

9 Monotheism—Curse or Blessing?

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Curse and blessing, as well as ambivalence in general, belong within the foundations of biblical, i.e. Israelite monotheism (for details see Assmann, 2015; 2018). They are part of the way in which biblical monotheism understands and presents itself in the Torah. They are not external concepts illegitimately applied to ancient texts, but ideas that are essential for the new form of religion biblical texts and which we came—since the 17th century—to call “monotheism”.

The core document concerned with cursing and blessing is the book of Deuteronomy. It is staged as a farewell speech of Moses, who is to remain in Moab and to die there, whereas the Israelites, to whom this speech is addressed, will cross the river Jordan the next morning. The book starts with a brief recapitulation of the liberation from Egypt and wandering through the wilderness, the experience of the great deeds of God, and then presents the people with the body of laws and commandments that will serve as the foundation of the Covenant between God and Israel. At last, Moses places six tribes on Mt. Garizim to bless the people and six on Mt. Ebal to curse them. The blessings are for those who keep the law and the commandments, the curses for those who break them. Ch. 27 ends with curses that will hit those who sin in clandestinity, out of reach of the arm of the law. Ch. 28 starts with ten blessings in case the law will be strictly observed. Upon this, however, follow no less than 53 verses of the most elaborate and terrible curses in case the law will be abandoned. Thus it is made clear right from the start that the new religion built on the Covenant between God and Israel is a mixed blessing, it contains life and death, life beyond all experience of prosperity and death beyond all experience of disaster.

Religion, to be sure, is always a very serious matter. Mistakes in ritual performance may cause calamities and even the death of the officiant, blaspheming the gods may arouse their wrath and entail terrible punishment, but here we are dealing with something categorically different. What JHWH ordained at Mt. Sinai and what he has the people swear by the most solemn oaths is a matter not just of correct behaviour towards God or the gods and correct observance of the ritual, but of the entire form of political, social and individual life. It is a matter even—and above

all—of inner commitment reflected in attitudes such as piety, justice, equity, sincerity, empathy, compassion, beneficence, generosity, helpfulness and much more. Most if not all of these attitudes and virtues occur also in other cultures such as Egypt, Babylonia, Greece; however, they are not part of religion there, but belong to secular wisdom. In Israel they become part of religion because they are part of the Covenant, which is not just a formal alliance but also a very strong emotional bond, a bond of love, really, for which bridal community and matrimony are central metaphors. Keeping a Covenant requires not just outward correctness but inner, emotional and intellectual participation. In the book of Deuteronomy, the proclamation of the laws of the Covenant starts with the famous ‘shema’ confession: “Hear, O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH is one. Love YHWH your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.”

The concepts of curse and blessing are integral elements of the idea of ‘Covenant’, *berît* in Hebrew, a political term meaning contract, treaty, alliance, that YHWH, the God of Israel, establishes on Mt. Sinai between himself and his chosen people which he liberated from Egyptian bondage. The religious concept of Covenant is an absolutely new and revolutionary idea in the history of religion. However, it has a long prehistory on the political plane. Political treaties used to be sworn by both parties with solemn oaths, and these oaths used to contain a series of curses that are to hit the party that would break the treaty. There is a rich tradition in formulating those curses in Babylonia, Egypt and among the Hittites. In this tradition, Deuteronomy may rank as the most elaborate example, a veritable masterpiece in the art of cursing. Even closer to the structure of Deuteronomy than the political treaties are the loyalty oaths that Esarhaddon king of Assyria in the 7th Century B.C. had his subjects and vassals swear in favor of his son Assurbanipal. Whole passages have been adopted in Hebrew translation from the Assyrian model, a copy of which must have existed in the royal archive at Jerusalem, since in the 7th century B.C. the king of Judah was himself a vassal of Assyria. In the same way as the *political* concept of alliance serves as the model for the *religious* concept of ‘Covenant’, the political concept of loyalty serves as the model for the kind of inner attitude and engagement that the Covenant requires of its members for which the Hebrew term is *aemunah*, *pistis* in Greek and *faith* in English (Koch, 2008).

