

Blessings and Curses in the Bible: President's Address and Presentation of the Convention Theme

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Welcome and Acknowledgements

In the name of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN), I warmly welcome all here present: the people of God from different walks of life, who are eager to listen with us to what the Bible says on blessings and curses. In particular, I acknowledge with deep gratitude, the presence of our ever-generous host and foundational member of CABAN, His Eminence John Cardinal Onaiyekan, Metropolitan Archbishop of the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja. Your Eminence, we cannot sufficiently express our gratitude to you for generously hosting this conference free of charge for CABAN members, even as you did during our third annual convention in 2010, on the theme “Good Citizenship and Leadership in the Bible”.¹ It would seem that each time our national general elections come around, the Holy Spirit moves you to host CABAN in Abuja, the national capital and seat of government. You attend our conventions and business meetings regularly and support CABAN ventures to ensure that it grows and waxes strong in service to the gospel. May your generosity towards CABAN bring abundant blessings to the association and the people of this nation, especially the electorate and the politicians in this season of election. It is with great providential joy that we dedicate this volume to you on the year of your seventy-fifth birthday and the fiftieth anniversary of your priesthood.

¹ Published as *Good Citizenship and Leadership in the Bible*; Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN, Vol. 3; Bernard Ukwuegbu, Mary Jerome Obiorah, Vincent Nyoyoko and Cletus Gotan, eds.; Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2014).

I acknowledge with joy the presence of his Excellency Bishop Martin Olorunmolu of the Catholic Diocese of Lokoja, an ever-faithful member of CABAN. Your Excellency, your presence, with moral and material support, is a blessing and encouragement to CABAN, evidence that the leadership of the Catholic Church in Nigeria continues to be part of the mission entrusted by the Magisterium to biblical scholars worldwide: “to help the church to mature in its understanding of Scripture”.² You faithfully attend our conferences, participate in the discussions and stay till the end. May God bless you.

Our deep gratitude goes to Rev. Fr. Dr John Jimoh, the Cathedral Administrator of Abuja Archdiocese, whom the Cardinal appointed as our liaison for this convention. Thank you Fr. Jimoh for all your hard work to secure a suitable venue in Abuja for our convention and to help prepare in liaison with the CABAN Secretary, Rev. Dr Luke Ijezie, and the President, the materials and logistics needed for this convention, even sponsoring the convention materials. May God bless you for your love and commitment to CABAN.

I welcome you all beloved and devoted members of CABAN and thank you for your enthusiasm and keenness to participate at the eleventh annual convention on “Blessings and Curses in the Bible”.

The issue of curses, which is increasingly harassing our people in so many ways, has not yet been systematically addressed by competent biblical scholars. The many presentations at this convention are evidence of our keen awareness of the problem and evidence of our active commitment to the mission of CABAN: through sound

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* 40; citing *Dei Verbum* of Vatican Council II and previous magisterial documents.

research to help promote a deeper rooting of the gospel among God's people in Nigeria, Africa and beyond.

Last but not least, I sincerely thank our gracious God for the gift of our convention theme. It has helped me personally, and perhaps others, too, to listen more attentively than ever to what our people are being exposed to by many pastors and television preachers in the name of God, Jesus and the Bible; and to be enriched by the discovery of the biblical message on blessings and curses. May we all listen attentively throughout the convention to what the Spirit will be teaching us on this matter through the paper presentations and discussions. May our interactions in the days ahead deepen our knowledge of blessings and curses in the Bible. Then, enriched and liberated ourselves from the fear of curses by our discoveries, we will recommit ourselves more resolutely to do our utmost to impart to our people the true biblical knowledge that will set them free from obsession with fear of curses; and move them to focus fearlessly and joyfully on God's gratuitous and irrevocable blessing to all in Christ, and in turn become a blessing to others.

Catalyst and Sketch of the Convention Theme

Situating the theme in context

The choice of the convention theme, "Blessings and Curses in the Bible", was inspired by the growing, worrisome experiences of Nigerians and perhaps people in other parts of Africa and beyond. The immediate catalyst was the encounter with a boy of Junior Secondary School (JSS; Class II going to Class III). The street was his home; but on that particular day I found him sitting on a curb in CIWA chaplaincy grounds distressfully contemplating. After much persuasion he told his story. He was from a traditional family, not a Christian. A friend used to take him to church (not Catholic Church); one

night he dreamt he was going to hell. As a result, he refused to be enrolled by the dad with all other family members in the dad's traditional covenant shrine. The dad then drove him away from home. But he felt God would help him. A few of us in the Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) rallied around to help him find food and a temporary roof over his head while we explored a stable home.

