

## **Blessing and Cursing in the Book of Numbers: A Corrective to a Magical Understanding of "words" in Pop-Christianity**

### **Introduction**

My *Aikido sensei* continually reminds me of the importance of "extending" ones "*ki*" when using the defensive techniques of this martial art. A further esoteric teaching attached to *Aikido* is that of the *kotodama*, which as a *kiai*, may be viewed as nothing more than "grunts" to coordinate physical exertion. But as an *ukei* the words take on a magical power. *Kotodamas* are not unique to *Aikido*. They are found in Shinto prayers (*norito*) and other Japanese folk customs (sometimes referred to as *yogoto*).<sup>1</sup> Although the concept of *kotodama* is compartmentalized in the day to day life of a modern Japanese, it has its epiphanic moments. Having been born and raised in Japan, I could have a proclivity toward this dualistic perspective, which when applied to Christian teachings could wreck havoc. From a biblical perspective, it is concepts such as "blessings" and "curses" that fit quite neatly into this slot.

Not unlike the aforementioned *kotodama* in ancient and modern Japan, many in both occidental and Asian Christian settings have viewed words of blessing and cursing through a magical worldview. This pop-Christian subculture is probably much larger than the often maligned "word of faith" movement. Tragically, scholarly literature has not been of much help. A review of felicitous literature written by leading minds of the past elevate the "magical" interpretation. Johnnes Pedersen, Sigmund Mowinckel, and Johannes Hempel laid a deep foundation in the direction of the magical power of these words, while Eichrodt, Procksch, Knight, Jacob, Zimmerli, von Rad are but a few of those who followed suit in Old Testament studies with either magical or with a mechanistic understanding.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will investigate the use of blessing and secondarily cursing in the book of Numbers as a cross sectional slice of the larger biblical corpus. I will hone in on the importance attached to these concepts and to their unique articulation in the Old Testament.

### **1. Blessings and Cursing as Stitching**

The quintessential archetype of biblical blessing (Num 6.24-26) is found in the obscure book of Numbers. The fact that this book of Numbers ranks only 4th in the Hebrew scriptures in its usage of the

---

<sup>1</sup> For further studies see: Ann Wehmeyer, "The Concept of Kotodama in Edo Period Nativism," *Annals, Southeast Conference, Association for Asian Studies*, XIII (1991), 71-80 and "The Interface of Two Cultural Constructs: Kotodama and Fuudo," in *Japanese Identity: Cultural Analysis*, ed. Peter Nosco (Denver: Center for Japan Studies, Teikyo Loretto Heights University, 1997), 94-106.

<sup>2</sup> See Anthony Thiselton, "The Supposed Power of the Word," *JTS* 25 (1974), 283-287, Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "to Bless" in the Old Testament*, SBL Dissertation Series 95 (1987), 17-27, and Herbert C. Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse" in the Hebrew Bible*, SBL Monographs 13 (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1963), 12-13, for a summary of previous research in this area.

√*brk*,<sup>3</sup> may imply a subsidiary role with reference to the concept of blessing in this book and for that matter, its role in articulating the significance of blessing in the Old Testament as whole. However a unique structural framework that spans the whole book, elevates its importance and weaves the antonymous<sup>4</sup> concept of "curse"<sup>5</sup> into a braided unity, thereby elevating its importance.

Scholarly exertion has been concentrated on articulating a definitive structural key and outline for the entire work, but chronology, geographical movements, narrative/law generic interchange, documentary analyses, the ingenious usages of the early and later census reports which depict a first and second generation of Israelites, a ring pattern and most recently a cultic-military migration saga all capture only a fascicle of the whole.<sup>6</sup> I would argue that a small stitching that has gone basically unnoticed is that of the concept of blessing and cursing in chapters 5-6 and 22-25

Chapters 5-6 may be broken up into 5 separate pericopes<sup>7</sup> in which most scholars have abdicated the their search for cohesion.<sup>8</sup> Eryl W. Davies sums up this consensus well when he writes, "it is difficult to discern any logic behind the inclusion at this point in Numbers of the remaining material contained in chs. 5f."<sup>9</sup> It is true that Philip Budd has proposed a theme of ritual and ethical purity as a linking element,<sup>10</sup> while Gordon Wenham knits the disparate units together via introductory formulas to each pericope.<sup>11</sup> Despite these hints of thematic and structural continuity, only pieces of the puzzle are

<sup>3</sup>Out of the total occurrences of 402, there are 88 in Genesis, 83 in the Psalter, 51 in Deuteronomy and then 17 occurrences in the book of Numbers (Num 6.23, 24, 27; 22.6 (x2), 12; 23.11 (x2), 20 (x2), 25 (x2); 24.1, 9 (x2), 10 (x2).