We do not know of vassal treaties and loyalty oaths in Ancient Egypt, but there is a famous and frequently copied piece of wisdom literature that the Egyptian pupils had to learn by heart, known as the Loyalist Instruction, in which we read:

Worship the king in your innermost parts,
place His Majesty in friendly fashion in your thoughts.

He is Sia (the personification of Perception) who is in your hearts
 and his eyes pierce through every being. [. . .]
 nostrils frieze when he starts to rage
 but when he sets to peace one can breathe again.
 He gives nourishment to those in his circle
 and he feeds the one who sticks to his path. [. . .]
 He is Bastet (the goddess of grace) who protects the Two Land,
 the one who praises him will be protected by his arm.
 He is Sakhmet (the goddess of plagues) to those who disobey his
 orders,
 and the one whom he disagrees will be laden with sorrows. [. . .]
 Do this and your body will flourish
 and you will find it excellent for eternity.

(Simpson et al., 2003, pp. 172–174)¹

We find here very much the same ambivalence—curse and blessing in a more general sense—but also and above all the same emphasis on inner man. Loyalty is an affair of the heart, of inner adherence, constant emotional engagement.

The political origin of the religious idea of Covenant is very revealing. It invites us to ask the question of curse or blessing with regard to the state: The state—curse or blessing? It becomes immediately obvious that the state suffers of the same kind of ambivalence we—in asking this question—find in ‘monotheistic’ or rather ‘Covenantal religion’, and for the very same reason. The state is also founded on an implicit kind of treaty or Covenant (which thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean Jacques Rousseau have tried to spell out) that provides blessings for its loyal followers, according to Hobbes (e.g., the freedom from fear) and curses for its enemies. It demands considerable sacrifices and promises in turn considerable advantages.

However, when we pass from the political plane onto the religious plane, from social contract to religious Covenant, we become aware of a very fundamental difference concerning the nature of blessings and curses. What the Covenant has to offer in terms of curses surpasses in terror and power of annihilation everything that even the strongest and most authoritarian state may threaten its subjects with in terms of punishment and intimidation. Even more decisive, however, is the difference when we ask for the blessings. The state can only promise security from civil violence and freedom from punishment for those who keep its laws; God can promise prosperity in the Promised Land, fertility, success in every respect, recognition and even leadership on the international scene. What in the early Jewish conception is implied in the ambivalence of the Covenant is success versus collapse in history. In rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam, this alternative becomes intensified as salvation and damnation.

The analogy of state and Covenantal religion is anything but accidental. The idea of Covenant is an antithesis against the state. It is meant to oppose and to overturn the state in its ancient oriental form of sacral kingship. The adoption and religious reinterpretation of the Assyrian concepts of treaty and loyalty amount to an act of subversion (Otto, 2000, pp. 43–83). It amounts to a radical deconstruction of the concept of ‘king’ in its ancient Egyptian and Oriental understanding as a mediator between the gods and human society. Parts of the king concept, above all the function as legislator, are now transferred to God, and other parts, such as the function of partner of divine election and support, are now transferred to the people. This leads to a radically new concept both of ‘God’ and of ‘people’. Already in Assyria, which provides the closest analogies to the biblical concept of Covenant, we find the idea of a Covenant between God Asshur and the Assyrian king. It is this idea which in Israel is transferred to the people. This transference is achieved by introducing a concept as innovative and revolutionary as the concept of Covenant: the concept of revelation (Otto, 2006).

Revelation means the disclosure of a transcendental reality and—by this same act—the relativization of the immanent or “mundane” reality. By offering man a home in another world, revelation creates a specific form of disengagement or estrangement in this world. “I am a stranger in this world. Hide not your Torah from me”, we read in Ps. 119, 19 or, in the words of Hugo of St. Victor, “Perfectus vero ille cui mundus totus exilium est” (Truly perfect is he to whom the whole world is an exile). Heine, in his Parisian exile, called the Torah a “portable fatherland” the exiled and refugees may take along into their places of refuge or captivity. The Marxist and literary theorist Georg Lucács coined the term “transzendente Obdachlosigkeit” (metaphysical homelessness) with reference to the late 19th century novel, pointing to the loss of exactly that kind of transcendental homestead that is symbolized in the concept of revelation. Under extreme conditions of suffering and despair in the world as it is, this concept may lead to an attitude of investing all hopes, endeavours and expectations in the other world and to radically reject and despise this world, or, with regard to the individual, to eagerly throw away the life that is and invest everything in the life to come. This is an attitude frequently met with among young Salafis.