One day he brought a pamphlet from an all-night vigil he had attended. The pamphlet, a two page joint A-4 paper, written front and back, had over thirty-four curses, which the Pastor O. U. Miracle was poised to break for those who attended the vigil; or show them how to break those curses or return them to their senders.³ The Pastor's "unrivalled" power to break curses and free people from all kinds of misfortunes and hardships in life was reportedly supported throughout the night vigil by abundant testimonies of participants who had been liberated by him. Catholics attend this and similar vigils or participate in them through the television.

By chance or by providence, I stumbled one day on the live session of this pastor.⁴ The abundant testimonies given during the session were magically mesmerizing. Outstanding was that of the man, who testified that previously, he "was poorer than a church rat" and could hardly feed his family. Then he "attended the commission", as the pastor's sessions are called. As a result, he himself got a high-profile federal government job next in rank to the manager (the company of his miraculous job was not mentioned). That miracle gave him

³ The pamphlet sold for N1,000 (one thousand naira) and worshippers readily bought them. Our CABAN Acts, for instance, sell for the same amount (except vols. 2 and 3 that sell for N500 each); yet people are not keen to buy them.

⁴ This was on Rivers State Television (RSTV), Channel 22, on 11 October 2018.

the status to “wine and dine” with the highest major generals in the country (these were not named); to buy the latest car model (the key was dangled from his pocket as unverified evidence); while his five jobless children got jobs in one day with an oil company (not named). The pastor interjected at every sentence to ensure that the congregation got the point of the testimony. This testimony, along with others, was greeted intermittently with a thunderous “Give Jesus a wonderful clap”. The pastor then expatiated: “I gave him the word, gave him blessed (not holy) water and olive oil and all his evil bondage was broken. To you who are listening to me on television, I prophesy that everything you have lost in life will be restored to you”.⁵ The assembly thundered “AMEN”.

All who testified during this session began with “My Last Bus-Stop. My Miracle is here”. The name, “Last Bus-Stop”, registers the fact that all efforts to seek deliverance from other churches and pastors had failed, except this last Bus Stop of the pastor. TV viewers were urged to come with their water and olive oil for the pastor to bless, make them “anointed water”; and receive deliverance through listening to “anointed preaching” and “anointed music”. He urged TV viewers saying, “God is waiting for you here”. “When I testify, you prophesy”. “Power surpasses power” and “There are pastors and pastors”. This pastor’s session was succeeded on the RSTV (Rivers State Television) by similar ones that had queued up for their turn.

That is one fairly detailed example of the issue. To come home, we hear of some Catholic priests, who go from family

⁵ This “Dynamic Flame of Fire Miracle Ministries” as it is called, is located at No. 11 Golden Valley Estate by Y. C. K Junction, Woji, Port Harcourt. Its “Prayer lines [sic]” (0906 474 6933; 0907 266 6342) were projected on the TV screen throughout the show. Its “Deliverance by Fire Programme” takes place “every Tuesday by 2.00 prompt”, not counting night vigils.

to family in their parishes to break ancestral curses, charging each family a hundred thousand naira (N100,000.00). A Rev Sister reported that because her family had her, a Rev. Sister, the priest only charged the family half the amount (N50,000.00). In another reported case, a priest succeeded in convincing members of a family that the lack of progress for their lazy sons was caused by their uncle, who, meanwhile, had unsuccessfully done everything possible to help them to grow. Result? The family burnt down the uncle's beautiful house, while he himself barely escaped alive by jumping over the fence. They cut down the beautiful trees he had planted around the house because the priest told them that the uncle had locked up their fortunes in those trees. We can each add copiously to these few examples.