<sup>4</sup>Michael D. Swartz, "The Aesthetics of Blessing and Cursing: Literary and Iconographic Dimensions of Hebrew and Aramaic Blessing and Curse Texts," *JANER* 5, no. 1 (2005), 187, argues that, "The blessing and the curse are closely related not only semantically, but formally as well. The same style used to pronounce Israel's blessings is used to pronounce its curses." It is interesting to note that despite the multiple words used to describe the malediction/curse, that in the Old Testament only the √*brk* is used as the antonym. See Josef Scharbert, "√*rr*," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Volume 1, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 415.

<sup>5</sup>√*lh* - Num 5.21 (x2), 3, 27; √*rr* - Num 5.18, 22, 24, 27; Num 22.6 (x4), 12; 24.9 (x2); √*qbb* - Num 22.11, 17; 23.8; √*m* - Num 23.8.

<sup>6</sup>See the influential work of Dennis T. Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch*, Brown Judaic Studies 71 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985). A possible corrective and refinement has been offered by Won W. Lee, "The Transition from the Old Generation to the New Generation in the Book of Numbers: A Response to Dennis Olson," in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium: Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*, Volume 2, ed. Wonil Kim, Deborah Ellens, Michael Floyd, and Marvin A. Sweeney, 201-19 (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000) and Won W. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel's Migratory Campaign* (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003).

<sup>7</sup>Num 5.1-4 (expulsion of the unclean from the camp), 5.5-10 (restitution of misappropriated materials), 5.11-33 (the ordeal of jealousy), 6.1-21 (Nazirite oath), and 6.22-27 (Aaronic blessing).

<sup>8</sup>See Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 44-45, who argues that "no recognizably close relationships, as far as subject-matter is concerned, either with each other or with what precedes and follows," can be identified.

<sup>9</sup>Eryl W. Davies, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 43. See also the discussion in Rolf P. Knierim and George W. Coats, *Numbers*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, Volume IV (Grand Rapids, MI and Cambridge, U.K.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 32-34, which argues for a long history of "successive accretions" that have inexplicably been displaced from Exodus and Leviticus.

<sup>10</sup>Philip Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 5, digital edition (Waco, TX: Word, 1984). Budd relies on the works of J. De Vaulx and Sturdy for this interpretation.

<sup>11</sup>Gordon Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England and Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 89. He specifically refers to 5.1ff, 5ff., 11ff.; 6.1ff. and

evident.<sup>12</sup> Reinhard Achenbach is the most recent scholar to have tried to fit a few more pieces in the developing landscape. He connects chapters 1-4 centering on the topic of the camp's order with 5-6 by viewing chapter 5 as models of possible impurities, while 6.1-21, conversely, models purity. The Aaronic blessing then caps-off the impurity and purity topic with an announcement of the community's cleansing and sanctification by Yahweh.<sup>13</sup> Achenbach gives one possible interpretation of the redactional outcome,<sup>14</sup> I, on the other hand, would argue that chapter 5 contains legal injunctions that result in a community-wide blessing, whether lay-people in 6.1-21 or the whole community with the assistance of the Aaronic priesthood.

Attempts to link themes and units throughout the book of Numbers on a larger scale has been proposed by Mary Douglas.<sup>15</sup> Starting with the observation that in Numbers narratives and laws "switch back and forth,"<sup>16</sup> Douglas adds Milgrom's insight that thematic parallelism in the form of chiasm and introversion are evident, even at the level of whole chapters.<sup>17</sup> Douglas calls the complete structure of the book of Numbers a "ring." Section I (Num 1-4) and XIII (Num 36) are narrative stories which will begin and close off the book at the same point, with "God's Order" as its theme. The first rung with the theme of "keeping faith" is found in the law sections II (Num 5-6) and XII (Num 33.50-35.34). The "offerings" stories which forms sections III (Num 7-9) and XI (Num 31.1-33.49) follow suit. The legal theme "holy times" are found in sections IV (Num 10.1-10) and X (Num 28-30). The revolt stories in section V (Num 10.11-14.45) and IX (Num 20-27) are followed by the "offerings and purifications laws" of section VI (Num 15) and VIII (Num 18-19). For Mary Douglas the "triple rebellion" and the story of Aaron's rod (Num 16-17) complete the ring. Intriguing and creative as this schema may be, the crucial chapters of 5-6 and 22-24 do not seem to fit well into her depiction. The paneling of chapters 5-

