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# Did God curse humanity? A pragmatic reexamination of Genesis 3.14–19

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## Abstract

Many biblical scholars assume that God only cursed the serpent and the ground in Genesis 3, and not humanity. However, others consider the threefold pronouncement on the serpent, woman, and man to be formal curses. This article reexamines the three utterances in Gen. 3.14–19, building a cumulative linguistic case for a reading that attends to the pragmatic function of the speeches. I suggest that the curse on the serpent establishes a pattern by which to interpret the following utterances, and that it is not necessary for the word 'curse' (ארר) to be uttered to perform a curse. Based on linguistic and textual data, it can thus be argued that God curses all three parties, albeit with nuanced differences: the serpent directly, the woman and man indirectly. This reading invites a redefinition of 'curse' in Genesis and clarifies its function in the wider context of the Primeval history with its concern for blessing.

## Keywords

Blessing, curse, direct and indirect language, pragmatics

## 1. Introduction

Did God curse humanity in Gen. 3 or only the serpent?[1] Centuries of interpreters have said all are cursed. For example, the Jewish midrash Genesis Rabbah boldly states that 'Adam was cursed, Eve was cursed, and the serpent was cursed' (GenR 20.1; Reuling,

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[1] An earlier exploration of this topic appeared in Patty, 2016.

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2006: 262).[2] In the history of Christian theology, many have similarly read the events of Gen. 3.13–19 as a series of threefold curses. This text has a long history of connection with the doctrine of original sin, with John Calvin, for instance, referring to it as ‘the universal curse of the human race’ (Calvin, 2001: 664).[3] Indeed, the concept of the curse on humanity continues to be a feature of some evangelical theologies, although it usually plays a minimal role in constructive systematic theologies. Moreover, some biblical theologians also consider humanity to be the recipient of a curse in Gen. 3 (Kaminsky, 2012; Brown, 1999: 149), as do those offering a literary reading of the text (Alter, 1996: 13; Kraus, 2011: 31).

Nevertheless, the majority of biblical scholars of the last century are inclined to disagree. These are willing to concede that God’s words to the serpent in Gen. 3.14–15 constitute a curse, due to its explicit use of a curse formula ארור אתה ‘cursed be you …’. In this case, the explicit presence of the verb is the validator of its function. However, when addressing the woman (3.16), God does not use the word ‘curse’. And when addressing the man (3.17–19), the curse is explicitly directed toward the ground: ‘cursed be the ground because of you’. Thus, the argument goes, the serpent is cursed, but the woman and man are not. Von Rad, for example, suggests that ‘it is unthinkable to speak of malediction [towards the humans]!’ (1972: 93). Walter Bührer has argued that we should talk about these utterances using completely different terminology: ‘curse-speech’ (for the serpent) and ‘punishment-speech’ (for the humans) (2014: 250). On this interpretation, Cain is considered to be the first human recipient of a curse from God, since the form of his curse is very close to that of the serpent (Mathews, 1996: 248, 275). This reading has significant theological import, as Mark S. Smith uses the point in his case against a theology of original sin: ‘neither the man nor the woman is said by the deity to be cursed or punished’ (2019: 37). Indeed, the matter seems to be resolved for many biblical scholars, across a variety of theological traditions: in Gen. 3, the man and the woman were not cursed (Dubovský, 2008: 160; Meyers 2024: 349; O’Connor, 2018: 65; Pongutá, 2005: 92; Wenham, 1991: 81; Westermann, 1988: 25).

In this article I seek to revisit the question of the linguistic function of the three utterances in Gen. 3.14–19 and to relate the findings to a broader reading of the Primeval history (Gen. 1–11). My approach is to build a cumulative case by attending to the pragmatic aspect of the speeches: how they are being used, not just what they are saying.[4] As such, this is a broadly linguistic approach, drawing on insights from the field of pragmatics, speech-act theory, and politeness theory. The questions I seek to answer are as follow. First, in what sense are the words to the serpent a ‘curse’? Second, what is happening in the pronouncement to the woman? And third, what is the function of the ‘curse’ on the ground and how does it relate to the man?

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[2] Also see the reference to ‘ten curses on Eve’ in Avot de Rabbi Nathan and the Babylonian Talmud (Reuling, 2006: 297).

[3] Earlier, Calvin makes the connection clearer: ‘Since, therefore, the curse, which goes about through all the regions of the world, flowed hither and yon from Adam’s guilt, it is not unreasonable if it is spread to all his offspring’ (Calvin, 2001: 246). This use of the word ‘curse’ likely finds its genesis in the theology of Augustine, who uses terms like ‘Adam’s curse’ and ‘the curse of the first man’ (Augustine, 1886a: par. 16023; Augustine, 1886b: paragraph 37493).

## 2. Defining ‘curse’: The speech to the serpent (Gen. 3.13–15)

As already noted, most interpreters agree that the utterance directed toward the serpent (Gen 3.14–15) is a curse, based on its explicit use of the verb ארר ‘to curse’. But in what sense is this a ‘curse?’ What is the relationship between the so-called ‘curse formula’ and the rest of the utterance? And what is this utterance actually accomplishing? It is necessary to answer these questions before proceeding to evaluate the pronouncements to the woman and man.

We begin by situating the present text in its literary context. The serpent deceives the woman to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and she shares the fruit with her husband. God then conducts an investigation, proceeding from the man to the woman, but preventing the serpent from defending itself. His addresses reverse the pattern of this investigation, with the first pronouncement addressed to the serpent (3.14–15). Because the serpent acted deceptively, causing mankind to transgress, the serpent receives a curse: ארור אתה, lit. ‘cursed be you’.