Underlying these practices is the cultural belief that misfortune in life and the lack of progress of any kind, especially material progress (business collapse, childlessness, inability to get a job, or a life partner, and so forth), are caused by someone somewhere; and by curses, chief among them ancestral curses. Specially anointed men, rarely women, of God then capitalise on this unevangelised cultural belief and mind-set to arrogate to themselves "the anointed ministry" to break these curses. Sadly, these beliefs are held and practised by Christians, including Catholics, clergy and religious as seen above.

"It is in the Bible"

The Bible seems to provide a theological ("God-based") foundation for this belief. The multiple TV deliverance sessions are punctuated with quotations from the Bible, often used as talisman.⁶ Further, even some Catholics reportedly

⁶ The young lad mentioned above reported that his dad had a Bible in his "juju shrine" as he put it. Whenever the Jehovah Witnesses or Pentecostals

bless themselves by the God of a powerful Catholic pastor thus: “by the God of Fr. Mbaka”, “of Fr. Ede” and “Ebube Muonso”.⁷ The pastors also do the same in such statements as “by the God of my ministry, I decree”,⁸ this being a take-off from such biblical expressions as “the LORD, the God of Elijah” (2 Kings 2:14).

Today in the Nigerian and African contexts and beyond, curses largely take the form of hyping up the powerful influence of Satan and wicked people on almost everybody’s life. Preachers give biblical recipes for drastically dealing with these curses and satanic influences; yet the prescribed recipes never fully work, because the deliverance sessions and the breaking of the same curses continue, as the same people go from church to church and pastor to pastor in search of lasting solutions.

In the samples from the night vigil leaflet mentioned above, one can hear biblical echoes in the curses (the selected numbering is from the pamphlet):

5. I paralyse all the demonic delegates assigned to my life, in the name of Jesus.

16. I lose myself from all inherited bondage, in the name of Jesus.

18. Evil bands, release me in the name of Jesus.

visited his house to preach to him, the dad would ask him to fetch the Bible from the shrine to prove to them that he was no stranger to the Bible.

⁷ “Ebube Muonso” signifies “Glory of the Holy Spirit”; more than one priest bears this title. Their sacramentals include “Ebube Muonso blessed sacrament medal” and “holy water”.

⁸ Information by CIWA student priests in the Faculty Course on “Gospel Miracles and Faith Healing in the African Context”.

30. *I take as my weapon the two edged-sword of the spirit [sic] and I cut down the powers of witches, familiar spirits, wizards, ancestral/familiar spirits, spirit wives, mermaid spirits, spirit husbands manipulators, spirit children, evil monitors, evil spiritual properties, evil arrows, and evil decisions.*

32. *Lord, add more fire of the Holy Ghost to the fire that is burning my enemy.*

34. *Lord, use me as your battle-axe.*

35. *Let the angels of war be released on my behalf, in Jesus name.*⁹

We may compare this prayer for the destruction of the enemy with some OT Psalms:

“Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until you find none” (Psa 10:15).

“On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and sulphur; a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup” (Psa 11:6).

*“He loved to curse; let curses come on him. He did not like blessing, may it be far from him. He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water and like oil into his bones. May it be like a garment that he wraps around himself, like a belt that he wears every day. May that be the reward of my accusers from the LORD, of those who speak evil against my life (Psa 109:17-18).”*¹⁰

The Psalms in particular demonstrate the cultural, historical and theological contexts and mind-sets in which the psalmists lived, and from which emanated their prayer against the

⁹ Senior Prophet U. O. Miracle, *Dynamic Fire Word Bulletin*, Vol. 21, 2018. Dynamic Flame of Fire Ministries. A. K. A. Last Bus-Stop.

¹⁰ These and other citations are from the NRSV, unless otherwise stated.

wicked. In some cases, New Testament authors cite them positively (cf. Psa 10:3, 15; cited in Rom 3:14-18). They are powerful because for the psalmists, they were heartfelt personal prayers to God. Today, people view them as “the word of God” because they are “in the Bible”.

