might be invoked.

Some authorities carried the matter even further and stated that one may be liable both during the life and after the death of ones parents;<sup>9</sup> others would include that person who cursed the father or mother of ones husband in his presence.<sup>10</sup> Generally such parties, were not liable;<sup>11</sup> nor did the liability extend to grandparents although the matter was

discussed.<sup>12</sup> This law was thought to be applicable to  
Israelites alone and not to gentiles and slaves.<sup>13</sup>

A further restriction was added to the enforcement of this ordinance through the statement that the curse had to use the Divine Name and not a substitute name;<sup>14</sup> this was reported by R. Ahaï b. Josiah and R. Haninah b. Idai (T - 4). R. Meir (T - 3) would, however, have punished parties for the use of the substitute name as well.<sup>15</sup>

If the party had been properly warned,<sup>16</sup> the punishment after the trial was stoning.<sup>17</sup> Thus the same penalty was invoked for cursing ones parents as for cursing God.

The cursing of other parties was also prohibited and was punishable; following the Biblical injunction (Ex. 22:27)<sup>18</sup> it is forbidden to curse the rulers of the land. They are to be included only if they occupy themselves with the tasks of their people.<sup>19</sup> It is in this connection that we are told of Herod's massacre of all the scholars of his time except Baba b. Butha; he had not realized that they would follow the ruler of their land and that he did not need to fear them.<sup>20</sup>

These regulations were broadened to also include rich and powerful men, but this was not done to protect the honor which was due to them, but because the news of ones curse might reach their ears.<sup>21</sup> Naturally the prohibition against cursing the deaf (Lev. 19:14) was also mentioned

several times.<sup>22</sup>

The rabbis also prohibited the cursing of any man;<sup>23</sup>  
 a statement of the Talmud declared that no negative precept  
 which involved no action is punishable through lashings  
 except three; one of them being the cursing of ones  
 neighbor.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore if one curses ones fellowman  
 with the Divine Name one is subjected to two punishments  
 as was reported by R. Eleazar in the name of R. Oshaia  
 (A - 1).<sup>25</sup> The ordinary punishment of cursing ones fellow-  
 man was administered through whipping. The scholars even  
 discussed the case of an Israelite cursing a slave, but  
 no conclusion was mentioned; naturally the curse of a slave  
 toward an Israelite was punished.<sup>26</sup>

It is interesting to note that R. Meir represented the  
 strict point of view both in regard to blasphemy and in  
 regard to the cursing of parents. An application of that  
 opinion would have presented a new basis for these laws  
 after the Divine Name had been forgotten.

1. Kiddushin 30 b, Yerushalmi Kiddushin 17a, Yerushalmi Peah 3 a.
2. Baba Metzia 94 b, Shebuoth 27 a, Chullin 78 b.
3. Shebuoth 27 a, b, Chullin 79 a, Mechilta Mishpotim 21:15.
4. Sanhedrin 66 a, Mechilta Mishpotim 21:17.
5. Maccos 16 a.
6. Chullin 82 b, 91 a, Sanhedrin 66 a.
7. Ibid.
8. Yebamoth 63 b, Num. Rabba 9:7.
9. Maccos 16 a, Mechilta Mishpotim 21:17, Mishna Sanhedrin 11:1. Sanhedrin 85 b.
10. Kethuboth 72 a.
11. Maccos 12 a.
12. Kethuboth 72 b, Yerushalmi Kethuboth 31 b.
13. Yebamoth 22 a.
14. Sanhedrin 66 a, Shebuoth 36 a, Mishna Sanhedrin 7:8, Yerushalmi 28
15. Ibid.
16. Yebamoth 63 b, Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 28 b, 29 a.
17. Sanhedrin 53 a, Mechilta Mishpotim 21:17, Tosefta Arachin 2:10, Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 18 a.
18. Sifra Mishpotim 22:27, Sanhedrin 66 a, b., 85 a, Yebamoth 22 b.
19. Ibid.
20. Baba Bathra 4 a.
21. Ecc. Rabba 10;20, Lev. Rabba 32:2.
22. Mechilta Mishpotim 21:17, Sanhedrin 66 a, b.
23. Mechilta Mishpotim 22:27.

24. Shebuoth 21 a, Maccos 16 a.
25. Temura 3 b, 4 a.
26. Maccos 8 b.

Up to the present we have concerned ourselves with those types of blessings and curses which the rabbis made subject to their regulations. The common use of the blessing and the curse, however, stood outside the legal sphere; the examples which come under this category are more frequent than the others and are also more picturesque. We are generally restricted to those blessings and curses which are used by the scholars themselves; only rarely do they report those of the common people.