While the use of the verb ארר ‘curse’ to enact the deed is obvious, the meaning of the word ‘curse’ is not immediately clear.[5] There have been several attempts at a semantic analysis of curse language in the Bible (Aitken, 2007; Crawford, 1992; Kitz, 2014) with the biblical and epigraphic evidence suggesting that curse should be understood as the opposite of blessing, namely the deprivation of such gifts as ‘land, numerous progeny, sufficient food, clothing, safety, etc.’ (Crawford, 1992: 231; cf. Deut. 28.15–19). But this is still rather too broad a definition to be helpful for interpreting Gen. 3. In what sense is the serpent cursed? Pragmatics requires an understanding of how words are being used. Thus, one way to get closer to understanding the specific meaning of ארר ‘curse’ in this text is to interpret it in its immediate context. Below I separate the speech event into four distinct parts: the rationale, the curse formula, the ‘elaboration of isolation’, and the content of the curse (see Table 1).

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[4] Huang succinctly defines pragmatics as ‘the study of language in use’ (2015: 1).

[5] This data is readily available in the standard Hebrew lexicons, and need not be summarized here.

**Table 1.** The pronouncement on the serpent (Gen. 3.14–15)[6].

| Utterance category | English | Hebrew |
|---|---|---|
| Rationale | Because you did this, | כִּ֣י עָשִׂ֣יתָ זֹּ֗את |
| Curse formula | you are hereby cursed, | אָר֤וּר אַתָּה֙ |
| Elaboration | *separated from* all beasts, and *separated from* all creatures of the field; | מִכָּל־הַבְּהֵמָ֔ה<br>וּמִכֹּ֖ל חַיַּ֣ת הַשָּׂדֶ֑ה |
| Content of curse | on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat *all the days of your life*.<br>I shall place enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel. | עַל־גְּחֹנְךָ֣ תֵלֵ֔ךְ<br>וְעָפָ֥ר תֹּאכַ֖ל כָּל־יְמֵ֥י חַיֶּֽיךָ׃<br>וְאֵיבָ֣ה ׀ אָשִׁ֗ית בֵּֽינְךָ֙ וּבֵ֣ין הָֽאִשָּׁ֔ה<br>וּבֵ֥ין זַרְעֲךָ֖ וּבֵ֣ין זַרְעָ֑הּ<br>ה֚וּא יְשׁוּפְךָ֣ רֹ֔אשׁ<br>וְאַתָּ֖ה תְּשׁוּפֶ֥נּוּ עָקֵֽב׃ ס |

Following the rationale, which explains the reasons for the pronouncement using כי ‘because …’, the first element is the curse formula. Sheldon Blank has argued that this is the clearest way to construct a curse in Hebrew: the Qal passive participle ארור with a subject (i.e., אתה + ארור ‘cursed be + you’) (1950: 73–95).[7] This core formula is constructed as a nominal clause (not containing an inflected verb), with the participle used as a predicate adjective. The subject receiving the curse is presented either in the second person (e.g., ‘you’, Gen. 3.14) or the third person (e.g., ‘Canaan’, Gen. 9.25). In Gen. 3, the word play is particularly potent: the serpent previously described to be ערום (‘wise’ or ‘crafty’, 3.1) is now ארור (‘cursed’).[8] The explicit curse is modified by an elaboration that, in this case, isolates the creature. At first, the serpent’s wisdom elevated it above other creatures (‘more crafty than’), but now its cursedness lowers it beneath its creaturely kin. The preposition מן is in this context separative: the serpent is cursed ‘apart from’ or ‘above’ all other creatures. The curse causes a rift between the serpent and the rest of its kind (cf. 3.1). Blank argues that, from a religious-historical perspective, the curse formula evolves into a ‘composite curse’, whereby the basic formula is expanded with ‘one or more main clauses, each in itself a curse’ (1950: 75).[9] The curse on the serpent in Gen. 3.14 is understood to fit this type: ‘cursed are you …’ is followed by ‘you will crawl on your belly, etc.’ Whether or not we accept that this expansion is due to an evolutionary development in religious language (which I do consider to be problematic), the exegetical point is valid: that which follows the explicit curse formula clarifies the intended *impact* of the curse. In the content of the curse there is a clear pattern, whereby each element is governed by an imperfect verb, containing three distinct consequences for the offender: ‘you shall go’ and ‘you shall eat’; ‘I shall place’; ‘he shall bruise’ and ‘you shall bruise’. The impact is to disrupt the serpent’s identity and relationships (Zevit, 2013: 197).

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[6] Unless specified otherwise, all translations from the Hebrew are my own.

[7] For this construction, see Gen. 27.29; Num. 24.9; Deut. 27.15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26; Judg. 21.18; 1 Sam. 14.24, 28; 26.19; Jer. 48.10a, 10b; Mal. 1.14; Ps. 119.21. Curse formulas also have ‘clear parallels in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures’ (Gager, 1992: 26).

[8] For such a negative interpretation of ערום, see Day, 2022: 24–46. For a positive interpretation, see Charlesworth, 2010.

[9] The examples given are Gen. 3.14; 3.17-19; 4.11–12; 9.25; 49.7; Deut. 28.16a, 16b, 17, 18, 19a, 19b; Josh. 6.26; 9.23; Jer. 17.5; 20.14, 15.

The first two pronouncements are linked together consequentially. The serpent shall crawl (lit. ‘go’) on its belly, causing it to eat dust (עפר). Because the serpent tempted mankind to eat (אכל), his destiny is now to eat (אכל) the dust from which mankind was created (עפר, cf. Gen. 2.7). In this way God condemns the serpent to a position of lowliness. This fate is for כל־ימי חייך ‘all the days of your life’, an expression indicating totality and permanence.