The Heart of the Matter

A few people do not subscribe to the reigning doctrine of curses; or believe that some humans can break curses for others. I asked a Christian, not a Catholic, who engages in the work of evangelism whether that work included breaking of curses, and what he thought of curses generally. Laughingly he replied: “As long as one gives his [her] life to Christ, curses have no power over the person. The person is the one to pray and break the curses, not to go looking for another to do it for them. The practice of looking for others to break curses is what promotes false prophecy all over the place”. When we got into the issue of baptism, he said they did not baptise anybody in their church till the person was eighteen years old and could thus assume responsibility and be accountable for his (her) life as a Christian.¹¹

This view touches the heart of the matter. Can curses, whatever their source, have effect on one who is configured to Christ by baptism? Christians, especially Catholics, believe in the radically transforming power of baptism, by which one is born of God in Christ, receives God’s own life;¹² is incorporated into the church, “the body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27); and becomes “a new creation” (2 Cor 5:17).¹³ If all

¹¹ I leave aside the conversation which ensued about the true meaning of baptism and his confusing John’s Baptism with Christian baptism.

¹² See, for instance, John 1:12-13; 3:5-8; Rom 8:15-17; Gal 4:5-7; 1 John 3:1-3, 9.

¹³ See further on this issue, Teresa Okure, “He gave them power to become children of God (John 1:122-13): Divinization as foundational Charism in

this is true how then can one still believe in the enduring effects of ancestral and other curses that a human being, flesh and blood like them, can break at exorbitant fee; one that God's life in them is incapable of breaking? Is the root cause of this problem the inefficacy, ineffectiveness of baptism to impart God's life which God, not humans, gives and continues to nourish through the Holy Spirit and the sacramental ministry of the church? Or ignorance of one's nature as a Christian and the consequent failure to believe that one truly has God's life and should therefore assume full personal responsibility to live accordingly even as one does in natural life?

The theme of our current convention, more so than others, obligates us to dig deep into the cultural mind-set in which the Bible, especially the OT, was written and the traditional belief systems of our people. This requires that we pay close attention to the nature of language (the embodiment of culture) and the words and concepts in the texts, set within the life contexts and historical and geographical epochs in which a given text was written. This cultural rooting is further compounded by the interpreter's own biblical/theological and cultural rooting. Though presentations will grapple with these issues, a word on blessing and curses in the Bible generally is appropriate here.

Core Biblical Message on Blessings and Curses

Blessings

Whatever the cultural backdrop and belief in blessings and curses in the Bible, and whatever definitions may be given to

the Bible", in *The Holy Spirit and Charisms in the Bible*; Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN) (vol. 10; Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2018) 118-135.

these terms (in ancient and modern dictionaries),¹⁴ this much can be affirmed from the biblical evidence itself. Blessings are pure, undeserved and unmerited gifts and endowments from God, given at creation to all living things, including humans, to enable them to be what God intended them to be; and to realise the full potential which God destined for them. The first blessing word in the Bible in the creation account is of living things: fish and birds and other living creatures: “God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters of the seas and let the birds multiply on the earth’” (Gen 1:22); of humans, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it” (v. 28). The blessing here is not mere words or ritual such as using “holy water” to bless people. The blessing is God’s endowment and empowerment to the creatures to fulfil their purpose. The blessing causes and empowers them to exist, grow, become and endure by replicating their own kind. This is why modern onslaught against nature is radically anti-creation, as Pope Francis reminds us.¹⁵ Blessing is an attribute of God, who is life and gives life freely to all that live. No creature asked God to bring it into existence or to empower it to live and replicate its own kind. Does the attachment of the blessing word to living things alone offer any further insight into what the biblical authors understood by blessing?¹⁶

¹⁴ See for instance, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/blessing>; www.biblesstudytools.co./dictionary/blessing; www.compellingtruth.org/blessing-Bible.html; W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*; H.-G. Link and U. Becker, *NIDNTT*, 3:206-18.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’ on Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vatican, 2015).

¹⁶ In the first creation account, plants and vegetation were endowed, in their way, with the ability to replicate their own kind: “with their seed inside them”. But the blessing word goes only with animate things.