A curse could be rather lightly used, so that when R. Eliezer found that the audience at one of his lectures was slowly wandering from the hall, he proceeded to call them names; as the last individuals made their way toward the exit, he cursed them.<sup>1</sup> Our source desired to protect the honor of his pupils and remarked that these were not students, but only ordinary listeners. A curse used upon such a slight pretext could obviously carry no implications with it. In a similar manner R. Juda b. Ilai (T - 3) cursed an idolater who had insulted him by stating that the scholars face must have been shining due to one of three things - intoxication, usury, or the breeding of pigs; R. Juda replied that it was due to the study of the law and cursed him.<sup>2</sup> When R. Ishmael (T- 4) found a Samaritan interpreting dreams which were told to him in a rather foolish manner, he cursed

him several times and gave his own interpretation of the dreams.<sup>3</sup> There is no concern expressed about the efficacy of the curse; both the interpreter and R. Ishmael continue, just as before. Curses were generally used and were even to be expected, so God warned Moses that the people would curse him.<sup>4</sup>

It was considered as an obligation to bless the righteous and to curse the wicked. Those who did not do so were considered to have violated a positive commandment.<sup>5</sup> Other cases in which a curse was considered quite justifiable were also mentioned; the woman whose husband was not willing to provide her with the proper ornaments could curse that husband.<sup>6</sup>

The incidents in which we are given the actual contents of a blessing or a curse are rather few. We are told that the daughter of a priest who behaves lewdly will bring a curse upon her father; men will say - cursed be the one who begot her, cursed be he who raised her, cursed be the one from whose loins she sprung.<sup>7</sup> (In another occasion we are told of R. Eleazar's curse in which he stated - cursed be the sons of Rokel; may their mother bury them.<sup>8</sup> We are not told whether this curse became effective.

In a number of cases the effect of the curse is mentioned. A woman once came before Rabba (BA - 3) and cursed

him because of a legal matter. The statement was -  
 may your ship sink! Although Rabba's clothes were  
 soaked in water in order to stave off the curse, he  
 drowned because of the curse.<sup>9</sup> At another time we  
 find that Rab cursed Samuel (BA - 1) with the curse that  
 he might have no sons; similarly the curse took effect  
 even though the reason for it was rather slight as it  
 appears that he had not provided some medicine quickly  
 enough.<sup>10</sup> We also find that a woman insulted Samuel before  
 Rab Judah by stating some rather unpleasant matters about  
 him, so he cursed her and demanded that she be banned;  
 she burst and died there immediately.<sup>10</sup>

The blessing is spoken of in the same manner, so  
 when Rab blessed R. Huna (BA - 2) with the blessing that he  
 might one day find himself smothered by silks, we later dis-  
 cover that the blessing took effect; at the wedding of his  
 son Rabba (BA - 3) he was smothered in silks. This even  
 annoyed Rab to some extent for had R. Huna responded with  
 the statement - the same to you, it would have happened  
 to Rab as well.<sup>11</sup> R. Tanhum (A - 5) explained a Biblical  
 verse in a similar manner; the verse "these six grains of  
 barley gave he to me" (Ruth 3:17) must contain more than a  
 literal meaning; they refer to the six offsprings whom she  
 is destined to have - David, the Messiah, Daniel, Hannaiah,  
 Mishael, and Azariah. Full Biblical proof texts are of

course presented.<sup>12</sup>

A number of the blessings which are mentioned fail to report the final result. We are told that R. Simon b. Halafta (T - 5) blessed Rabbi's son in a manner which did not seem too significant to the boy, but had meaning for the father.<sup>13</sup> The story of the traveller in the desert who desired to bless the tree on an oasis which gave him food and shade was told; he blessed it by stating - may your offsprings<sup>14</sup> be similar to you. The rabbis warn a man from blessing in too public a manner; one should not bless a friend who has been hospitable in the street as this will only lead to his being robbed as R. Dimi (A - 4) reported.<sup>15</sup> The total number of blessings which are mentioned in this literature are very small; we have no incident of a blessing on the deathbed; nor do we find a single occurrence of a blessing given by a scholar to his disciples. Thus there are no parallels to the famous Biblical blessings of Isaac and Jacob.

The blessings mentioned in the Bible are of course discussed and somewhat embellished in the appropriate sections of the Tannaitic Midrashim and of the Midrash Rabba, but the discussions do not go beyond this and reveal nothing of the thought of blessing and curse during the Talmudic period. The embellishments would for example point out that the blessing of Moses is only a continuation of that of Jacob

this is proved through Biblical verses. At another point they list the eighteen curses which Isaiah was said to have pronounced over Israel.<sup>17</sup>

No single point of view regarding the permanence of the blessing or the curse appears to have prevailed. It is mentioned that because of God's blessing Ham cannot be cursed and Canaan must be cursed in his place; this interpretation was presented by R. Juda b. Ilai (T - 3), however R. Nehemiah presented another one here.<sup>18</sup> R. Alexandri stated, however, that the power of those who bring forth their tithes is so great that it can change their curse into a blessing.<sup>19</sup> No opinion is dominant in connection with the story of Balaam; one source stated that through the fact that Balak intended to curse Israel through Balaam twenty-four thousand men of Israel died.<sup>20</sup> Another statement also indicated that Israel was cursed as well as blessed through Balaam. Elsewhere it is reported that Balaam's tongue was even twisted by God to utter a blessing and not a curse; therefore Balaam was merely the agent of God and did nothing of his own accord.<sup>21</sup> We are also told of the fact that nothing would grow upon the earth after the flood until some rain had fallen, for nothing could grow from the water which had been cursed.<sup>22</sup>

