Deuteronomy 28: A Bible Study

Leif M. Michelsen

Deuteronomy 28 is the epilogue of the lawbook of Deuteronomy. It seems to have been a common practice in the Orient to end a law codex with utterings of blessing and curse. The Lipit-Ishtar law code, dating from the early Post-Sumerian period (about 1860 B.C.), ends by saying:

May he who will not commit any evil deed
Be presented with life and breath of long days.
(On the other hand) he who will commit some evil deed

... Let not the foundation of his land be firm.

The Code of Hammurabi, dating from about 1700 B.C., has a very long epilogue of the same kind. The Holiness Code in Lev. 17-26 has a closing chapter which, even though the words blessing and curse do not occur, comes very close to Deut. 28 with regard to its content and reflects the same practice.

An ascertainment of this kind is not without significance. It helps us to see how Deut. 28 functions within the context of the book of Deuteronomy. Se-
condly, some peculiarities in our text may be regarded as less singular when compared with the more or less fixed pattern of the epilogues found in the cultural environment of Israel. Some critical scholars have been inclined to interpret the fact that the curses occupy such an extensive part of Deut. 28 as an irrefutable token of a late adaption of the chapter, through which the balance between blessing and curse has been disturbed. Now, the Code of Hammurabi has the same lack of balance. As the intention of the epilogue is to instil respect for the law, it is quite natural that the admonitions prevail. A number of pronouncements in Deut. 28 bear on the captivity of the disobedient people. In some verses the invasion by a foreign people and the dispersion of Israel is clearly foretold (vs. 25, 35, 37, 41). This has been regarded as a post-exilic element. An assumption of this kind is rooted in an underestimation of the prophetic character of the word of God, and if such be the case, must be met in principle. If it is based on textual criticism and on a study of the composition of the chapter, it should be mentioned that the utterances just mentioned are found not only in the last part of the chapter, vs. 43-69, where the parallelism between blessing and curse is lost, but also in the first part, where the parallelism is still intact. Secondly, it should be observed that the list of curses in the Hammurabic Code includes elements which correspond rather closely with the pronouncements mentioned. If the succeeding king does abolish the law, enacted by Hammurabi, Enlil the Lord shall order “the destruction of his city, the dispersion of his people the transfer of his kingdom” and his enemies shall “carry him away in bonds to a land hostile to him.” The threat of a military invasion was, of course, just as the invasion of grasshoppers and the danger of drought, well known and feared in the Orient long before the downfall of Israel in 722.

By this quotations we have touched another item of great importance. The list of chastisements with which we are faced in Deut. 28 seems to lean closely on a biblical tradition. The judgments of God mentioned in Deut. 28 correspond with those mentioned in Amos 4:6-12, Lev. 26:14-39 (as we should expect), Jer. 15:1-14, Ezek. 5:1-14. The similarities reach down into details. This biblical tradition may be related to the cultural environment of Israel, since, as we shall see, the Code of Hammurabi seems to correspond in more than one point. Since we have stressed the similarities over against the law-codes of the Orient, it should be said that Deuteronomy 28 is entirely rooted and embodied in the theology of the mosaic faith. While Hammurabi implores the many gods of Babylon according to their different domains, Deut. 28 knows only one God, Yahweh. This example of disagreement is not just an example. It is a crucial point, involving a number of minor but not at all unimportant disagreements, reducing the code of Hammurabi to an interesting document, making Deut. 28 the words of the living God.

Deut. 28 as a conditional law-text (vs. 12 and 14) is not prophecy in the strict sense of the word. It has to do with the future, it is true, but does not in a determinant way foretell how the future is to be. That remains an open question, depending on the obedience of the people. Nevertheless, God acts according to his word when his people disregard his commandments. Thus we can see the fulfillment of Deut. 28 in the history of Israel. II Tim. 2:12-13 offers the principle: “If we deny him, he also will deny us, as he cannot deny himself.”