After the creation account, we meet the blessing word at key points in the Bible. In the restoration of Noah and his family after the flood, God repeats the blessing given at creation: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (Gen 9:1); in the call of Abraham, the proto-ancestor of Israel (Gen 12:1-3), severally treated by presenters at this convention; in the journey of Israel through the desert to the Promised Land. A memorable example is when Balak, King of Moab, tried to bribe Balaam, son of Beor, a Mesopotamian diviner, who yet knew YHWH, to curse Israel so that they would not pass through and harm his territory (Numbers 22 - 24). The diviner, in turn, tried unsuccessfully to bribe God to allow him curse Israel by building God elaborate altars with increasingly abundant sacrifices. The reversed outcome of that venture was the multiple blessings of Israel by this “pagan” diviner. The key message is that one cannot “curse whom God has not cursed” (23:8) and that “there is no divination against Israel” because “the Lord their God is with them” (23:21-22). Balaam then utters the first messianic prophecy in the Bible (attributed to him by the biblical author): “A star shall come out of Jacob/and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel” (Num 24:17),¹⁷ who will crush Moab and the surrounding enemy nations.

God’s covenant with Israel seems to be conditional. Israel’s blessings will depend on its observance of the laws of the covenant “only if you follow his ways”, (“only if you keep all his commandments”, Deut 26:27, 28). The Deuteronomist sets before the people “a blessing and a curse;” and marshals out the curses or evil consequences of breaking the law of the

¹⁷ The church celebrates the fulfilment of this Messianic prophecy by a Mesopotamian diviner in the Solemnity of Epiphany; marked by the journey of the Magi (Matthew 2).

covenant.¹⁸ By keeping God's commandment, Israel will be known as "a nation the Lord has blessed". Paul, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, a Pharisee thoroughly trained in and faithful to the law (Phil 3:3-6), refers to this curse inherent in the law when he says "Christ became a curse for us" (Gal 3:13);¹⁹ in order to liberate us from the curses inherent in the law and incurred by failure to obey it; and give us in place of a curse, the status and dignity of being God's children, able to call "God Abba! Father" (Gal 4:4-6). The different nuances in the Hebrew Scriptures of blessings as *barak* and *esher* are treated in the presentations.

In the New Testament we equally meet the blessing word at key events of the new creation: at the annunciation, Gabriel names Mary "Full-of-Grace, [*kecharitomenē*]", one thoroughly and irrevocably blessed, because "the Lord is with you" (Luke 1:28).²⁰ Elizabeth sees her as "blessed among women", "blessed the fruit of [her] womb" and blessed because "she believed" what the angel told her by God (Luke 1:42-45). In her case, the blessing empowers her to conceive in her womb without sexual intercourse and become the mother of the long-expected Messiah. Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, equally blesses God, that is, acknowledges God as the source of messianic blessings for Israel in the *Benedictus* (Luke 1:68-79), which the church prays daily at Morning Prayer.

¹⁸ See especially esp., on curses: Deut 27:14-26 (being accursed); 28:15-46; on blessings: 28:1-14 and parallels.

¹⁹ That is, as one "born under the law", subject to the law (Gal 4:4). Paul probably refers to the same message when he says: "For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

²⁰ *Kekaritomenē* is the name, not the greeting, so Pope St John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

Jesus begins his inaugural Sermon on the Mount, the great charter of the kingdom (Matthew 5–7), what scholars call his Torah of the new covenant, with the declaration of unconditional blessedness of the rejects of society: the poor, those who mourn; the meek, those who hunger and thirst for justice, and so forth (Matt 5:3-12). These beatitudes, with the entire sermon that launches God’s kingdom or sphere of values, expressly prohibit cursing even of one’s enemies, contrary to previous stipulations:

You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy”. But I say to you Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous (Matt 5:43-45).

NT authors took up this injunction severally,²¹ an indication that this gospel message sunk deep into their hearts, contrary to their previous Torah or cultural upbringing. The Jewish disciples, in particular, had to give up their previous injunction by the law to love their neighbour, those who love them “and hate their enemy” (Matt 5:43; cf. Lev 19:18).