It may be noted that a midrash strongly felt the injustice done in the case of Isaac's blessing and warned

Jacob not to harm Esau as all of his blessings would be destroyed through the one powerful blessing given to Esau (Gen. 27:40 a).<sup>23</sup>

The effect of the blessing or the curse might be immediate or might only be felt at a much later time; we are presented with the same dual interpretation as in the case of the suspected adulteress. In the cases of Rabba and R. Huna the effect was soon felt as also happened with a curse of Rab Judah. The effect of the curse of Rab upon Samuel, or of the blessing given to Ruth were not felt until a much later time. We are also told that the curse of Deut. 11:16 did not take place until the time of Ahab,<sup>24</sup> while the blessing which Elijah gave to Elisha did not effect the latter until Naaman, the leper, came to be healed by him.<sup>25</sup>

Curses and blessings were considered to be effective long periods of time after they had been given, but we are there mainly informed of them as uttered by God. These have been discussed previously.

We find a rather common proverb also used in this literature; blessings are supposed to bring additional blessings in their train, but no concrete examples are given by the rabbis.<sup>26</sup> It was also claimed that blessings and curses were always given in equal amounts; this is proven through Biblical quotations.<sup>27</sup>

The belief in the blessing and the curse appears to have been sufficiently strong to permit some rather forceful statements to be made. It was said that a curse uttered by a sage, even without any good cause would be valid.<sup>28</sup> As proof for this assertion the story of David's attempt to halt the floodwaters rising from the place of the foundation of the Temple was told. He desired to know whether it was permissible to stop the flood through throwing a potsherd with the Name of God upon it into the deep; he cursed anyone who was able to answer him, but would not do so to death through suffocation. Ahitophel reasoned that it was permitted after the curse had been spoken, but nonetheless he was subject to it and therefore died of suffocation (II Sam. 17:32) It was also claimed that wherever the sages cast their glance there death was to be found if any evil had occurred in that place.<sup>29</sup> R. Isaac even claimed that the curse of an ordinary man should not be treated lightly; it was told that Abimelech cursed Sarah and that the curse was fulfilled upon Isaac and caused his blindness ( Gen. 20:16 ).

It seems that on occasion a curse could be turned upon the party who spoke it; when Bar Sheshak cursed Rabba (BA - 3) with the words - may the eye burst which wishes to see evil of you - in a sarcastic manner, Rabba responded Amen and Bar Sheshak's eye burst on the spot.<sup>30</sup> Had Bar Sheshak worded his statement with greater care the curse might have been avoided.

A curse could also be placed upon another party. We are told that Benaiah warned Solomon, who intended to slay him, that all the curses which David had pronounced upon him would take effect upon Solomon if he slew him. They took effect as Benaiah had warned according to the Aggadic version.<sup>31</sup> This uncertainty as to the final result of a curse led men as Rab and Rab Judah (A -1) to state that it was better to let yourself be cursed than to curse another man.<sup>32</sup>

It seems rather clear that blessings and curses were only taken very seriously when they occurred in the Bible; there the scholars tell us that they were unchangeable and that their effect might be felt centuries later or even permanently. These were mainly blessings and curses pronounced by God himself, or spoken through an agent for him. In a few cases in this literature the curse was taken seriously, but the number of which we are told is so small that it is not possible to ascertain whether these were believed as facts or whether they were merely presented to enhance the reputation of one rabbi while humbling that of another. Quite frequently Biblical verses and tales were presented in such a purely midrashic manner that only a slightly superstitious element about the nature of the blessing and the curse remained. One could not, however, conclude that there was a strong feeling about their

efficacy from these few examples.

1. Betza 15 b.
2. Ecc. Rabba 8:1.
3. Lam. Rabba 1:15.
4. Ex. Rabba 7:3.
5. Gen. Rabba 49:1.
6. Sabbath 62 b.
7. Sanhedrin 52 a.
8. Baba Bathra 156 b.
9. Baba Bathra 153 a.
10. Sabbath 108 a, Nedarim 50 b.
11. Megilla 27 b.
12. Sanhedrin 93 a, b.
13. Moed Katon 9 b.
14. Taanith 5 b, 6 a.
15. Arachin 16 a.
16. Sifre B'rocho 33:1.
17. Chagiga 14 a.
18. Gen. Rabba 36:7.
19. Ex. Rabba 41:1.
20. Num. Rabba 20:22.
21. Ex. Rabba 4:3, Num. Rabba 20:21.
22. Gen. Rabba 33:7.
23. Deut. Rabba 1:16.
24. Sanhedrin 113 a.
25. Chullin 7 b.

26. Lev. Rabba 15:7.
27. Yoma 38 b.
28. Maccos 11 a, Sanhedrin 90 b, Berachoth 56 a.
29. Sota 46 b, Chagiga 5 b, Moed Katon 17 b, Nedarim 7 b.
30. Aboda Zara 65 a.
31. Sanhedrin 48 b.
32. Ibid.