If revelation means the disclosure of a *metaphysical* home, it is important to note that this idea arose in a historical situation of extreme *physical* homelessness. In 722 B.C., the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered and destroyed by the Assyrians, the population deported and the land repopulated with other tribes. The Southern Kingdom was subdued and forced into vassaldom. One hundred years of Assyrian oppression followed, continued by decades of Babylonian oppression that ended in 587 with complete disaster and catastrophe. Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, royalty and the elite deported in captivity—200 years,

in short, of extreme suffering and anxiety, ending in the loss of everything that could secure home, identity and security in this world. It is easily imaginable what a huge liberation and comfort this complex of revelation and Covenant must have meant for those by whom this new religious truth was experienced and to whom it was announced.

There is no word for this revolutionary concept of 'revelation' in the ancient languages. In Hebrew, the Torah is 'given' but not revealed. *Apokálypsis* in Greek and *revelatio* in Latin mean 'unveiling' or 'uncovering' and refer to the uncovering of the future, especially the end of the world as in our word 'apocalypse'. This, however, is not what has been revealed, neither on Mt. Sinai nor in Bethlehem and Mekka. There are, of course, references to the end of the world and the Last Judgement in the New Testament and the Qur'an. But the focus of the idea of revelation in its three main manifestations is not on the end of the world but on the way (*halakha, hodos, sharia*) of living in the world. Revelation in this new sense addresses a whole nation or community, is given once and for all times and concerns the totality of human existence: law, morals, politics and cult. It means a complete reordering and restructuring of human existence, establishing a new order that is meant to last forever.

There is probably no religion on earth that does not know of any forms and media by which the gods may reveal their intentions to humans, e.g. by means of dreams, oracles or prodigies. Revelation in this sense is a normal form of divine communication. These revelations, moreover, refer only to specific situations addressing specific persons and/or presupposing specific methods and institutions of divination. The new concept of Revelation with a capital "R", so to speak, does not find its expression in a word, on the *lexematic* level, but on the level of *narration*. This narrative expression is unfolded in the biblical book of Exodus. The myth of the Exodus from Egypt with its three parts of emigration, legislation and conquest follows the structure of a typical rite of passage with its stages of separation, transformation and reintegration and must be much older than the second book of Moses, which in its present form dates back only to the post-exilic period, i.e. to late 6th through 5th centuries. This book combines the older narrative of the exodus from Egypt with the new myth of revelation and becomes the founding myth of II Temple Judaism that in turn will become the origin and model of three world religions: Rabbinic (or Talmudic) Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

'Monotheism' is not an ancient term, but has been coined only since the 17th and 18th centuries. What we ask for in terms of curse and blessing, i.e. ambivalence, is not monotheism, which has many varieties, but this singular complex of revelation and Covenant that has been discovered or invented only once in human history and lives on in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as in other religions following their model. It is, therefore, important to have a closer look at the book of Exodus where this complex is first and most explicitly expounded.² The account

of the revelation of the Covenant at Mt. Sinai forms the centre and the apex of the book of Exodus. The book starts with two chapters describing the sufferings of the Israelites under Egyptian oppression and the birth and upbringing of Moses. This exposition ends with Moses' flight to Midian after having slain an Egyptian taskmaster. In these two chapters, God is not once mentioned. All the more striking is his entry at the end of Ch. 2 where he is mentioned five times in five consecutive sentences. God at last hears the cries of the Hebrews and understands their situation. He decides to intervene by appointing a liberator: Moses, to whom he appears in the scene of the burning bush. This is the first of five steps in which the process of revelation will unfold. Out of the burning bush, God's voice reveals his name YHWH to Moses, meaning "I am or will be present", i.e. "be with you and for you and your people". God commissions Moses to return to Egypt with his brother Aaron (who is to act as his spokesman) and to demand of Pharaoh leave for his people (at first just of three days that they may celebrate a feast for the god who has revealed himself to them).

Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh and declare their request, legitimizing themselves by performing a miracle (or, rather, a magic trick), turning their staves into snakes. God, however, had hardened Pharaoh's heart (=mind), preventing him from giving in too fast and giving himself the opportunity to reveal his superior power in a sequence of ever more terrible 'plagues'. This show of power becomes the second step of revelation. Whereas the first step was addressed to Moses alone and was staged in a very intimate and gentle way, the second step, being addressed to Pharaoh, is staged in cosmic dimensions, violent ways and largest possible publicity. It starts as a continuation of the magic context with the transformation of water into blood and ends with the slaying of the Egyptian firstborns, at which tenth and last blow Pharaoh finally gives in and lets the people go. Shortly after, however, he changes his mind and pursues the emigres with his entire army. This headless action leads to the miracle of the sea when the Israelites pass on dry feet through the retiring flood while the Egyptians are drowned in the returning waves.

After three months of wandering through the desert—with several severe crises—the people arrives at Mt. Sinai, the scene of the third and decisive act of revelation, where the people is confirmed its election and receives its mission to become "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation". The scene culminates in a grandiose theophany. Among earthquakes, fits of fire and the sound of thunder and trumpets, the trembling people hear the voice of God proclaiming the Ten Commandments. The rest of the 613 biddings and prohibitions is then given through mediation of Moses and laid down in a book, whereas the Ten Commandments are written with God's own finger on two stelae prepared by Moses. All together these constitute the rules of the *b'rit* or Covenant that YHWH and the people are about to contract and that is concluded in a solemn

ceremony. In this third step in which the process of revelation culminates, God reveals himself not in a visible shape, but in overwhelming natural phenomena that accompany his “inscripturation”.

This is without any doubt the apex of the process of revelation, but it is not its end. After the Covenant ceremony, Moses is summoned to stay and wait on the mountain until he is called to enter the cloud that covers its peak. At this point, the revelatory process turns intimate and secret again, proceeding between YHWH and Moses alone. In the cloud, Moses is shown a model of the “tabernacle”—a movable shrine—which he is to build and whose elements are itemized in an endless list constituting the longest catalogue poem in antiquity, the more so as this list is repeated in slightly different order afterwards, when the execution of God’s design is reported. The demonstration and explanation of this design forms the fourth step of revelation.

Between the revelation and the execution of the tabernacle, however, occurs a crisis that jeopardizes the whole project. While Moses stays for 40 days and nights in the cloud learning all the details concerning the tabernacle, the people waiting at the foot of the mountain lose hope in seeing Moses ever again and ask Aaron to replace their vanished leader with an image that may lead them through the desert. Aaron casts the Golden Calf and the people start feasting and dancing. This amounts to a formal break of the Covenant just contracted whose first commandment prescribes No other Gods! No images! God sees himself betrayed and is resolved to destroy the people and to start a new one with Moses alone. Moses, however, after having slain 3000 dancers in an act of punishment and expiation, is able to make YHWH stay in the Covenant. He is even granted a vision of God from behind and an audition of his voice reciting a kind of self-characterization that again stresses the basic ambivalence: “keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children’s children”. This event forms the fifth and last step in the process of revelation.

The book of Exodus closes with the construction of the tabernacle and the entry of YHWH into his sanctuary. This act, however, is not to be counted as a step of revelation, which is always an event and a transient intervention in time, but an enduring state. YHWH now dwells “in the midst of his people” as the formula runs “sitting upon the Kerubîm”. In the same way as the tabernacle here functions as the ideal model of the temple, the Covenant here established becomes the model and ideal type of monotheistic religion that will be adopted and continued by Christianity and Islam as well as by more recent religions that follow in turn their model of a religion founded on revelation and faith.

