

Five Examples of Blessing and Cursing in Job 1–2

Perhaps my sons have sinned by *cursing* God in their hearts. (Job 1:5)

אוֹלֵי הָטָאוּ בְּנֵי וַיְבָרְכוּ אֱלֹהִים בְּלִבָּם.

[Y]ou ... have *blessed* everything he does. (Job 1:10)

מֵעֲשֵׂה יְדָיו בֵּרַכְתָּ.

... and watch him *curse* You to your face — (Job 1:11 and 2:5)

אִם לֹא עַל פְּנֵיךָ יְבָרְכֶךָ.

Blessed be the name of Yahweh. (Job 1:21)

יְהִי שֵׁם יְהוָה מְבֹרָךְ.

Curse God and die! (Job 2:10)

בָּרַךְ אֱלֹהִים, וּמָת.

One is surely surprised to discover that all the italicized words are translations of Hebrew words having the identical root *b-r-ch*, traditionally translated as “bless.”

Concerning the meaning of the Book of Job, Edwin M. Good writes the following at the end of his 400-page commentary [*In Turns of Tempest: A Reading of Job with a Translation*], the fruit of a career devoted to this text: “... I come to the end of my reading of Job with the conviction that the book remains open and multiple, its ‘meaning’ indeterminate and undecidable....”

As the five examples of blessing and cursing illustrate, the indeterminacy of the Book of Job works not only on the level of the text but also on the level of individual words. Although blessing and cursing are central to the text, motivating much of the book’s dialogue, in most

cases it is not clear which of the two senses of these apparently opposite concepts are intended. Good extrapolates from this indeterminacy to a way of approaching the entire book (page 202).

[My goal is] to help readers liberate their imaginations, wherever the word appears, to focus on its depth, not on its shallowness, on its multiplicity, not its illusory simplicity. The very centrality of *brk* [*sic*] prevents smug certainty that we know the meaning of this story.

The multiplicity of meanings of this single root suggests that bless/curse, and by extension all dualistic thinking, do not represent opposites but point to something much more profound. They are dynamic word-clusters involving complementary and interdependent processes, much like Indra's Net in Buddhist thought. In the same way that we read the Book of Job, focusing on its depth and the multiplicity of its meanings, so may we live our lives, particularly when, like Job, pain and suffering afflict us.

Is Good making too much out of the fact that both blessing and cursing are rendered in the original Hebrew by the same root? Scheindlin has a much less dramatic view of this phenomenon. In his notes on the phrase "by cursing God" in Job 1:5, he writes the following. "The word in the Hebrew text, both here and wherever the expression occurs in Job, is 'bless.' Expressions considered blasphemous were often replaced by antonyms, either in the original composition or by copyists. See the notes on 7:20 and 32:3."