---

6.22ff. Wenham finds multiple treads of unity in throughout chapter 5 as discussed in pages 80-81. More recently Reinhard Achenbach, *Die Vollendung der Tora: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Nemeribuches im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2003), 499 states, "Die Redeeinleitungen in Num 5,1.2a; 5,5.6a; 5,11.12a; 6,1.2a; 6,22.23a sind analog gestalte und verschaffen dem Textbereich eine innere Gliederung."

<sup>12</sup>The inability to account for selected pericopes in analyzing the book of Numbers is the norm. For example A. Scharf's intriguing *ringstruktur* of Num 10.11-21.25 with chapters 13-14 as the central unit must leave out chapters 15, 18 and 19. See Aaron Scharf, *Mose und Israel im Konflikt: eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den Wüstenerzählungen*, *Orbis biblicus et orientalis* 98 (Freiburg, Schweiz and Göttingen: Universitätsverlag and Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1990), 56 or Thomas W. Mann, "Holiness and Death in the Redaction of Numbers 16:1-20:13," in *Love & Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope*, ed. John H. Marks and Robert M. Good (Guilford, CT: Four Quarters Publishing, 1987), 181-190.

<sup>13</sup>Achenbach, *Die Vollendung der Tora*, 511.

<sup>14</sup>John van Seters has recent gone to battle with the whole notion of redaction criticism. Note especially: John van Seters, "The Redactor in Biblical Studies: A Nineteenth Century Anachronism," *JNSL* 29, no. 1 (2003), 1-19; John van Seters, "An Ironic Circle: Wellhausen and the Rise of Redaction Criticism," *ZAW* 115, no. 4 (2003), 487-500, and John van Seters, *The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the "Editor" in Biblical Studies* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006).

<sup>15</sup>Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers*, JSOT Supplement Series 158 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), especially 102-22 and 147-50.

<sup>16</sup>Douglas, *In the Wilderness*, 102.

<sup>17</sup>Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), xxii-xxix.

6 with Num 33.50-35.34 seems far too artificial,<sup>18</sup> with similarities on the level of loose subject matter, but no "repetition of words and semantic fields," "larger textual units or structures" or even clear evidence of "similarities in theme or genre."<sup>19</sup>

The contribution that I would like to make in this paper towards solving the structural puzzle of Numbers is to suggest that actually chapters 5-6 and 22-25 are intertextually connected. Evidence for this connection can be argued from the fact that it is only in chapter 6 and 22-24 that the  $\sqrt{brk}$  is used. Furthermore the word clusters that depict "curse" and "cursing" ( $'lh$ ,  $'rr$ ,  $qbb$  and  $z'm$ )<sup>20</sup> are found almost exclusively in chapter 5 and 22-24. The addition of chapter 25 is necessary due to such words as  $qn'h$  (Num 5.14 (x2), 15, 18, 25, 29, 30 and 25.11 (x2)) and its verbal form  $qn'$  (Num 5.14 (x2), 5.30; 11.29; 25.11, 13). The inversion of a deeper relationship to Yahweh in Num 6.1-21 by lay-people is reversed in chapter 25 and both the Aaronic blessing and the covenant with Phinehas in Num 25.11-12 uses the term  $\text{\textit{šlwm}}$ , which is found only in Num 6.26 and 25.12. What may be dubbed the ordination of Phinehas in this section, shows further connectivity with the narrative frame of the the Aaronic blessing, in which Aaron's sons play a significant role. Although many more threads could be used to tie chapters 5-6 and 22-25 together, those that find large scale parallels in other Numbers pericopes have been mostly avoided.

Turning momentarily to the cohesion of chapters 5-6 and 22-25, it may be argued that this intertextual reading may give hints to possible reasons why the pericopes were collected and placed as such. It is here that Jacob Milgrom's insight that the book of Numbers prefers to utilize "prolepses" or "anticipatory passages" is important. He writes, "another distinctive redactional technique evidenced in Numbers is the divulging of information that is patently irrelevant to its context but that prepares the way for what follows. . . . Rather than being dismissed as editorial interpolations and glosses constituting later additions to the text, these proleptic passages should be regarded as integral to the composition."<sup>21</sup> The first unit, Num 5.1-4 introduces both  $tsr'h/tsr'$  and corpse contamination which are crucial for making sense of Num 12 and 19 respectively,<sup>22</sup> while continuing the message of Lev 13-14

---

<sup>18</sup> Douglas, *In the Wilderness*, 120, 147-50.