The curse was often utilized as a means of enforcing rabbinical decisions or opinion; it functioned as a method of controlling law and custom. It must have been a rather powerful weapon in the hands of the rabbis if any belief in the efficacy of the curse was widely held during this period.

These scholars utilized it to encourage study; anyone who did not do so was to be cursed,<sup>1</sup> or one who studied in a careless manner was led to expect a curse from his teacher.<sup>2</sup> It appeared to be quite fitting to curse those who instructed their pupils with wrong interpretations, so we are told that Joab cursed his teacher for this reason.<sup>3</sup> According to the opinion of some rabbis certain matters were not to be the subject of speculation or instruction. R. Samuel b. Nahmani (A - 3) reported in the name of R. Jonathan that anyone who made calculations concerning the end of times should be cursed; the section in which this statement is found contains many such calculations.<sup>4</sup>

The matter was, however, carried much further, so that we often find scholars cursing the decision of another man with whom they did not happen to agree. It was told that R. Nahman cursed all those who made decisions according to the opinion of R. Eleazar b. Azaria (T - 2); nevertheless it was reported that the halacha followed the decision of R. Eleazar b. Azaria.<sup>5</sup> The pages of this literature are

filled with numerous cases of a similar nature; on another occasion we find R. Simon b. Abahu cursed by Abaye (BA - 4)<sup>6</sup>. Rab (BA - 1) cursed the decision of a Tanna as well as joining with R. Juda in cursing a ruling of R. Simon;<sup>7</sup> we also find Rab cursed by R. Johanan.<sup>8</sup> This type of curse was used without respect of person through the entire period of the Talmud; many other examples could be given, but all of them follow the same pattern. Generally no reason for the curse is given. This type of curse appears to have had no effect upon the choice of the final halacha.<sup>9</sup>

Aside from the use of the curse with legal decisions we find it mentioned frequently with customs which were not approved by the rabbis. Anyone who said his prayers at the time of the last disappearance of the sun was cursed.<sup>10</sup> Rabina (BA - 6) reported in the name of R. Hisda (BA - 3) / that anyone who searched for water for the purpose of cleaning his hands when dust was available was to be cursed.<sup>11</sup> A man who delegated the task of saying grace after the meal to his slave or his wife was cursed as he would really be neglecting a commandment according to a Tannaitic source.<sup>12</sup> Far more serious matters were also dealt with in this manner; R. Ishmael b. Jose (T - 4) would curse anyone who utilized the method of investigation of blood of R. Haninah; his use of the method was accepted as he was

especially skilled in this matter.<sup>13</sup> We learn from a Tannaitic source that those persons who raised dogs<sup>14</sup> or pigs<sup>15</sup> were to be cursed. Similarly anyone who taught Greek fell under a curse;<sup>16</sup> it is not clear whether this remark has reference to the language or to Greek customs. The last three curses mentioned rose from an aversion for any matter even slightly connected with pagan customs.

We also find personal matters falling within the scope of this type of curse. R. Judah felt concerned over the poor father of a rich son; he cursed any son who would dishonor his father by feeding him from the tithes which were normally designated for the poor.<sup>17</sup> Rab (A - 1)<sup>18</sup> and R. Joshua b. Levi (A - 1)<sup>19</sup> cursed those who aroused themselves sexually.

Certain other actions were to be avoided so that a curse might not fall upon the party concerned. One should not cut the corners of the field which were normally left for the poor even if there was little chance that the poor might harvest their portion; otherwise a man passing the field might curse its owner.<sup>20</sup> R. El'azar b. Jose (T - 4) stated that one should not arbitrate settlements to avoid the possibility of being cursed.<sup>21</sup>

Matters which were permitted in some places and prohibited in others should generally be avoided, so Rab (A - 1) cursed those who would sow flax on Purim which fell into

this category.

The curse was also used with a method of punishment which was frequently invoked; it was generally connected with excommunication. The subject of the ban has been treated in detail in several monographs; its development, its historical background, and its implications would necessitate a more detailed discussion than is warranted by this paper. The curse was used in the ceremony of excommunication and was subject to all the regulations connected with it; a full treatment of this subject would lead us into areas far removed from the main topic of this paper. It might be interesting to note that a son was permitted to curse his parents if he was ordered to do so by the court in this ceremony; this could, however, only be allowed in a case of blasphemy.<sup>23</sup>

The use of the curse in connection with the ban was fully regulated, but the use of the curse for the purpose of the regulation of custom or of enforcing a decision of a particular scholar was free from all regulation.

1. Lev. Rabba 25:1.  
One is at least obliged to support scholars according to  
Ecc. Rabba 7:11, Sanhedrin 92 a.
2. Sanhedrin 111 a.
3. Baba Bathra 21 a, b.
4. Sanhedrin 97 a, b.
5. Kethuboth 56 a.
6. Kiddushin 33 b.
7. Sabbath 120 b.
8. Kiddushin 71 b.
9. Kethuboth 56 a.
10. Berachoth 29 b.
11. Berachoth 15 a.
12. Succa 38 a.
13. Nidda 20 a.
14. Baba Kama 82 b.
15. Baba Kama 83 a.
16. Baba Kama 82 b, Menachoth 64 b, Yerushalmi Berachoth 26 b.  
Yerushalmi Taanith 20 a, Sota 49 b, Mishna Sota 9:14.  
Josephus, F., Antiquities, 14,2,2.
17. Kiddushin 32 a.
18. Nidda 13 b.
19. Nidda 14 a.
20. Sabbath 23 b.
21. Sanhedrin 6 b.
22. Megilla 5 b.
23. Sanhedrin 85 a.