In the third pronouncement, Yahweh himself becomes the direct agent: ‘*I shall place* enmity between you and the woman…’ (3.15). The serpent, already isolated from its own animal kind, is now set at odds with the woman and her offspring. The serpent and humanity are hereby locked in a battle that will extend into future generations. The balanced nature of the two phrases ‘he [the woman’s offspring] shall bruise’ and ‘you [the serpent] shall bruise’ suggests that the conflict has not yet been resolved (Goldingay, 2003: 141; Walton, 2011: 226).[10]

With the serpent separated from its kin, lowered to a pitiable position, and set at odds with humanity, the curse is complete. Though previously superior in its craftiness and ability to speak and to influence, the serpent has been transformed into the lowliest and most despised creature. Its new position permanently disrupts its identity and relationships (‘all the days of your life’). The descendants of the woman and the serpent are to remain locked in battle, which is ironically good news for the nearly-defeated humanity. From a theological standpoint, Yahweh-God has given humanity a second chance; their enemy has not won yet. Yahweh-God’s curse is destructive and relationally severing, yet carries within it a possibility of future life for humanity and the world (Gonzales, 2009: 57).

What makes this pronouncement on the serpent a curse? In this case, the explicit use of the verb ארר ‘curse’ clarifies the type of speech. In linguistic terms, it makes the function unambiguous, since it uses the word it intends to enact (see Kempf, 1993: 371; Lanser, 1988: 75). Speech-act theory defines this as an ‘explicit performative’, a pronouncement that accomplishes an action while also clearly stating which action is being performed. A modern example of this would be ‘I promise I will visit you today’; this is clearly a ‘promise.’[11] But a performative verb without further explanation does not tell us much about what the speaker intends to accomplish. True, the verb ארר does semantically generally carry a negative connotation. But in Gen. 3.14–15, the specific nature of the curse is made known only in what follows: in the elaboration and the content of the curse. In other words, it is really the elements in the pronouncement *beyond* the curse formula that clarify the sense in which this is a curse. Central to this is the sequence of imperfect verbal forms which enact the punishment and describe in detail what the punishment entails. This pronouncement is a curse in that it causes rupture of vocation or identity (‘on your belly you shall go’) and conflict in relationships (‘enmity between you and between the woman’). By virtue of its very utterance, the serpent enters into this new accursed state.

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[10] John Day also notes that ‘There is no indication that one side would be victorious over the other in the ongoing hostilities’ (*2022:* 58), despite the traditional Christian interpretation that this refers to the *Protoevangelium*. There is still ‘good news’ here, but it takes a different form.

[11] More specifically, this is what John Searle would define as a commissive: ‘those illocutionary acts whose point is to commit the speaker (again in varying degrees) to some future course of action.’ (1975: 11).

While the pronouncement of the curse on the serpent is not the source of controversy among interpreters, its analysis lays the foundation for the work on the pronouncements that follow.

## 3. To curse or not to curse: The pronouncement to the woman (Gen. 3.16)

While the pronouncement on the serpent can be unambiguously classified as a curse, many biblical interpreters are hesitant to classify the speech to the woman in the same way. Yahweh’s second pronouncement has been variously classified as a ‘punishment’ (Mathews, 1996: 248), ‘consequences’ (Fretheim, 2005: 76), or a ‘disruption’ (Wenham, 1991: 81), but rarely a ‘curse’. Typical is a statement like that of Arnold: ‘The judgments meted out are often called “curses”, although only the serpent and the soil are actually cursed by God’ (2009: 68). Such a claim is rarely explicitly supported and evidently depends on the absence of the curse formula (ארור אתה ‘cursed be you’) or even the word ‘curse’ in this pronouncement to the woman (so Meyers, 2024: 3) (see Table 2):

**Table 2.** Genesis 3.16 at a glance.

| | |
|---|---|
| I shall greatly multiply your anguish in childbearing; in anguish you shall bear children. Your desire shall be for your husband, but he shall dominate over you. | הַרְבָּ֤ה אַרְבֶּה֙ עִצְּבוֹנֵ֣ךְ וְהֵֽרֹנֵ֔ךְ<br>בְּעֶ֖צֶב תֵּֽלְדִ֣י בָנִ֑ים<br>וְאֶל־אִישֵׁךְ֙ תְּשׁ֣וּקָתֵ֔ךְ<br>וְה֖וּא יִמְשָׁל־בָּֽךְ׃ ס |

Behind this claim is the assumption that a speaker needs to use the word ‘curse’ to enact a curse. But is it necessary to use a formula or a specific word to accomplish a particular verbal action?

Early scholarly treatments of blessings and curses were influenced heavily by evolutionary theories of the development of culture. In this conception, attention was given to the ‘“primitive”, cultic and magical elements that supposedly lay behind Israelite religion’ (Aitken, 2007: 9; cf. Plassmann, 1913). This led to a later distinction between biblical blessings and curses (made efficacious by God) and magic (self-operating and automatic).[12] Despite various debates concerning origins, the efficacy of a curse was understood to be tied to the speaker’s adherence to formulaic language. This is typified by the work of Blank. Although he helpfully identifies some patterns in the construction of curses (as discussed above), he also assumes that curses are ‘*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’ (Blank, 1950: 78). This reliance on a magical framework for understanding the efficacy of curses has been heavily criticized (Aitken, 2007; Brichto, 1963: 215; Thiselton, 1974). Instead, the better way to understand the efficacy of utterances like curses is that they are performative language: they enact what they declare (Thiselton, 1974).[13] Indeed, the Psalms provide ample evidence that the efficacy of a curse is not magically connected to saying a particular sequence of words.[14]

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[12] This ‘magical’ understanding of curse and blessing still persists; e.g., ‘Any curse in the ancient world gains its power only from God or the gods’ (O’Connor, 2018*:* 65).