<sup>19</sup> Ellen van Wolde, "Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar," in *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Carole Fontaine (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 432-33. Van Wolde is here describing the procedures for intertextual readings, but they are a good guideline for identifying parallel texts.

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that  $\text{\textit{קלל}}$  does not appear in the book of Numbers and although it may be argued that  $\text{\textit{הרם}}$  (Num 18.16) should be included in the discussion, its periphery nature has convinced me to not include it in this discussion. See Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse" in the Hebrew Bible*, 15-21 for a quick overview of the important terms referring to "curse" in the Old Testament.

<sup>21</sup> Milgrom, *Numbers*, xxx. Milgrom gives many examples but does not refer to Num 5-6 and 22-25.

<sup>22</sup> I cannot explain the use of  $\text{\textit{זב}}$  "discharge" as a prolepses in this verse. The concept itself is found in Lev 12 and 15.19-24. Wenham suggests the possibility of the use of a "triadic pattern" to explain its inclusion. See Wenham, *Numbers*, 78 and Gordon Wenham and J. G. McConville, "Drafting Techniques in Some Deuteronomic Laws, *VT* 30, 2 (1980), 250-51.

and the larger context of Lev 11-15. Num 5.5-10 is internally consistent and reaches out to the next unit with the use of such vocabulary as *'šm*<sup>23</sup> and *m 'l*<sup>24</sup>, however a proleptic role seems questionable to me.<sup>25</sup> Ashley on the other hand, sees the right of the priest "to share in the gifts/sacrifices"<sup>26</sup> in 5.8-10, 25; 6.10-12, 14-20, and which may well point toward the controversies in Num 16-17 in an oblique way. It does speak to a internal fusion via *leitwort* and/or *leitmotiv*,<sup>27</sup> that may run from 5.5-10 through 6.21.

The unity of Num 22-24 has its own unique problems that cannot be taken up at this time.<sup>28</sup> The fact that chapters 22-24 consists of prose and poetry and what seems to be internal inconsistencies within chapter 22<sup>29</sup> would take a whole monograph to tackle. It is important however to note that Num 25 has been fused to chapters 22-24, by such *leitwort* as "Shittim," "Moabites" and the presence of Balaam himself. The point of interest here is instead how and why the whole unit, chapters 22-25 is placed in this location. If this unit is connected with chapters 5-6, as has been argued above, then its location, coming right before the renewed census of Num 26, forms a long distant chiasmus with Num 5-6<sup>30</sup> which followed the census narrative of Num 1-4.

This would imply that the message of chapters 5-6, 22-25 stands in an important position in the whole book of Numbers. In terms of our inquiry into blessing and cursing, the topic is elevated via this positioning.

## 2. Blessings in Numbers

The Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6.24-26 and its narrative enclosure<sup>31</sup> (6.22-23, 27<sup>32</sup>) has been investigated thoroughly by both the commentaries and technical journal articles.<sup>33</sup> Instead of re-

---

<sup>23</sup> See Num 5.6, 7 (x2), 8 (x2); 6.12 and 18.9.

<sup>24</sup> See Num 5.6, 12, 27; 31.16.

<sup>25</sup> Budd, *Numbers*, digital edition, sees Num 5.5-10 as "some kind of halakhic comment on Lev 5," which would speak against it being used proleptically

<sup>26</sup> Timothy Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, The New International Commentary of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans publishing, 1993), 112.

<sup>27</sup> See Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 88-113.

<sup>28</sup> Milgrom, *Numbers*, 400-1

<sup>29</sup> This is especially so in Num 22.21-35.

<sup>30</sup> Michael Fishbane, "Accusations of Adultery: A Study of Law and Scribal Practice in Numbers 5:11-31," *HUCA* 45 (1974), 26-27 argues for a large *inclusio* beginning at Exod 40.33b and ending at Num 7.1a.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Fishbane, "Form and Reformulation of the Biblical Priestly Blessing," *JAOS* 103, no. 1 (1983), 115.