Jesus’ ministry in Galilee, Samaria and Judea/Jerusalem is characterised by the blessing word. People, who witness his God-like activities, constantly give glory and praise to God. A woman in the crowd, in a culture, where women were hardly expected to be seen and heard in public, was moved by the Spirit to shout: “Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you” (Luke 11:27). This recalls Elizabeth blessing at Mary’s visitation, “Blessed is the fruit of your womb”; this time Mary’s womb is blessed; she is blessed for

²¹ Cf. Luke 6:34; 10:23-24 [the Good Samaritan]; 23:34; Rom 12:14; 1 Cor 4:12; Acts 7:60; 1 Pet 3:9.

having a child like Jesus. Jesus, in reply extends this blessing to those who hear and keep God's word as his mother did (v. 28). He declares Peter, "blessed" because God revealed to him Jesus' identity as the Messiah (Matt 16:17). Those, who do not lose faith in him as the Messiah because of his concern for the poor and sinners, are equally blessed (Matt 11:6). The disciples, who witness his mission, are blessed because they see something prophets had longed for in vain (Matt 13:16-17; Luke 10:23-24). In each of these instances, the blessing is contained in the word spoken to the one blessed.

The early Christians heard and took to heart Jesus' gospel message to "bless and not curse" even enemies; they made it an integral part of their life and proclamation, encouraging each other to live up to it as evidence of their new life as God's children since it is of God's nature/character to bless. Paul exhorts the Romans: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" (Rom 12:14).²² He himself testifies that he and his co-workers "bless" when cursed (1 Cor 4:12). The epistles, especially Ephesians, praise and extol God for giving humans across racial boundaries the singular blessing in Christ of becoming God's children and members of God's household.²³ Blessing for humans is God's gracious call and endowment to participate in diverse ways in God's life of self-giving; of giving generously and unconditionally to all creatures.

Curses

While "blessings" is an attribute or property of God, curses in the Bible, are essentially connected with sin, deviation from God's will and intent for humans and creation. Their character and purpose are to destroy; frustrate, diminish and prevent

²² This is the text on our conference poster, banner and handbills.

²³ My paper at this convention explores what this letter presents as blessing.

growth. The dictionaries emphasise this.²⁴ The first curse word in Scripture is to the serpent, “Cursed are you among all animals” (Gen 3:14). Next, the ground is cursed as a result of human sin (v. 19).²⁵ Curse is clearly neither part of God’s creation nor of the creation narrative (Gen 1:1–2:25). Its origin is not God, whose nature is to bless; but sinful human beings, who act against God’s will and diminish and destroy life in them and in others. Consequently, curses can never override the fundamental blessing that God gives or with which God endows creation and individuals; and gives most uniquely in Christ.

From creation onwards, the curse motif grows; but in whatever way one sees it, the curse is always connected with sin, deviation from God’s ways and intent. God does not curse. The biblical view whereby God curses (cf. Deut 28:20-37) is to be situated within the cultural mind-set of the ancient world (not only of Israel) that sees God as responsible for everything, good or bad. Humans curse or are accursed as a result of what they do to themselves or to others as extension of their sin. This is true in the curse of Cain, who killed his brother, Abel (Gen 4:11-12). After the flood, Noah curses his grandson, Canaan, the fourth son of Ham, though interpreters miss the shift in the narrative from Ham to Canaan (Gen 9:25-26). The call of Abraham attracts blessings and curses, “I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you” (Gen 12:3).

²⁴ See the *TDNT* and *Dictionary of NT Theology*, vol. 1 on *makarios*, *makarismos*, *eulogia* and *katalogein*, *anathema* and cognates.

²⁵ It is to be noted that the entire creation is not cursed. Though Paul is often cited in connection with Gen 3:19, Paul in Romans sees the travails of creation as birth pangs; the earth that gave birth to all animals and insects, reptiles (Gen 1:24), will itself be renewed and set free from this bondage to decay in the fulfilled new creation where there will be a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1).

Summary of Biblical Evidence on Blessings and Curses

In sum we can say that in biblical perspective properly understood, God blesses; God does not curse. However, there is a marked progression from focus in the OT on receiving and giving blessings, to being blessed in the NT. Both the OT creation stories and the NT narratives conceive of blessing as proper to God, God's empowerment of living creatures to be and to replicate themselves; and of humans, to share in the divine image and nature by caring for creation. This insight helps us to understand why Jesus enjoins his followers, God's children, to "Bless those who curse you; pray for those who persecute and calumniate you" (Matt 5:44). The God, who created, and who loves, endows and sustains creation to continue to exist (Wis 11:24-26), cannot curse, diminish or frustrate that creation in any form. That is why, despite human sin and damage to creation, God will bring forth "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev 21:1-2) by way of recreation, freedom, and liberation from bondage to decay (Rom 8:18-22), along with humans (vv. 23-25).