Take, for example, Ps. 109.13, appearing in the middle of a 15-verse sequence of pronouncements on the psalmists’ enemy (Ps. 109.6–20):

| | |
|---|---|
| יְנַקֵּ֣שׁ נ֭וֹשֶׁה לְכָל־אֲשֶׁר־ל֑וֹ | May the creditor seize all that he owns |
| וְיָבֹ֖זּוּ זָרִ֣ים יְגִיעֽוֹ׃ | May strangers plunder his acquisitions |
| | (Ps. 109.13) |

At face value, this verse expresses the wish of the Psalmist. This is supported by the modal jussive verbs at the head of each bicolon (יְנַקֵּשׁ ‘may he seize’, and וְיָבֹזּוּ ‘may they plunder’).[15] The ‘creditor’ and ‘strangers’ are to seize and plunder the belongings of the unspecified target. But what is the psalmist *doing* with these words? Are they simply a personal wish, or perhaps something more? The function of this utterance is made clear several verses later, when the psalmist provides an unambiguous description of the intentions behind his speech:

| | |
|---|---|
| וַיֶּאֱהַ֣ב קְ֭לָלָה וַתְּבוֹאֵ֑הוּ | For he loved to curse; let them come upon him, |
| וְֽלֹא־חָפֵ֥ץ בִּ֝בְרָכָ֗ה וַתִּרְחַ֥ק מִמֶּֽנּוּ׃ | But he did not delight in blessing; let it be far from him. |
| | (Psalm 109.17) |

The psalmist’s intent is to hurl *curses* on his enemy, in similar fashion to the ones his enemy delighted in. This makes it clear that a phrase like ‘May strangers plunder his acquisitions' is a curse, even though it contains none of the typical features of a formulaic curse, such as ארור אתה 'cursed be you'.[16] The explicit use of the verb קלל 'curse' in verse 17 clarifies the Psalmist's functional intent, but this is also accomplished by using the same verbal form throughout.[17] This stringing together of the jussive verbs ('may he seize', 'may he plunder', 'let them come') ensures that the interpreter recognizes these as belonging to the same class of action.

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[13] Following J. L. Austin, who initially proposed speech-act theory, ‘the issuing of the utterance is the performing of the action’ (Austin, 1975: 6). Levinson notes that despite the promise of speech-act theory, some of its fundamental issues were never resolved. A more fruitful avenue for explaining how we do things with words may be Conversation Analysis (see Levinson, 2017). But since there is no verbal response from any of the parties in Gen. 3.14–19, analyzing the utterances through the lens of speech-act theory seems acceptable.

[14] Aitken has argued that both rituals (‘social convention’) and specific language (‘semantic convention’) are part of the effectiveness of such utterances. While speech-acts like curses are powerful, the power ‘is not inherent in the words themselves, but rather in the conventions of their use’ (Aitken, 2007: 21).

[15] The context suggests that each of the verbs in this sequence is jussive rather than imperfect, based on the negation of the verb in v. 12, where אל can only negate a jussive.

Pragmatics and speech-act theory can be used to clarify what is happening in an example like the above. A key distinction must be drawn between *direct* and *indirect* performatives (Wagner, 2013; cf. Austin, 1975: 69–73).[18] Direct performative utterances are marked explicitly as speech acts by unambiguous semantics and/or syntactic markers. This is most visible with the use of a perfect verb, indicating the kind of speech employed. In example a), the kind of performative utterance that has occurred is obvious, given the explicit use of the verb 'promise' (Wagner, 2013):

a) *'I promise I'll visit you today' = speech act: TO PROMISE* (direct)
b) *'I'll visit you today' = speech act: TO PROMISE* (indirect)

On the other hand, example b) does not contain any unambiguous markers, and thus the meaning of the act is *indirect*. But this kind of implicit performative utterance need not be expressed with a performative verb since the kind of action can be made clear by the context. In this case, even though the b) statement lacks the phrase 'I promise', it may well be identical in its *function* to the first example a).[19] In both cases, the act of promising can be viably communicated.

It is not always clear why a speaker uses indirect rather than direct forms, and most theories of indirect speech barely explore possible answers. In many cases, however, it is suggested that politeness or respect plays a role in choosing indirect forms (Sadock, 2006: 71). In any case, the point is that we cannot expect the word corresponding to the act to always appear in the utterance. Performativity is linked more to recognizable patterns of syntax (which in turn reflect cultural conventions) and to speaker's intent than to the use of explicit verbs to magically enact.[20] Ultimately, we must look ‘for those acts which correspond to the verbs which can be used to indicate illocutionary point’ (Briggs, 2004: 101).[21] It is the verbal action we are looking for, not necessarily the appearance of a certain word or verbal formula.

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[16] At its most basic, curse language is principally a wish (Kitz, 2014: 64).

[17] The Hebrew verb קלל is used rather than ארר, but both fall within the same semantic domain. Its pairing with ברך 'bless' in the second line confirms this.

[18] Austin coined the terms 'primary' and 'secondary' performative utterances, but the terms 'direct' and 'indirect' are used interchangeably with them in later scholarship. Although 'performativity' is a known category in studies of Hebrew grammar, its use is connected primarily with direct performatives. For example, it has been argued that Classical Hebrew renders the direct performative with a 1st person *qatal* verb (Joüon & Muraoka, 2018: §112f), although there are cases of usages with the 2nd person (Gen. 4.14) as well as 3rd person (1 Chron. 21.23). Similarly, Smith demonstrates that performativity is one of the six basic functions of the *qatala* form in Ugaritic (1995: 789–803).