Vs. 1-2 are an introduction to the first section, vs. 1-14. The form is con-
ditional. The main point of view is presented. The people of God can exist and prosper only if they are ready to live in obedience under the rule of the Holy One, who has elected them for his people, v. 9, Lev. 18:1-5. Thus vs. 1-14 speak of the blessedness of those who observe the law of God in faithfulness. As Deut. 28 is an epilogue of a lawbook, the law is mentioned in general (“all his commandments”), not in detail as in the curse-list of Deut. 27:15-26. The only commandment emphasized in our chapter is the first one (see vs. 14 and 20: “thou hast forsaken me”). This is partly due to the basic significance of this commandment, partly to the situation facing the people of God at that time. Only through obedience the people of God can be separated from the heathen surrounding them, and prevail in a warlike environment. The guidance and the protection, given to them by him who had carried them “as a man doth bear his son” all the way through the wilderness, (Deut. 1:31) depends on the obedience of faith.

Vs. 3-14 develop the aspect of blessing more specifically. Like the introductory verses, this section has its parallel in the second part of the chapter. The six short sentences concerning the blessing, vs. 3-6, correspond in detail with the six utterances of curse in vs. 16-19. Also vs. 7-14 has its corresponding verses in vs. 15f. The last one is found in vs. 44, which corresponds with vs. 12-13.

Vs. 3-6 depict the totality of the blessing through the contrasting expressions “city and field,” “basket and store,” “when thou comest in—when thou goest out.” The same picture of the abundance and totality of the blessing is aimed at in v. 4. The six sentences from vs. 7-13, all starting in the same way (“The Lord shall cause . . .” “The Lord shall command . . .,” etc.) emphasize in a very suggestive way that the blessing is an act of the will, determined and accomplished by God. Any trace of a magic way of thinking is lacking. It should be noticed that the blessing has its fulfillment in fruitfulness as very often is the case in the O.T., Gen. 1:22, 28; 22:16-17; 49:25. This should not be understood in contrast to spiritual blessing. It has to do with the approaching events in the history of Israel. The people of God are about to enter into the promised land. It is easy to see that the promises, given by God to the patriarchs, play an important role in the passage. It is hinted at in several verses (vs. 8, 9, 11). This land was at the time inhabited by the Canaanites, worshipping Ba’al as the sender of all fertility. Farming and cult were to a very high degree coherent. Israel was to enter this land and to share the cultural life of the land with the Canaanites. The great temptation and the great test which the people of God had to meet, consisted in co-existence with the people of this nation, Judges 2:21-22. The question was whether they would stick to their own traditions of faith or fall, not by the sword of the enemy, but by the temptation to idolatry. We know from the history of Israel that they did not stand the test. Hosea complains that Israel “did not know that I (Yahweh) gave her corn and wine and oil and multiplied her silver and gold, which they prepared (as a gift of thanks) for Ba’al,” Hos. 2:8, Deut 8:6-20. On this background it is understandable that Deut. 28 stresses both the reality and the totality of the blessing, as well as God as the only giver of fertility. The people of God today, living in a heathen culture of great prosperity, are in need of the same warning, so that they can be released from the materialistic fear of want and learn to live with confidence in the providence of the God of blessing.

Indirectly Deut. 28, like the Scripture as a whole, teaches us that God is the
only one able to bless. All blessings come from the same spring, from him. Thus the essence of blessing is God himself. In the Aaronic formula of blessing this has found expression in the wording: “The Lord bless thee,—the Lord make his face to shine upon thee...” The ability of modern man to supply himself with what he needs does not alter this truth. The mixture of welfare and godlessness is not an objection to Deut. 28. The emptiness of a life lived in superabundance demonstrates the difference.