This section is to deal with the meaning of the blessing and the curse; it will concern itself with their contents during this period. It will be found that the same elements which were emphasized during Biblical times continue to be stressed in this literature; this may often be traced to the influence of the Biblical verse with which a statement was connected. The pattern is, however, too clear to attribute it to this cause alone.

The main emphasis of the blessing and the curse is on fertility; there is no difference between the blessings and curses of God or of man in regard to this matter. Interest in agricultural fertility ~~was~~ as well as human fertility was frequently expressed. Obed Edom was to be blessed through the fact that the eight daughters-in-law of Hamoth were to have sextuplets.<sup>1</sup> God was supposed to watch each man until the age of twenty-one to discover whether he will marry or not; after that age He curses him.<sup>2</sup> R. Tanhum (A - 5)<sup>3</sup> stated that anyone who has no wife lives without blessing; R. Judah modified this statement a little by teaching his son that a man can only find pleasure in his first wife.<sup>4</sup> The blessing (Deut. 28:6)<sup>5</sup> was interpreted to refer to sexual matters. According to legend Samson was blessed with special virility.<sup>6</sup> All of these statements demonstrate a great concern about fertility. This did not hinder the scholars from inter-

preting the curse upon childbirth placed upon Eve (Gen. 3:16) as having effect upon all but the most righteous women.<sup>7</sup> They explained the words which commanded fertility *וְהָרְבִיתְךָ* *וְהָרְבִיתְךָ* as referring to the pain which a woman may endure through two types of blood,<sup>8</sup> that of menstruation and that of virginity.

The curse of Noah was caused by the fact that he desired another son to serve him and was unable to beget one after his castration; therefore he cursed Canaan to eternal servitude according to R. Berekiah (A - 5) and R. Huna (A - 4).<sup>9</sup> Although the Bible tells us that the granting of a son to Abraham was the greatest blessing given to him as it enabled the other blessings of God to be fulfilled,<sup>10</sup> R. Meir (T - 3) would see his blessing in having no daughters.<sup>11</sup>

Agricultural fertility was mentioned frequently as the content of a blessing. The scholars sought to discover the nature of Jacob's blessing to Pharaoh; they concluded that he blessed him with the statement - may the River Nile rise to your feet.<sup>12</sup> Certainly no blessing would be more welcome in Egypt. As water was the principal agent of fertility frequently lacking in the Near East, all forms of water, dew, or rain were called signs of blessing. We are told that if the month of Nisan passed without rainfall, it was considered as a curse.<sup>13</sup> Rain was considered a

blessing at all times except during the festival of Sukkos,<sup>14</sup>  
 on the eve of the Sabbath,<sup>15</sup> and early in the morning;<sup>16</sup>  
 during those periods it was considered a curse. Everything,<sup>17</sup>  
 including even the fish, was blessed through rain. It  
 seems quite appropriate therefore, that the sages equate rain  
 with the Torah;<sup>18</sup> at another time dew is compared with  
 Israel.<sup>19</sup>

The curses and blessings connected with the story of  
 the Paradise are explained in an interesting manner; the curse  
 upon the earth is explained as referring to ten famines which  
 will occur in the future.<sup>20</sup> Another interpretation given  
 by R. Isaac of Magdella indicates that the earth shall bring  
 forth accursed creatures such as gnats, fleas, midges, etc.  
 which might, however, be profitable if they were of sufficient  
 size to be sold.<sup>21</sup> Here we also find the old Midrash which  
 states that the world was created with the letter ך so that  
 the world might survive through blessing, while it would  
 have been cursed had it been created with the letter ך at  
 the beginning of the account.<sup>22</sup>

Other matters were also mentioned in the blessings. Moses  
 blessed the people by wishing that the Shechina might rest  
 upon their work.<sup>23</sup> Job was blessed through a doubling of his  
 wealth according to Elisha (T - 2).<sup>24</sup> The emphasis which was  
 placed on the blessing of peace in connection with the  
 priestly blessing has already been mentioned.<sup>25</sup> In the

interpretation of that blessing we find almost all possible blessings mentioned and connected to it through the use of Biblical quotations.

Throughout this literature the only symbol which is constantly used as a source of a curse is the serpent. Joshua was reported to have cursed the Gibeonites (Josh. 9:22 f.) with the reward of the serpent as they had acted in the manner of the serpent.<sup>26</sup> The serpent was supposed to have introduced slander into the world.<sup>27</sup> According to Rab (BA - 1) her main punishment consisted in having to carry<sup>28</sup> her young longer than any other animal proportionally.

We find fertility to be almost the only item emphasized in the contents of the blessings and curses of this period. The remaining matters are only mentioned occasionally.