[19] This point is supported by the observation of Adams that 'there is no actual term expressing the sole semantic domain for 'promise' in the Old Testament. Only context can determine if אמר ["to say"] or דבר ["to speak"] should be translated as such and further whether it is expressing an illocution or not' (Adams, 2006: 32).

With this linguistic theory in mind, we can return to Gen. 3.16 and the pronouncement on the woman. Given that the utterance need not define the act it is accomplishing,[22] a comparison with the previous pronouncement on the serpent is in order (Table 3). This will help determine whether this second utterance is of a different class or instead should be interpreted as accomplishing the same type of act, that is, cursing.

**Table 3.** Comparison between Gen. 3.14–15 and Gen. 3.16.

| Utterance category | Gen. 3.14–15 | Gen. 3.16 |
|---|---|---|
| Rationale | כי ‘because…’ | None |
| Explicit Performative | ארור ‘cursed be…’ | None |
| Elaboration | מכל ‘separated from…’ | None |
| Content of Curse | תלך ‘you shall go’<br>תאכל ‘you shall eat’<br>אשית ‘I will place’<br>ישופך ‘he shall bruise you’<br>תשופנו ‘you shall bruise him’ | ארבה ‘I shall multiply’<br>תלדי ‘you shall bear’<br>ימשל ‘he will dominate’ |

Comparison yields two useful insights. First, unsurprisingly, the pronouncement to the woman does not contain a direct performative, and neither does it contain a rationale or an elaboration. This may suggest a shift in utterance type, as has been suggested by biblical interpreters. However, the second insight challenges this conclusion. The pronouncement on the woman is marked by the same type of sequence of imperfect verbal forms. When read sequentially, the transition from the verbs in the content of the curse on the serpent to the pronouncement on the woman is seamless; no shift in verbal action is discernible. Yahweh’s enactment of the curse with ‘you shall go’, ‘I will place’, ‘he shall bruise you’ in the first instance (3.14–15) can be understood to carry over to the second instance: ‘I shall multiply’, ‘you shall bear’, ‘he will dominate’ (3.16). This suggests that the words to the woman should likewise be interpreted as curse-language, which describes the punishment that is effected in its very speaking.

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[20] In this way, Biblical Hebrew curses and oaths are similar, in that they ‘need not be formulaic’ (Stadel, 2013).

[21] Here ‘illocutionary’ means the aspect of the utterance that *does* something.

[22] Contra Sanders, who argues that, in Semitic languages, there can be no performative utterance unless the statement contains the mention of the act (2004: 167).

Crucially, however, the lack of an explicit verb (‘cursed be …’) makes this utterance an *indirect* performative.[23] This means that the pragmatic intent of the speech is discernible not through unambiguous features, but rather through contextual clues and syntactical patterns. Just as we saw with Ps. 109, the lack of an explicit performative verb does not indicate lack of performativity. Form and intent work together to clarify the function.

If we take the pronouncement on the woman as an implicit curse, we should first ask why Yahweh does not use the verb ארר. From a pragmatic perspective, the answer is probably best explained by reference to politeness theory (see Brown and Levinson, 1987). In this framework, indirect communication is a face-saving measure meant to preserve or protect the relationship. Terkourafi argues that indirectness, even between individuals of different social standing (such as a boss and an employee), can ‘serve the function of underlining interlocutors’ common ground’ (Terkourafi, 2011a: 2864). In the case of this curse, Yahweh seems to be motivated to maintain his relationship to the woman, despite or even because of their power differential.

On the other hand, Thomas Holtgraves argues that direct performatives (like ‘cursed be you’, Gen 3.14) are ‘used when a speaker wants to avoid ambiguity’ (Holtgraves, 2005: 2041). While previously Yahweh wanted there to be no doubt about the severity of the serpent’s punishment, his dealing with the woman appears to be more restrained. True, the curses do still carry with them a harsh new reality, but Yahweh does not become overbearing in his enactment of this punishment.

And lest we import foreign ideas about the nature of cursing, we must look at the actual content of the curse. In each of the three bicolons, God prescribes a punishment for the woman’s transgression. Each person involved in the conflict is mentioned: Yahweh-God (‘I shall multiply’), the woman (‘you shall bear’), and the man (‘he shall rule’). The serpent is not mentioned, silencing it in a similar manner as previously.

The language used in the pronouncement is reminiscent of the blessing in Gen. 1. In Gen. 1.28, humanity had been commissioned to ‘multiply’ (Qal רבה); now, God promises to ‘intensely multiply’ (ארבה הרבה) the woman’s pain in childbearing. The task that was to entail joyous cooperation with God’s mission will now be characterized by struggle and intense pain. The blessing of mediating God’s creative power now comes at a personal cost. The Hebrew infinitive absolute strengthens and emphasizes the verb. The word used for ‘pain’ (עצבון/עצב) suggests ‘both physical and psychic dimensions’ to the pain, hence my translation of ‘anguish’ (Fretheim, 1997: 483; also Meyers, 2024: 5). The term is repeated twice and is fronted in the second line for emphasis.[24] The woman will continue to ‘be fruitful and multiply’, but the joy of child-rearing is matched by the potential for intense grief and sorrow. At the same time, the woman's pain-filled vocation entails the salvation of the human couple (cf. 3.20).

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[23] For other curses that do not use the explicit verb ‘curse’ but communicate imprecatory intentions via imperfect verbs, see Lev. 26.26; Deut. 28.30–31; 38–41; Jer. 11.11; Hos. 2.9; 4.10; 8.7; 9.12; 9.16; Amos 5.11; 8.12; Mic. 3.4; 6.14–15; Zeph. 1.13; Mal. 1.4 (cf. Queen Sutherland, 1992).