The book of Exodus combines two originally separate topics, the Exodus from Egypt and the Sinai revelation. Through this combination, it establishes a connection between the ideas of liberation and legislation. Revelation and Covenant appear in this narrative frame as means of

liberation from human oppression. Egypt, in this context, appears as the symbol of physical homelessness and the Covenant offers the Israelites what we have called a “metaphysical home”. It is important to note that the narrative arc that the book of Exodus is drawing does not lead from bondage in Egypt to freedom in Canaan, but from utter humiliation and godforsakenness in Egyptian bondage to freedom and dignity as god’s chosen people in closest symbiosis with God dwelling in their midst. It is the tent tabernacle, the portable temple, which is the goal of the narrative. Not Israel’s entry into Canaan but YHWH’s entry into the tent and into community with his people is the point of the narrative.

The book of Exodus is to be recognized as the canonical expression of a new type of religion, even that very type of religion that we have in mind by asking the question of blessing or curse. It is obvious that the narrative of the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and their calling into a Covenant with YHWH is primarily represented in terms of blessing. The ambivalence, however, of this new religion is by no means left in the dark. On the contrary, it is highlighted in the most explicit form. The Covenant appears in these texts as a matter of loyalty and betrayal, piety and blasphemy, distinguishing between friends and enemies, love and hate, support and destruction, and, in the Christian interpretation, salvation and damnation.

The complex of revelation, Covenant and faith is a system devised to function independently of state, kingship, territory and temple. It could have been invented—or “revealed”—only in a situation when all this was missing. The existing religions needed all this; they were identical with state, cult and culture. There was no way of distinguishing between religion and politics, religion and culture, state, and temple. Revelation is a strategy of “*Ausdifferenzierung*”, in the sense of Max Weber and Niklas Luhmann, of establishing religion as an autonomous cultural system in its own right and even to put it in a hegemonial position above and in control of the other systems such as law, economy, politics, art, and science. Differentiation operates by introducing a leading distinction such as just/unjust in the case of law, gain and loss in the case of economy, association and dissociation (or even friend and foe) in the case of politics, art and non-art in the case of art, true and false in the case of science. The new distinction in the case of religion is belief and unbelief.

Belief in the sense of “faith”, *Glaube* in German, *fides* in Latin, *pistis* in Greek and *aemunah* in Hebrew, is a concept that is alien to ancient religions. People did not “believe” in the sun, the sea, the thunderstorm, rivers, trees and other powers of heaven and earth. They had them around, as objects not of belief but of experience, cognition, veneration and reconciliation. Religion was a matter of natural evidence, not of belief. Belief is only required where religion is a matter of *revelation*, where the truth and power of the divine and the foundations of a life in concordance with the divine are not obvious in the order of the given, but belong

to an order that is not given but comes from beyond and has to be made real in a new life and society. Belief in the religious sense is 'faith' in English; it is a combination of belief and truthfulness or loyalty. If you want to belong and stay within the Covenant, you have to be truthful to the God who saved you from Egyptian slavery. Loyalty presupposes alternatives. The world is full of gods; their existence is not denied but stressed. You must be careful not to adore them. The leading metaphor is adultery or "whoredom". If Israel starts worshipping other Gods alongside YHWH, she commits adultery, raises YHWH's jealousy and contracts divine anger and punishment. The problem with faith or truthfulness is its shadow, which is infidelity or disbelief, a problem that, in my opinion, is completely alien to the other, "pagan", religions. This is the tragic side of the myth of revelation, to which I will now turn in the last part of my contribution.