1. Berachoth 63 b, 64 a.
2. Kiddushin 29 b.
3. Yebamoth 62 b.
4. Sanhedrin 22 b.
5. Baba Mezia 107 a.
6. Sota 10 a.
7. Sota 12 a, Lev. Rabba 34:8.
8. Erubin 100 a, Yebamoth 62 a.
9. Gen. Rabba 36:7.
10. Num. Rabba 2:12 f.
11. Baba Bathra 141 a, Tosefta Kiddushin 5:(end)
12. Num. Rabba 12:2.
13. Taanith 1:7.
14. Taanith 1:1.
15. Lev. Rabba 35:9.
16. Taanith 6 b.
17. Deut. Rabba 7:6.
18. Baba Kama 17 a, Gen. Raba 41:9.
19. Gen. Rabba 39:8.
20. Gen. Rabba 25:3.
21. Gen. Rabba 5:(end).
22. Gen. Rabba 1:10, Yerushalmi Chaggiga 8 b.
23. Sifre Pinchos 28:8.
24. Ruth Rabba 6:4.
25. Sifre Noso, see also Deut. Rabba 5:15.

26. Num. Rabba 8:4.

27. Num. Rabba 19:22.

28. Berachoth 8 a.

Everything was blessed through the merit of his great  
holiness. It was only when Moses and Aaron lay  
down to rest that the people that the Lord had chosen  
to be His people. During the life of the Patriarchs the Lord  
and the Land were blessed, but after their death the  
blessing of the Land was suspended. This was the reason  
why the Land was given to the Canaanites. It was only  
after the fact that Israel was to be a blessing unto all  
the nations is established and then interpreted.

The name of a friend of the Lord was supposed to be  
of great value and the blessing of their words. The word  
of the Patriarchs was in this case preferred over  
the blessing of Moses according to St. Jerome, St. Basil  
(11: 1). Another authority would derive from this word  
of the Lord and declared that the blessing of Moses was to  
be fulfilled in this world. This is seen in the Patriarchs  
could not see fulfilled until the world to come.

When the Patriarchs mentioned later passages they  
taught that the Temple and the Temple service was God  
especially blessed during the time of Moses and Aaron.  
They also spoke of the blessing of Moses in Genesis  
11: 1. Moses was chosen when the Torah had been given.

According to the thought of this time the blessing and the curse were inherent in some persons or it was preferred that they be bestowed by certain persons. Everything was blessed through Moses because of his great trustworthiness; <sup>1</sup> it was only when Moses and Aaron together blessed the people that the Shechina rested upon their hands. <sup>2</sup> During the life of the Patriarchs the seed and the land were blessed, but after their death famine struck the land; furthermore they bore their blessings with them; Joseph is included in this category. <sup>3</sup> Of course the fact that Israel is to be a blessing unto all the nations is embellished and often interpreted. <sup>4</sup>

The curse of a friend of the Jews was supposed to be better for them than the blessing of their enemy; the curse of Ahijah the Shilonite was in this case preferred over the blessing of Balaam according to R. Samuel b. Nahmani (A - 3). <sup>5</sup> Another authority would differ from this point of view and declared that the blessings of Balaam were to be fulfilled in this world while those of the Patriarchs <sup>6</sup> would not see fulfillment until the world to come.

When the scholars mentioned later personages they stated that the Temple and the Temple service had been especially blessed during the time of Simon the Just. <sup>7</sup> They also spoke with admiration of Joshua b. Gamaliel <sup>8</sup> as a blessed man through whom the Torah had been saved.

Whenever Hadrian was mentioned in this literature, he was named the accursed.<sup>9</sup> There is a Midrash which connects many Biblical figures who were blessed and cursed through a series of Biblical verses,<sup>10</sup> but it serves no purpose other than this.

Although individuals were mainly associated with the blessing and the curse, it was also used to designate whole groups. The am ho-oretz was considered in the same category as the accursed beasts by some scholars;<sup>11</sup> this statement, however, comes from a passage which is filled with exaggerations. R. Jeremiah b. Eleazar (A - 4) stated that during the time Babylonia was cursed her neighbors were cursed also, but when Samaria was cursed, her neighbors were blessed.<sup>12</sup> The emancipated slave was still considered to be cursed through the curse of Noah, and was not to be married for this reason; in regard to marriage an emancipated slave was to be placed in a lower category than a proselyte; this view was expressed by R. Zadok (T - 1) and R. Simon b. Yochai (T - 3).<sup>13</sup>

The curse was associated with individuals and with groups, but only rarely with any rite. We are told that R. Joshua b. Levi (A - 1) desired to curse a sectarian who annoyed him; the scholar took a cock placed it between the legs of his bed and planned to wait until the comb of the

cock became white and it stood on one leg. This was to occur at dawn; then he would curse him, but the teacher decided that this was not the proper manner in which to act.<sup>14</sup> R. Berekiah (A - 5), R. Helbo (A - 4), R. Aibo (A - 4), and R. Samuel b. Nahmani (A - 3) reported that the heathens blasphemed in a certain manner when they entered the Temple. They placed their hands behind their neck, turned their faces upward, scratched the floor with their boots, and blasphemed.<sup>15</sup> This does not report anything of a Jewish rite, however.