[24] The word will also be used to describe the toil of the man (3.17). Later the root appears with God as the subject: God is ‘pained’ to the heart (Hithpael ויתעצב) at how far humanity has fallen into violence (6.6). Perhaps, in 3.16, this piece of the curse foreshadows the kind of pain the woman will experience when she loses two sons, one to death, and one to curse (Goldingay, 2003: 142).

Just as curse affects the woman's role in childbearing, it also affects her relationship to her husband. The woman's 'desire' will be for her husband (אל־אישך תשוקתך), but the man will 'rule over' her (ימשל־בך), meaning that there will be tension in the marital relationship, even though the relationship of the couple was that of equals in the garden (cf. 2.23–24). Now, their relationship will be marked by competition and conflict.[25] Note, however, that the verb used here (משל) is different than that used for the rule of mankind over animals (1.28 רדה). In fact, the verb used here is used more commonly for political domination and never elsewhere for the marital relationship (Meyers, 2024: 5–6). Thus, while the woman will experience a kind of *domination* by her husband, God does not place the woman under the *rule* of the man as he placed the animals (Davidson, 1988: 128).

As in the curse on the serpent, the curse on the woman impacts her identity or vocation, as well as predicts conflict in relationships. The emphasis, like before, is on the hostility and struggle that comes as a result of transgression. But crucially, the woman is not isolated in the same way that the serpent was. The curse on the woman also lacks an unending quality, like the serpent's 'all the days of your life'. This suggests that these pronouncements are not prescriptive for all time, but rather are a temporary measure.[26] The woman does enter into a new state upon the pronouncement of this performative curse, but it does not have a kind of 'magical' effect that would bind her and all who come after her forever. Thus while anguish in child-rearing and domination by her husband is now a real reality, they are defining in a descriptive rather than prescriptive sense. This is not to belittle the real punishment that the woman receives. But the lack of explicit curse formula and additional elements suggests that, despite its effectiveness as a curse, it is spoken in as soft a manner as possible, preserving the relationship between the speaker and the recipient.[27] The curse must fall, but Yahweh communicates it gently and with a good measure of hope.

## 4. Curses that bounce: The pronouncement to the man (Gen. 3.17–19)

The third pronouncement in Gen. 3 is the longest and most complex of the triad. One of the complexities that arises is that although Yahweh speaks to the man, the curse is actually addressed elsewhere: ארורה האדמה ‘cursed be the ground’. As Claus Westermann notes: ‘The curse is not directed precisely at the man, but at the ground because of the man’ (Westermann, 1992: 263). The question we need to answer is: What is the function of the ‘curse’ on the ground and how does it relate to the man?

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[25] This is suggested by a connection with Gen. 4.7, where both 'desire' and 'rule' reappear. Here God warns Cain that sin's desire is for him (אליך תשוקתו), but he must rule over it (תמשל־בו).

[26] In this, I side with those who interpret the curses as descriptive rather than prescriptive (e.g., Curley and Peterson, 2016). By no means can this text be a norm for so-called 'gender roles'. Arnold summarizes well: 'Whatever the nuanced meanings of the archaic poetry and terminology …, the rulership of the man is no more prescriptive than pain in childbirth. … All such prescriptive approaches miss the point of human responsibility and the nature of punishment in the Hebrew Scriptures' (Arnold, 2009: 70; see also 73–74).

[27] Pinker et al. take a rather pessimistic view of the function of indirect language ('deniability'), but they do recognize that it is used between speakers in order 'to preserve their relationship while transacting the business of their lives' (2008: 838).

This interpretive challenge can be illustrated by attending to the various ways Yahweh switches the objects of the verbs in his speech, from speaking directly to the man (האדם) to mentioning the ground (האדמה). Although the ground is the object of the curse formula (ארורה ‘cursed be …’), the ground is in fact only referred to one time in the explication of the curse’s content. In all other cases, the man is in view, both in the rationale for the curse (‘you listened’, ‘you ate’), the justification for the curse (‘because of you’), and the description of the curse’s content (‘you shall eat’ 3x, ‘you return’ 2x, ‘you were taken’). The man is addressed far more than the ground (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Objects of verbs in Gen. 3.17–19.

| | Object is האדם ‘the man’ | Object is האדמה ‘the ground’ |
|---|---|---|
| **3.17** | שמעת ‘you listened’<br>ותאכל ‘you ate’<br>(לא תאכל ‘you must not eat’)<br>בעבורך ‘because of you’ | ארורה ‘cursed’ |
| **3.18** | תאכלנה ‘you shall eat (in pain’)<br>ואכלת ‘you shall eat (wild plants)’ | תצמיח ‘it will sprout (thorns and thistles)’ |
| **3.19** | תאכל ‘you shall eat (with sweat)’<br>שובך ‘you return (to the ground)’<br>לקחת ‘you were taken (out of the ground’)<br>תשוב ‘you will return (to dust)’ | |

Of course, in the context of Gen. 2–3, the man and the ground are inextricably linked together in an interdependent relationship (see Meyers, 2012). The man could even be called a ‘groundling’ because of the wordplays in Gen. 2.7. The one affects the other: the ground is the man’s place of origin and source of nourishment, while the man is to steward and work the ground. This tight relationship is evident even in v. 19: The man shall return to the ground, since he was taken out of the ground. But in context, it is the man that is culpable for disobedience. The ground is actually innocent in this entire narrative; it is only secondarily pulled into the conflict.[28]

So to whom is the curse ultimately directed? Kraus offers a mediating position: ‘Like the serpent, the ground is also cursed (ארורה), but the man himself is not cursed, although his connection with the cursed earth … *appears to make him so*’ (Kraus, 2011: 33; emphasis added). While this preserves some of the inherent ambiguity in the utterance, I think stronger language is appropriate.

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[28] This observation seems to lie behind the interpretation of the LXX (Reuling, 2006: 33, 244.), as well as Saadia (Linetsky, 2002: 162).