<sup>32</sup> Although the Hexateuch follows the major Hebrew witnesses in forming an enclosure around the Aaronic blessing, the LXX lacks this structural style and introduces the blessing by adding the text of verse 27 to a position before the blessing. A further difference is evident in that the LXX has *ego kurios* in place of just *'ny* John Wevers, *Notes on the Greek Text of Numbers*, SBL Septuagint and Cognate Studies Series 46 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 105-6, suggests that these differences de-emphasizes the Aaronic role and elevates the placing of the "divine name" on the people. It is interesting to note that in Num 10.33-36, the Hebrew and LXX has reverse their roles in forming or not forming an enclosure.

<sup>33</sup> See for example: Pieter Arie Hendrik de Boer, "Numbers 6:27." *VT* 32, no. 1 (1982), 3-13; Michael Fishbane, "Form and Reformulation of the Biblical Priestly Blessing," *JAOS* 103 (1983), 115-21. David Noel Freedman, "The Aaronic Benediction (Numbers 6:24-26)," In *Pottery, Poetry & Prophecy: Collected Essays on Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1980), 229-42; Sharon R. Keller, "An Egyptian Analogue to the Priestly Blessing," In *Boundaries of the*

working this fruitful field, I would like to highlight just a few points of interest. First, both the enclosure and the blessing itself emphasize that it is Yahweh's name that is central in the blessing. Mitchell summarizes the implications from this observation by stating: "The Priestly benediction shows more clearly than any other passage how God's blessing is intimately connected to his favorable attitude. The benediction asks for God to be favorably disposed toward his people."<sup>34</sup> This relational aspect makes God the active party in the blessing and strongly argues against either a magical or mechanical view of power in the words of blessing.<sup>35</sup>

Second, structurally the blessing itself is in a tripartite and pyramidal construction, moving from a short line to the longest in the third and final line. In a similar way the movement from *šmr* (to keep),<sup>36</sup> to the *chnn* (grace or favor) and finally to *šlwm* (shalom) is a movement conceptually from narrow to broad. Sharon Keller has identified an Egyptian blessing from the the First Intermediate Period (c. 2134-2040) which structurally progresses from a shorter to a longer line (3/5/7)<sup>37</sup> in a tripartite construction. Furthermore, the second line reads, "The face of the Great God will be Gracious over you,"<sup>38</sup> which brings to mind a combination of the second and third lines of the Aaronic blessing. It is interesting to note that the Aaronic blessing and the Egyptian parallel are not fixated on fertility as the primary element in a blessing as has been argued by earlier scholarship. On the contrary, it is a broader panorama, which shines its spotlight on the giver rather than the gift.

Third, the use of the metaphor "to shine" (*√'wr*) and "lift up his face" further emphasizes the relational aspect of Yahweh's blessing in that "God is giving attention to someone"<sup>39</sup> by these words. David N. Freedman speculated that these phrases reflected an "experience of Moses,"<sup>40</sup> while Korpel

---

*Ancient Near Eastern World: A Tribute to Cyrus H. Gordon*, ed. Meir Lubetski, Claire Gottlieb and Sharon Keller (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 338-45; Marjo C. A. Korpel, "The Poetic Structure of the Priestly Blessing," *JSOT* 45 (1989), 3-13; Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Blessing of God: An Interpretation of Numbers 6:22-27," *Interp* 29, no. 2 (1975), 240-51; H. Mowvley, "The Concept and Content of 'Blessing' in the Old Testament," *The Bible Translator* 16 (1965), 74-80; A. Murtonen, "Use and Meaning of the Words Lebarek and Berakah in the Old Testament," *VT* 9, no. 2 (1959), 158-77; A. Yardeni, "Remarks on the Priestly Blessing on Two Ancient Amulets from Jerusalem," *VT* 41 (1991), 176-85.

<sup>34</sup> Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "to bless" in the Old Testament*, 167.

<sup>35</sup> The fact that the *Targum Neofiti I* and a large number of the manuscripts of the *Targum Onqelos* retain the Hebrew rather than translating it into Aramaic is noteworthy. On the other hand, the *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* has translated it and presented a unique reading. Robert Hayward, "The Priestly Blessing in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan," *JSP* 19 (1999), 88 states "In short, the blessing is invoked on the Jewish people as a whole, to grant them blessing in their Torah study and obedience to the commandments, protection from evil, knowledge of divine mysteries, God's favourable reception of their prayers, and peace in their land."