The first to point to this dark side of monotheism seems to have been the German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. In an essay written in earlier years but published only in 1819 in his "Noten und Abhandlungen zum besseren Verständnis des West-Östlichen Divan" titled *Israel in der Wüste* (Goethe, 2010), Goethe held that after years of aimlessly wandering in the desert, Moses was slain by Joshua and Caleb who could no longer bear with his weak and hesitant style of leadership and wanted to enter and conquer the Promised Land as soon as possible. In this hypothetical murder, Goethe saw the culmination and logical consequence of the numerous scenes of rebellion, mutiny and infidelity that interrupt the march from Egypt to Canaan. These scenes of "murmuring" as they are traditionally called led him to the following conclusion: "The proper, sole and deepest motive of global and human history, to which all the others are subordinate, remains the conflict of disbelief and belief" (Goethe, 2010, p. 229f.). Goethe was led to this conclusion by the many scenes of mutiny and rebellion that are told in the books of Exodus and Numbers in which the Israelites resist Moses' leadership and cast doubt on YHWH's promise. There are no less than 14 such scenes, the most prominent ones being the scenes of the Golden Calf (Exod. 32), the return of the scouts (Num. 13f.), and the feast of Ba'al Pe'or in Shittîm (Num. 25). In the Calf scene and the scout scene, YHWH is resolved to call the whole thing off, annihilate the people and start a fresh one with Moses, who has a hard time to reconcile God's jealousy and anger. In the last scene of this series at Shittîm, YHWH killed 24,000 men by sending a plague. The biblical scholar Ernst Sellin held that Moses himself was slain at Shittîm by the revolting people, arguing that Moses, who was not allowed to enter the Promised Land, disappeared rather mysteriously in Mo'ab (Sellin, 1922; 1928). However, Sellin went further and saw in the alleged slaying of Moses not only the culmination of these numerous rebellions on the way from Egypt to Canaan but the beginning of a tradition of suffering and martyrdom to which the prophets of YHWH were exposed in

this world, culminating in the death of Jesus. Sellin was convinced that not only the memory of Moses but also and above all the remembrance of the grievous sin of his murder and all the crimes that have been committed against the prophets would have lingered on in the memory of the people and would eventually have caused a kind of collective psychic disease. He takes it for certain

that in spite of all the cover-up from the side of the priests the tradition of Moses' martyrdom stayed alive, that this murder and defection was resented as the great sin of the people which made them deadly ill and which has to be atoned for first before salvation may come.

(Sellin, 1922, p. 114)

The impression to live under the curse of the Covenant and under the wrath of God produced a "sick theology" of sorts, informed by a guilt complex. These feelings of guilt play also a major role in Sigmund Freud's analysis of Biblical religion. He followed Sellin in postulating the murder of Moses and formed his own psychoanalytic idea of the ambivalence of monotheism as a father religion:

Ambivalence is a part of the essence of the relation to the father: in the course of time the hostility too could not fail to stir, which had once driven the sons into killing their admired and dreaded father. There was no place in the framework of the religion of Moses for a direct expression of the murderous hatred of the father. All that could come to light was a mighty reaction against it—a sense of guilt on account of that hostility, a bad conscience for having sinned against God and for not ceasing to sin.

(Freud, 1964, p. 164)

The murder of Moses is, of course, a theoretical construct without any foundation in the biblical sources but nevertheless a very powerful symbol of the ambivalence of the new religion, which in the Bible itself finds expression in the scenes of murmuring in the wilderness and the violent fate of the prophets.

Today, we are confronted with quite different problems. Religion is sometimes experienced as a curse rather than a blessing, yet not from the inside but from the outside. It is, however, obvious that terrorist attacks and other atrocities that invoke sacred texts for motivation or legitimation have little to nothing to do with religion proper. They are just hijacking religion for their proper quite secular goals. We must not accuse religion, Islam for instance, for being abused by evil and violent movements. Nothing is proof against being hijacked and abused. Yet a text, a religion, a tradition is nevertheless not totally innocent of what

is made of it in its history of reception. There must be an element in it that lends itself to malign interpretations, much against the will of its author(s), to be sure, and it is only by hindsight that this element becomes perceptible. In this sense, it might not be quite needless to return to the sources in asking about curse or blessing with regard to monotheism.

Notes

- 1 The name of the author is now known to be Ka-ir-su.
- 2 See J. Assmann, *The Invention of Religion. Faith and Covenant in the Book of Exodus*, trans. R. Savage, Princeton UP 2018.

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