Vs. 15-68 deal with the curse, still on the basis of the law, v. 15. Thus it reveals an aspect of the law of God which is often neglected. The law bears witness to the One who does reveal it. It reveals his goodness and holiness, that is true, but also his severity and his zeal. He will not clear the guilty one. Transgression of the commandments of God is charged with punishment. There is such a thing as a curse, wherein God himself turns against his creatures to bring them to nought, v. 63. Just as the essence of blessing is God himself, the gravity of the curse is the conflict with God himself. The curse is just as real as the blessing. That is what the parallelism of blessing and curse in Deut. 28 signifies. We therefore find, in the section of the curse, the same six short sentences, vs. 16-19, and the same characteristic clauses (“The Lord shall send,” v. 20; “The Lord shall smite...,” v. 22 etc.) stressing the judgment as an act of the divine will. While v. 20 still is a more general statement, the following verses contain a number of well-known plagues, such as pestilence, vs. 21 and 22; drought, vs. 23 and 24; failure of crops, vs. 38-40; sword and captivity, vs. 22 and 25. Some of the details are very interesting because they occur not only in Lev. 26 and Amos 4, but also seem to reflect the Law-code of Hammurabi. Some quotations will demonstrate this. If the succeeding king disregards the law of Hammurabi, Enki shall “deprive him of knowledge and understanding,” (see vs. 28 and 34), Adad shall “deprive him of the rain from heaven,” (see vs. 23-24) Zababa, the mighty warrior shall “turn day into night for him and let his enemy trample upon him,” (see v. 29). And Ninkarrak shall “inflict upon him in his body an evil disease which never heals, whose nature no physician knows,” (see vs. 27 and 35; vs. 60-61). The correspondence can be explained as a result of the similarity of conditions of life in the Orient, but can also indicate that the lawcode of Hammurabi had some influence on the legal traditions of the people of the Orient and to some degree played the part of a model.

One important point in Deut. 28 is not yet sufficiently treated. That is the captivity of the people by a foreign nation. This point has several elements. First of all we must be aware of the fact that the conquest and the possession of the land, or the loss of it, play a very important part in Deut. 28 as a whole. The approaching events made that quite natural. Secondly, the existence of a people within their land plays an important role in all the lawcodes we know of in the Orient. The law as such is addressed to a nation, in this case to Israel, and the existence of Israel as a nation depends on the obedience. The law shall rule the country. Disregard of the law has loss of sovereignty as its consequence.

When this result of disobedience is depicted in Deut. 28, several extents can be distinguished. V. 25 speaks of a military defeat. Vs. 31-33 speak of an invasion of a foreign army which shall take possession of all the good things of the land. Vs. 36-37 speak of the exile of the king and his people.
Vs. 47-68 repeat the same points but in greater clarity. Nevertheless, the details do not seem to become too exact, and there is no need to regard this part of the chapter as vaticinia ex eventu. The foreign people coming from far is described as a nation with a foreign language, of fierce countenance and with great brutality, vs. 48-51. They shall besiege the gates of the cities and cause indescribable distress in the country, vs. 52-57. The ultimate result will be the dispersion of the people “among all peoples,” v. 64, where the life of the people will be a life of “none assurance,” vs. 65-67. The prophecies match with the coming history of Israel, but the details do not possess an explicitness beyond what could be expected. The history of the past in the Orient certainly did hold analogies, as the Code of Hammurabi to some degree indicates. The last verse is of great interest since the disaster here is regarded, not as an exile in Assyria, but as a return into slavery in Egypt, from where they have been redeemed “with great judgments,” Ex. 6:6-7.

Then we are brought back to the main theme of the curse section. The disaster and the plagues, occurring on the scene of history, do not indicate that the course of history is without divine direction. On the contrary, in human life the unbreakable coherence between the iniquity of man and the judgment of God is demonstrated. It is not my point that any suffering whatever it may be can be traced back to individual sin. But it is necessary to pay heed to the fact that it was by disobedience that the human race first fell, and came under the condemnation of God, Gen. 3:1ff. Just as Paradise was changed into a land of thorns and thistles, the promised land of Israel can be changed into a battlefield. In the same way any human fellowship can be turned into a world of brutality. Just as the creation would turn back from a cosmos into a chaos if the “bounds of the sea were removed,” Jer. 5:22, so human life is brought back to chaos by sin and transgression. We may say that the evil of man is the agent of this process, but the lawfulness of the process is established by him “who judges all the earth,” Gen. 18:25.

Dr. René Pache, author of the Etude biblique on pp. 1-4, has been President of Institut Emmaüs, a French-language Bible school now located at St.-Légiers-sur-Vevey, since 1947. Originally trained in law, in which subject he earned his doctorate at the University of Lausanne, he was converted to a personal faith in Jesus Christ while working as a lawyer for the well-known chemicals firm of CIBA at Basle. After a period of study at the Nogent Bible School in France, he engaged in evangelism and Bible teaching in many different places, including Central Europe, the Balkans, and North Africa. He is the author of a number of books on biblical and theological topics. He was instrumental in founding the Groupes Bibliques Universitaires (Inter-Varsity) in France and in Switzerland, and is currently a vice-president of the I. F. E. S.