<sup>36</sup> Marjo Korpel, "The Poetic Structure of the Priestly Blessing," *JSOT* 45 (1989), 5, has argued that with the except of Gen 28.14-15 the word-pair "*brk // šmr* is lacking in the Old Testament. The usual pair of these two term has God the subject of *brk*, while the *šmr* is being carried out by the people as a pre-condition. I wonder if the people's role in a *šmr* has not been already accomplished by the context of 5.1-6.21?

<sup>37</sup> Keller, "An Egyptian Analogue to the Priestly Blessing," 342.

<sup>38</sup> Keller, "An Egyptian Analogue to the Priestly Blessing," 340.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "to bless" in the Old Testament*, 96.

<sup>40</sup> Freedman, "The Aaronic Benediction," 233.

takes a more comparative religions approach in which words and/or phrases that were originally used in sun worship were retooled to express Yahweh's blessing in an intimate way.<sup>41</sup>

Fourth, the second person singular pronominal suffixes that are used throughout the Aaronic blessing "express both the intimate and personal character of the relationship between the Lord and the recipients of the blessing."<sup>42</sup> Patrick Miller, Jr. adds to this that, "the third person *plural* suffixes of the framework, these pronouns open up the objects of blessing to include or allow for either individual or collective blessings. The blessing is invoked upon the community and/or the individuals that make it up."<sup>43</sup>

The bulk of the occurrence of the the  $\sqrt{brk}$  in the book of Numbers is found in the Balaam narratives. Christopher Mitchell has classified the blessings in Num 22-24 as "divination blessing pronouncements." These pronouncements:

are declarations which describe the relationship between God and the person(s) blessed. They declare that God is favorably disposed toward certain persons and that God therefore has blessed them and/or will bless them in the future. Divination is employed to determine the will of God regarding the person(s) to be blessed. If divination reveals that God is not favorably disposed, or is angry at the person(s), then a curse predicting their downfall may be uttered in place of a blessing. A striking feature of this type of blessing is that it does not presuppose monotheistic or Yahwistic beliefs for the blesser, and the method of divination employed is quite similar to that used in extra-biblical ancient Near Eastern religions.<sup>44</sup>

Mitchell relies primarily on Robert Wilson's analysis of the Mesopotamian *bārû* diviner<sup>45</sup> capitalizing on the *bārû*'s significant role in war times and the use of extispicy and hepatoscopy.<sup>46</sup> Although his conclusions that Balaam was a *bārû* diviner may be debated, that the biblical character does exhibit some of the predominant characteristics has been substantiated by such scholars as Benjamin Uffenheimer<sup>47</sup> and Michael S. Moore. Both have however incorporated other roles. Uffenheimer refers to the nomadic *šā'ir* who utter poetic oracles,<sup>48</sup> while Moore depicts a multifaceted

---

<sup>41</sup> Korpel, "The Poetic Structure of the Priestly Blessing," 6.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick D. Miller, Jr., "Blessing of God: An Interpretation of Numbers 6:22-27," *Interp* 29, no. 2 (1975), 243.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, "Blessing of God: An Interpretation of Numbers 6:22-27," 243-44.

<sup>44</sup> Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "to bless" in the Old Testament*, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), 89-133, 147-50. Abraham Malamat, "Prophecy at Mari," in *"The Place is Too Small for Us": The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 59, however, promotes the view that the biblical Balaam may be better understood as an *āpilum*, i.e., an "answerer." He relies on the use of the word "answer" in Mic 6.5 along with possible similarities in "cultic acts" that Balaam performs in Num 23.3, 14-15, 29. Moshe Weinfeld, "Ancient Near Eastern Patterns in Prophetic Literature," in *"The Place is Too Small for Us": The Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 40, also picks up on the cult acts and proposes a similar analysis. Benjamin Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press & The Hebrew University, 1999), 78, has dismissed Malamat's thesis as groundless.

<sup>46</sup> Although the text indicates sacrifices on multiple occasions, it does not give evidence of either extispicy or hepatoscopy.

<sup>47</sup> Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel*, 79-80. He lists the following as "points in contact with the Babylonian diviner-priest": 1) ritual manipulations while interested parties stand by; 2) the shifting of ritual locals for possible magical purposes; 3) the connection with warfare, which is future supported Num 31.8, 16 and other passages.

<sup>48</sup> Uffenheimer, *Early Prophecy in Israel*, 80-3.

figure with "diviner/seer" and "exorcist" roles.<sup>49</sup> He perceptively concludes, "the Balaam we see in the biblical texts is not a simple figure, but a complex one enacting a plurality of roles for which there is not a minimal but a considerable degree of role overlap and preemption."<sup>50</sup> Although Moore's "exorcist"/*āšipu*-like role characterization for Balaam would place him in a more explicitly magical sphere,<sup>51</sup> the lack of textual evidence would tend to mitigate this fact.