In short, to curse the ground *is* to curse the man, albeit in a more nuanced way (Brown, 1999: 150). This is a clever means of being both direct and indirect, a sort of half-way house between the direct speech to the serpent and the indirect speech to the woman. A similar kind of curse is found in Gen. 49.7. Here the patriarch Jacob curses not his sons Simeon and Levi themselves, but rather their uncontrolled anger: 'Cursed be their anger (ארור אפם), for it is fierce, and their wrath, for it is cruel'. The context is clear that the curse is in fact meant for Simeon and Levi, but Jacob is hesitant to name the offenders directly (Scharbert, 1974: 411). The curse is uttered against אפם 'their anger', which is intimately associated with the two brothers in their slaughtering of the Shechemites (Gen. 34.25–31). In Gen. 3, the ground and the groundling share a similar intimate association (Gen. 2.7). We can consider this pronouncement to be a 'curse that bounces', in the sense that it is directed elsewhere but still hits the desired target. Although uttered directly to the ground, it indirectly affects the man.[29]

This sort of 'curse that bounces' is likewise a kind of indirect language, which like the pronouncement to the woman honors the relationship (by nature of its being indirect) but like the pronouncement to the serpent refuses to be ambiguous (by nature of its being direct). With this interpretation established, we can now compare the structure of this curse to the curse on the serpent, which can provide a helpful point of comparison and contrast (Table 5).

**Table 5.** The pronouncement to the ground and man (Gen. 3.17–19).

| Utterance Category | English | Hebrew |
|---|---|---|
| Rationale | Because you listened to your wife's<br>voice, and ate of the tree (about which I<br>commanded you,<br>'You must not eat of it'), | כִּֽי־שָׁמַעְתָּ֮ לְק֣וֹל אִשְׁתֶּךָ֒<br>וַתֹּ֙אכַל֙ מִן־הָעֵ֔ץ<br>אֲשֶׁ֤ר צִוִּיתִ֙יךָ֙ לֵאמֹ֔ר<br>לֹ֥א תֹאכַ֖ל מִמֶּ֑נּוּ |
| Curse formula | cursed be the ground | אֲרוּרָ֤ה הָֽאֲדָמָה֙ |
| Elaboration | because of you; | בַּעֲבוּרֶ֔ךָ |
| Content of Curse | in pain you shall eat from it all the days of your life.<br>It will sprout forth thorns and thistles for you;<br>so shall you eat plants of the field.<br>By the sweat of your brow shall you eat food | בְּעִצָּבוֹן֙ תֹּֽאכְלֶ֔נָּה<br>כֹּ֖ל יְמֵ֥י חַיֶּֽיךָ׃<br>וְק֥וֹץ וְדַרְדַּ֖ר תַּצְמִ֣יחַֽ לָ֑ךְ<br>וְאָכַלְתָּ֖ אֶת־עֵ֥שֶׂב הַשָּׂדֶֽה׃<br>בְּזֵעַ֤ת אַפֶּ֙יךָ֙ תֹּ֣אכַל לֶ֔חֶם |
| Limit | until you return to the ground, since you were taken from it.<br>For you are dust, and to dust you shall return. | עַ֤ד שֽׁוּבְךָ֙ אֶל־הָ֣אֲדָמָ֔ה<br>כִּ֥י מִמֶּ֖נָּה לֻקָּ֑חְתָּ<br>כִּֽי־עָפָ֣ר אַ֔תָּה<br>וְאֶל־עָפָ֖ר תָּשֽׁוּב׃ |

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[29] This intimate connection seems to also be in view in Genesis 5.29, which says that the cursed ground might find relief through one man (Noah).

This curse unfolds in some familiar ways to the curse on the serpent. It contains all the same elements: a rationale, curse formula, elaboration, and content of curse. The introductory כי clause establishes the rationale, highlighting the culpability of the man in disobeying Yahweh. This is followed by the curse formula, with ‘the ground’ as the subject (ארורה האדמה). This performative utterance contains another causal clause, בעבורך ‘because of you’, emphasizing further the blame of the man, and reminding us that this curse is really about the man and not the ground (Gonzales, 2009: 48). The elaboration acts in a similar way to the elaborative section following the curse on the serpent, although it lacks the language of isolation here, focusing instead on culpability. Though the curse formula begins in the third person (‘the ground’), the grammar shifts to the second person in the content of the curse (‘In pain *you shall eat* of it all the days of your life’).[30] This shift makes clear that the curses are directed at the man, since it disrupts his relationships and his identity (or vocation), following the pattern established in the two preceding curses. The relationship with the woman has already been strained (Gen. 3.16), and now so too is his relationship to the ground strained. Instead of producing food in a cooperative manner, the ground will now produce ‘thorns and thistles’. The task of keeping and protecting the garden (Gen. 2.15) is transformed into a life of harsh labour. Work itself is not a curse, but the unrelenting strain that accompanies work is.[31] The man will be able to produce food, but only at great personal expense: by ‘the sweat of your brow’ (Gen. 3.19).

However, in contrast to the curse on the serpent, this curse adds an addendum. This addendum serves to distinguish the two utterances and limit the extent of the curse on the man. Both utterances share the phrase כל ימי חייך ‘all the days of your life’ (Gen. 3.14, 17). The serpent’s punishment is to eat dust for its lifetime, while the man’s punishment is to eat in toil for his lifetime. But in the case of the man’s curse, Yahweh qualifies this sentence and places a key restriction on it. The use of temporal עד ‘until’ disrupts the series of imperfect verbs. This, along with the unit’s chiastic structure, have led some to argue that these clauses lie outside the scope of the actual performative curse (Kempf, 1993: 366). In any case, the additions place temporal restrictions on the curse: ‘till you return to the ground’. This reference of האדמה serves to further highlight the interdependent relationship between the man and the ground. The poetic expression highlights man’s origins (‘for out of it you were taken’), and predicts man’s end (‘for you are dust, and to dust you shall return’). In this sense, while death was earlier seen as a punishment for transgression, it is now reframed as means of release (see Wells, 2020). This is a bittersweet hope: there will be an end to the toil, but only through death (cf. 2.17; 5.5).