The manner in which a blessing was to be bestowed was also not mentioned often. R. Isaac reported that one was to bless only objects which were hidden from sight; other scholars agreed with this decision.<sup>16</sup> Actually the matter is ever really discussed.

The place of blessing was traditionally linked with the Temple;<sup>17</sup> this thought is not fully developed, however. The idea is expressed in a negative manner as well by R. Simon b. Gamliel (T - 3) who stated that since the destruction of the Temple no day had passed without the occurrence of a curse;<sup>18</sup> Rabba (BA - 3) would claim that the curses became more severe each day.<sup>19</sup>

The scholars of this period were not concerned with the manner of bestowal of a blessing or a curse which was not connected with the ritual; they also had no interest in designating any place as especially effective for them.

1. Ex. Rabba 51:1.
2. Ecc. Rabba 4:9.
3. Tosefta Sota 10:6 ff.
4. Sifre Noso 5:27, Yebamoth 63 a, Pesachim 117 b, Gen. Rabba 39:8.
5. Sanhedrin 105 b, 106 a, Taanith 20 a.
6. Deut. Rabba 3:4.
7. Yoma 39 a.
8. Baba Bathra 20 b, 21 a.
9. Gen. Rabba 10:4, 28:3, Ecc. Rabba 9:4.
10. Ex. Rabba 48:3.
11. Pesachim 49 b.
12. Erubin 18 b.
13. Horayoth 13 a.
14. Aboda Zara 4 b, Berachoth 7 a.
15. Lam. Rabba 2:11.
16. Taanith 8 b, Baba Mezia 42 a.
17. Num. Rabba 8:9.
18. Mishna Sota 9:12.
19. Sota 49 a.

The conclusions which may be drawn from the material presented in this paper will be discussed in this chapter.

It may be readily seen that there is no possibility of treating this subject in a chronological manner. Large segments of the material cannot be dated more precisely than Tannaitic or Amoraic; the evidence for this division is not always certain. The precise assignment of a statement to a scholar of one generation within these strata is often not possible as it may be reported of a scholar in one generation while being the subject of discussion of men living centuries later. One might assume that a statement which was transmitted through several generations was of some importance to the men in each generation.

There seems to be no pattern of the use of the blessing and the curse during this period; one is not able to point to one age or to one school and state that the blessing and the curse occurred with greater frequency than at other times. Both are used throughout the period under discussion; the thought expressed of them in their legal or in their common use did not change materially from one age to another. It is also not possible to point to any appreciable difference between the use of the blessing and the curse in Babylonia and in Palestine.

Many contrasting points of view are found in the manner

that the rabbis treat these phenomena, but we do not possess sufficient material of one generation, one school, or one scholar to be able to draw conclusions regarding them with any degree of certainty. At times the views of a single teacher contradict themselves, but this is not unlikely when one considers the possibility of incorrect transmission of the text as well as the fact that much of the treatment was homiletical and therefore not subject to the strict discipline of logic.

It might be possible to discover valid conclusions if this phenomena were treated as one among many others. Then one would be able to draw conclusions about smaller periods of time within this whole age.

It is also not possible to approach the problem from a linguistic point of view as has already been noted in the opening pages of this essay. A wide variety of phrases and words are used especially with the curse, but they often vary considerably among different versions of the same statement. Until critical texts of all of this literature is available it will not be possible to treat the subject from this point of view. Some critical editions have been prepared, but they only extend to a small segment of this literature.

The major interest of the scholars of this period did not lie in the treatment of the blessing and the curse of

their own time, but in that of Biblical times. The matter is handled in a manner similar to that of other phenomena as the miracle; the period of frequent occurrence appears to have been in the past. Whenever persons who have been especially blessed or cursed are mentioned a Biblical figure is cited. They mentioned Balaam, David, Abraham, Ruth, and many others numerous times, but a figure who lived a little closer to their own period is only rarely named. All of these phenomena - the miracle, the blessing, the curse - were much more vital during another and better period of history in which God was in constant direct contact with man; the present age seemed to be separated from those times by a deep gulf. The blessings and curses of God which are mentioned in the Bible are the subject of far more detailed discussion than those of man; they appear much more significant to the scholars of this age and are widely embellished with legends. The close ties of these rabbis to the Bible are obvious in almost every statement as all invariably close with a Biblical citation; this is true of the entire literature with the exception of the Mishna which omits such references in its effort to be concise. This is not peculiar to the blessing and the curse, but may be seen in connection with almost every subject discussed by these men.

The ritual use of the blessing and the curse appear

to be handled with extreme care and respect. Whenever possible the rituals were explained so that they would contain meaning for that time, otherwise they were surrounded with so many embellishments that they became inoperative. The priestly blessing is pictured as a strictly regulated ritual in which all elements of freedom and simplicity are removed from it. It was a significant ceremony in the Temple ritual and was transferred to the synagogue where it remained as the privilege of the priests. No concern whatsoever about the deeper meaning or the efficacy of the blessing is expressed; the concern of the scholars is limited to ritual matters. When the contents of the blessing are discussed, it is carried out in a completely Midrashic manner which limits itself to expanding the content, but does not delve more deeply into the matter. The treatment accorded to the priestly blessing does not differ from that given to any other verse except in length.