Balaam's second Oracle and specifically 23.19-20 may be a crux for this study:

El is not a human that he would lie,  
nor a mortal<sup>52</sup> that he would change his mind.  
Would he say, but not do?  
Speak, but not establish it?  
I was summoned<sup>53</sup> to bless,  
since he blessed!, I cannot revoke it.

These verses tend to support Mitchell's conclusion about the nature of Balaam's blessing and even cursing when he states:

Balaam does *not* have an exceptional ability to pronounce powerful formulas which effect what they state. Neither are the words, prayers or wishes for God to bless/curse. Rather, Balaam is a diviner. His skill lies in his ability to *predict* the future based on the examination of signs, not in making events occur. Balaam's frequent assertion that he can only speak what Yahweh tells him (22:8, 18, 35, 38; 23:3-5, 12, 16, 26; 24:14) is perfectly consistent with his role. He cannot simply say what he is paid to say. When he finds out from the gods what will happen, he cannot change it; he can only relay the information to Balak (23:8, 20). Balaam is essentially a prophet, i.e., a spokesman for God. Here his main function is as predictor."<sup>54</sup>

Therefore the overarching understanding of blessing in the book of Numbers is that it has as its foundation a relational aspect in which Yahweh is the blesser. There are no clear signs that the words or rituals of blessing have power to bring them about.

### 3. Curses in Numbers

J. Scharbert and H. C. Brichto have identified three main roots that express the word "curse," along with several less prominent ones. In Numbers the  $\sqrt{qll}$  is not evidenced, while  $\sqrt{rr}$  and  $\sqrt{lh}$  are dominant. The subsidiary  $\sqrt{qbb}$  as well as one occurrence of  $\sqrt{z'm}$  rounds out the usage. *lh* in its legal context in Chapter 5, "serves to prove whether a person is guilty after the manner of an ordeal."<sup>55</sup>

<sup>49</sup>Michael S. Moore, *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development*, SBL Dissertation Series 113 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1990), 97-109. The "diviner/seer" may be related but not limited to the *bārū*, while the "exorcist" has parallels in the Mesopotamian *āšipu* "sorcerer."

<sup>50</sup>Moore, *The Balaam Traditions: Their Character and Development*, 109.

<sup>51</sup>Michael S. Moore, "Another Look of Balaam," *RB* 97, 3 (1990), 359-78.

<sup>52</sup>Literally "son of man" is a impersonal address that is used 93 times in the book of Ezekiel. See Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1*, Hermeneia, trans. R. E. Clements (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 131.

<sup>53</sup>Reading a Qal passive following in align with the LXX. See W. F. Albright, "The Oracles of Balaam," *JBL* 63 (1944), 214.

<sup>54</sup>Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "to bless" in the Old Testament*, 91-2.

<sup>55</sup>Scharbert, "'*ālāh*," *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Volume 1, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren

Whereas *'rr* "predominantly designates curses which an authority pronounces to aid in carrying out his ordinances, public interests, or religio-ethical commands."<sup>56</sup>

In the infamous Ordeal of Jealously pericope (Num 5.11-31) it is *'lh* that is everywhere evident as an expression of an oath of innocence. Brichto has described this pericope as one that "reeks of magic, a practice against which Scripture generally sets its face."<sup>57</sup> The text itself has many repetitions, three ritual components that have been combined and unusual technical terms making a simple study difficult.<sup>58</sup> These complexities have been solved by a past scholarship that has attributed it to multiple sources being redacted together,<sup>59</sup> however scholars such as Brichto, Milgrom,<sup>60</sup> Fishbane<sup>61</sup> and Frymer-Kensky<sup>62</sup> just to mention a few, have opted for an analysis that attempts to make sense of the final form.