The curse on the serpent was direct, while the curse on the woman was indirect, placing this third curse somewhere between the two. This mode of speaking combines indirect and direct modes of speaking, which on the one hand preserves the relationship between Yahweh and the man, while also communicating unambiguously the new reality that is enacted as a result of transgression. What unites all three curses is the enactment of a rupture of the individual's identity and relationships as a result of their rebellion. The serpent is dealt with most harshly, being quarantined and given no hint of release from the curse. The woman is dealt with most gently, as she is not placed under the same restrictions and does not receive an explicit curse. And the man is dealt with in a manner between the two, as the curse is unambiguous but only secondarily effectual. Based on internal realities, these curses need not be understood as being ends unto themselves. Hope is present for the human couple: The ongoing struggle with the serpent means they have not yet been defeated (3.15), they will experience marital tension but will continue to bear children (3.16), and they will continue to eat despite the futility of labour (3.18–19). In the biblical conception, curse may just be a temporary detour on the road to blessing.

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[30] The connection between the transgression and the punishment is central to this curse, via the use of the verbal root אכל (‘to eat’), twice in the rationale and three times in the content of the curse.

[31] Meyers explains how this would have been an issue of particular concern for an agrarian society: ‘Humans were intended all along to be cultivators. But cultivating was neither easy nor always successful, as YHWH’s stinging words to the first man, the archetypal farmer, make abundantly clear (Gen 3.18–19)’ (2012: 145).

## 5. Conclusions

This study usefully shows that uttering a curse indirectly in biblical Hebrew is entirely viable, and that the effectiveness is not dependent upon a magical conception of words. I have argued in this study that all three of Yahweh-God's utterances in Gen. 3.14–19 should be understood as curses. This is based on the insights of pragmatics and speech-act theory, which allow for the efficacy of utterances to not be dependent on the use of specific words or formulas. Instead, the effectiveness of the utterances is based on contextual and linguistic features. First, the utterances exhibit shared themes of the disruption of identity, vocation, and relationships. Second, the utterances exhibit shared syntactical features, notably, sequential clauses with imperfect verbs. Third, the utterances exhibit a shared pragmatic intention on the part of the speaker, evident in the strong link between the transgression and the punishment (e.g., אכל 'to eat').

Despite the similarities between the curses, I have also highlighted their differences. First, I argued that the curse spoken to the serpent is the most severe due to its use of the direct curse formula. This marks the punishment invoked as unambiguous, distinguished by its elements of separation, hostility, and longevity of effect. Second, the curse spoken to the woman is the softest due to its use of implicit language. Although the enacted punishment is severe, its indirect forms of enactment prioritize the preservation of the relationship between the speaker and recipient. These features and the lack of an explicit verb mark this as an implicit curse. Third, the pronouncement spoken to the man is moderate due to its combination of both direct and indirect patterns of address. While the ground is addressed with a direct curse, the man should be understood as being the intended recipient. This utterance is unique by virtue of the inclusion of an 'expiration date'. Thus all parties are cursed, but the serpent receives a direct curse, and the woman and man receive indirect curses.[32]

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[32] Terkourafi challenges the assumption that direct speech should be considered more effective than indirect speech. Neither can be considered a natural default, but each serves its own unique purposes. Indirect speech is in fact a very effective way to 'enable the mutual shaping of meaning between speaker and hearer in ways that could never have been possible with direct speech' (Terkourafi, 2001b: 2871.).

Recovering the curses of Gen. 3.14–19 allows for a better recognition of how Yahweh deals with sin. Curse is presented as an appropriate response to transgression, but is not an end in and of itself (Miller, 1984: 475). In the curses, each of the guilty parties are given over to the disruption of identity and relationship. In the case of humanity, this disruption of identity is closely tied to their vocation as image-bearers and Garden-protectors. Despite the severity of this punishment, the curses includes elements of future hope, suggesting God's inclination toward the preservation of life. The serpent is addressed harshly: quarantined from the rest of his kin and locked in a stalemate with humanity for the time being, rather than allowed to triumph. Yahweh's speech to the woman is the most gentle, opening up pathways for her to become 'the mother of all living' (Gen. 3.20), despite significant anguish. God addresses the man with a moderate intensity, not hiding the pain involved with his toil in the ground, while assuring him of an end to the struggle, even if it is only in death. This study suggests that these curses are not simply God's means of exacting punishment for an offense, but are in fact the means by which the Creative project is set back on track (Doukhan, 2020: 600). This anticipates the commissioning of Abraham, in which curse is included as a mechanism within the hope of blessing for all the families of the earth (Gen. 12.3).[33] Through and despite curse, God opens up new ways to bring blessing to the world.

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[33] Reading Gen. 3.14–19 as a series of threefold curses clearly fits within the kerygmatic intent of non-P (traditionally J; Gertz, 2012: 113), anticipating the Abrahamic promise. Wolff argues that Gen. 12.1–3 shows God's intent to bless the world, but the primeval history 'explains in advance *why* all the families of the earth need the blessing' (Wolff, 1966: 145). Literary and canonical readings have also argued for the centrality of the themes of blessing and curse for the narrative development (e.g., Anderson, 2014; DeRouchie, 2013; Schmutzer, 2008; Smith, 1977).

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