The trial by ordeal of the suspected adultress could not be treated so simply by the scholars; it had to be retained as it was to be found in the Bible, yet it was completely unintelligible to their time. The problem was approached from two points of view; the one stated that the Biblical ideas concerning it were still valid and that the effects there described would occur and would even come about immediately. The other approach interpreted it in such a

vague manner that it ceased to have any value at all. If the results were thought to follow immediately the ritual would satisfy the jealous husband and might have some effect in spite of skeptics, but if its effect might not be felt until many years later it would certainly lose all of its value. No one could believe in such a ritual and it would neither frighten a woman into a confession, nor satisfy a jealous husband; only the outer form of the rite could therefore be continued.

The laws regarding the cursing of parents and of notables were made inoperative in a similar manner. They were subject to so many restrictions that their enforcement became an impossibility. The power of the officials of the community in many cases was undoubtedly also rather limited and so was their ability to enforce their legal decisions; this would be especially true in Palestine.

Although the subject of blasphemy was treated at length by these scholars, this was an entirely vacuus discussion as they limited blasphemy to a Divine Name which had been forgotten at the time of the destruction of the Temple. During an earlier period it was of importance, so that the statements of the Mishna and other Tannaitic sources would deal with a real problem.

Within the entire group of ritual blessings and curses those of Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim remain puzzling.

The matter is described at some length in the Mishna; the meaning of the ceremony is never discussed, but emphasis is rather placed upon the manner in which the blessing and curse were to be bestowed. Other vitally important occasions in the religious history of Israel are not the subject of such detailed treatment; neither the granting of the ten commandments, nor the final blessing of Moses is treated in such a manner. This may be due to the fact that these blessings and curses were commanded to be pronounced; therefore they were treated as any other commandment. It would seem that the blessing and the curse pronounced upon these mountains was a traditional sanction against the social crimes mentioned in the statements. Their formulation in this manner would have been of greater significance in an earlier period, but the manner in which the material is presented in this literature would indicate that nothing meaningful is discussed here. A tradition of the past has been given on, but no concern with the efficacy or the content of these verses has been shown by any of the scholars.

The basic emphasis upon the content of the blessing and the curse did not change since Biblical times; the major concern of this period still remains fertility, both agricultural and human; this remained a great mystery concerning which one might utter wishes. Blessings which were vague in the Bible were interpreted as referring to fertility. Almost every statement is in some manner connected with fertility.

As we turn our attention to the blessings and curses treated in a non-legal and non-ritual manner, we discover that only one category really exists; there are curses, but virtually no blessings. The blessing was no longer used as a formula of greeting, nor do we find the record of any blessing granted upon the deathbed of a father or of a great leader. In these matters the rabbis did not follow the Biblical examples. Blessings, wishes for good, seem to have lost their appeal; the last example of a blessing granted upon the deathbed seems to be that of Mattathias in the books of Maccabees. This is probably one reason for the many different phrases which are connected with the curses used in this literature while only one word of blessing is used. The curse, as the 'evil inclination', is much more picturesque and therefore appears to be treated a little more thoroughly!

An examination of the curses shows us that the agent to whom they were addressed for fulfillment was never mentioned. We do not find the name of God, a substitute name, the name of an angel, or of a form of nature ever invoked. The legislation of the Mishna would indicate that such usages were once common, but of such uses not a single example has been reported to us. If the word had special significance it would seem very likely that it would be invoked wherever possible. This is also contrary to the Biblical usage as

the Name of God was frequently utilized in connection with oaths and with conditional curses. In this matter the curses of this literature also differ from those of their gentile contemporaries, especially those of the Romans, who frequently invoked their deities.

A view of all the material treated in this literature would indicate that there was no strong belief in the efficacy of the blessing or the curse, at least among the scholars who recorded this material. Blessings and curses were effective in the past, but that did not influence the belief of the rabbis. The very few occasions upon which we are told of the outcome of a blessing or a curse may rather easily be attributed to the desire to increase or diminish the reputation of a particular scholar. At other times matters of efficacy are mentioned in a humorous manner which certainly does not demonstrate a strong belief in the power of the spoken word. The question of efficacy is actually never discussed with the exception of the case of the suspected adulteress. Even in connection with the ban the curse does not appear to be the force which gives it effect; the effectiveness of some types of ban is also rather doubtful as many of the regulations concerning them demonstrate that they may have been lifted as easily as they were pronounced. In any case the lighter form of objection to a decision of another

scholar, the pronouncement of a curse against him, had no effect at all. The material available does not permit us to draw any conclusions regarding the thoughts of the common people in connection with the blessing or the curse.

In conclusion it should be added that study in this field will remain difficult as long as no critical editions of many of the works of the period are readily available. A further obstacle placed into the path of a student is the lack of adequate indexes to major portions of this literature. These factors are undoubtedly responsible for the fact that almost no secondary literature on specific questions of this period exists.

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