The ritual itself is paralleled in the Ancient Near Eastern world<sup>63</sup> causing some scholars such as Baruch Levine to argue for a magical background. He writes, "utilization of a liquid substance more or less classifies the procedure of Num 5:11-31 as a "portion ordeal," a type of magical rite best known in Africa. . . . One must object to some modern scholars who play down the magical character of the ordeal of Num 5:11-31. There is widespread misunderstanding about the role of the gods in magical praxis, as there is about the integral relationship of prayer, magic, and the judicial ordeal."<sup>64</sup>

Brichto, who Levine was specifically referring to has argued convincingly for a non-magical / trial interpretation. From a theocentric position, he emphasizes the "invocation of Deity to grant a sign of His verdict"<sup>65</sup> thereby understanding God as judge. Tikva Frymer-Kensky calls this approach "leaving the punishment to God" which she claim has other scriptural parallels.<sup>66</sup> Brichto, then adds a strong polemic to his interpretation:

Nor should the feature of a spell-inducive potion be permitted to serve as a red herring in regard to the element of magic involved. The ultimate actor is God, the potion merely an instrument. Magic is present when the ritual is automatic and impersonal in its effectiveness; when impersonal powers are compelled or deity coerced. Although the very notion of spell and fearsome potion have their roots in magical thinking, so too does sacrifice. And if the biblical understanding of an offering to God is not taken to be magical, then neither is such stricture to be applied to

---

(Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1975), 263.

<sup>56</sup> Scharbert, "*'rr*," 415.

<sup>57</sup> Herbert Chanan Brichto, "The Case of ŠŌTĀ and a Reconsideration of the Biblical "Law"," *HUCA* 46 (1975), 55.

<sup>58</sup> Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 119.

<sup>59</sup> See Budd, *Numbers*, digital edition, for an overview.

<sup>60</sup> Milgrom, *Numbers*, 350-54. This is an article entitled "The Case of the Suspected Adulteress: Radaction and Meaning (5:11-31)" which has been appended to the commentary as Excursus 10.

<sup>61</sup> Fishbane, "Accusations of Adultery: A Study of Law and Scribal Practice in Numbers 5:11-31," 28ff.

<sup>62</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, "The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah (Numbers V 11-31)," *VT* 34, no. 1 (1984), 11-26.

<sup>63</sup> Milgrom, *Numbers*, 346-48, Excursus 7 "The Judicial Ordeal"; See also Fishbane, *Accusations of Adultery: A Study of Law and Scribal Practice in Numbers 5:11-31.*"

<sup>64</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, Volume 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 209, 212.

<sup>65</sup> Brichto, "The Case of ŠŌTĀ and a Reconsideration of the Biblical "Law"," 64.

<sup>66</sup> Frymer-Kensky, "The Strange Case of the Suspected Sotah (Numbers V 11-31)," 22-24.

the potion, anymore - for that matter - than to the unbinding of the woman's hair.<sup>67</sup>

Although further interaction with this text<sup>68</sup> and the Balaam narrative is necessary for a comprehensive argumentation, the basic direction can be seen. It is possible to interpret the pericopes in the book of Numbers without resorting to a "magical" or mechanistic underpinning. Attempts to analyse the texts from a speak-act perspective is another important field tool that needs to be more fully developed.<sup>69</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Jacob Z. Lauterback wrote back in 1939 that, "The belief in the effectiveness of the uttered word is common among primitive people and was widespread among ancient civilized peoples. The Jewish people were in this respect not different from other peoples. According to this belief, whatever is spoken, even if only casually and unintentionally, comes true and actually happens, that is to say, the word becomes fact."<sup>70</sup> This study has attempt to argue to the contrary. The crucial texts in the book of Numbers dealing with blessing and cursing can be interpreted from a non-magical, non-mechanical perspective.

The history of scholarship may have been too eager to read a historical development into the ancient Hebrew world. Behind Sheldon Blank's often quoted statement, "*The curse was automatic or self-fulfilling*, having the nature of a "spell," the very words of which were thought to possess reality and the power to effect the desired results,"<sup>71</sup> was based on his thesis of a development of the curse into a non-magical prayer of imprecation.

Is it possible that today, our own proclivities towards *kotodamas* or any other similar phenomenon need to be admitted? Furthermore, a renewed honest struggle with crux texts need to be engaged.

---

<sup>67</sup> Brichto, "The Case of ŠŌTĀ and a Reconsideration of the Biblical "Law"," 65.

<sup>68</sup> Most important is the nature of the *mě'ārārîm*.

<sup>69</sup> Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "to bless" in the Old Testament*, 3-8.

<sup>70</sup> Jacob Z. Lauterback, "The Belief in the Power of the Word," *HUCA* 14 (1939), 287.

<sup>71</sup> Sheldon H. Blank, "The Curse, Blasphemy, the Spell and the Oath," *HUCA* 23 (1950-51), 78.