Curses and Blessings in Modern Context: The Task Ahead

Today, while people are driven by fear of curses as seen at the beginning, they are also eager to claim biblical blessings, especially Abraham's blessings, as in the popular chorus:

Abraham's blessings are mine; /Abraham's blessings are mine.

I am blessed in the morning; /I am blessed in the evening.

Abraham's blessings are mine.

To what extent is this true? Is one Abraham? Can one claim Abraham's blessings without imbibing his wholehearted faith in God to the point of being ready and willing to sacrifice his

uniquely beloved son, Isaac (Genesis 22), on whom alone God had placed the fulfilment of God's repeated promises to increase his descendants as "the stars in the sky" or the sand on the seashore (Gen 15:4-6; 17:15-19)? One fact about biblical blessing is that it is unique and specific to the recipient even when all share the same blessings in Christ. Paul's analogy of the body (1 Cor 12:3-30) registers this fact.

In traditional settings, the blessings and curses of parents are believed to have lasting effect on their children; example, Isaac's non-retractable blessings of Jacob over Esau (Gen 27:27-39). The Bible records more blessings than curses; once we pay attention to it. The presentations at this convention will not exhaust the rich biblical evidence on blessings as coming from God and curses as originating from human sin; or as human ways of thinking transferred to God.

The church's liturgy frequently invokes God's blessings. Every Eucharistic celebration ends with: "May the Almighty God bless you, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit", to which the people answer "Amen", and are then sent forth "in the peace of Christ" to go and serve and be a blessing to the world. The Divine Praises at Benediction remind us of the importance of singing God's blessedness as the author of all blessings. So too does the hymn of the three young men, "O all you works of the Lord, bless the Lord" (Dan 3:57-88; used at Morning Prayer of Solemnities).

Let us engage each other then, on "Blessings and Curses in the Bible", with a view to helping us and our people understand and be liberated from false teachings, beliefs and practices, especially from paranoiac fear of curses. Key questions, which emerge from the above reflection are: what actually are curses and blessings in each episode of the Bible studied? Who curses; who blesses; by what authority; from what cultural, historical and theological perspective; what

effects have curses and blessings on individuals and the community? How does the one cursed, or blessed regard/receive the blessing or curse? Does God actually see curses the way authors of Scripture, rooted in culture, attribute them to God? Why do people today believe, fear more the power of curses (whether attributed to God or to humans, especially the ancestors) than they do blessings, human or divine?

Though related to this convention theme, the theme of our Fifth Annual Convention on “Material Wealth and Divine Blessings in the Bible”,²⁶ was inspired mainly by the “Prosperity Gospel” and the teaching on the obligation to settle God, if one wants God to settle the person. This current theme affects both those who prosper and those who do not. In both cases, God’s Gospel, Jesus of Nazareth, is seriously undermined and trivialised to the great impoverishment of his brothers and sisters, who believe in the effectiveness of the word of God and in the power of “anointed” pastors, prophets and preachers to break curses. We need to take the people’s beliefs and their imprisonment by these beliefs seriously. Belief in the effectiveness of curses on one’s life is rooted in the African belief in the power of the word; which enacts what it says, especially the curse word as we discovered previously.²⁷

²⁶ *Material Wealth and Divine Blessings in the Bible*. Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN, Vol. 5; Bernard Ukwuegbu, Mary Jerome Obiorah, Vincent Nyoyoko and Cletus Gotan, eds (Port Harcourt, Nigeria: CABAN Publications, 2014).

²⁷ See our first CABAN Convention on *Images of the Word of God in the Bible* Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN; Maiden Edition; Teresa Okure, Luke Ijezie and Camillus Umoh, eds.; Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2012).

It is not sufficient to assume or presume that these curses do not exist or that they are not effective. That may be true for some of us; the fact remains that the generality of our people believes in them. The entertainment industry, such as Africa Magic, helps to consolidate this belief alongside the activities of many TV preachers and prophets. It is imperative that we find ways to address them beyond the halls of this convention.

Global Dimension of Our Convention Theme

The issue of blessings and curses or the influence of the demonic forces on humans is not peculiar to Africa. Elsewhere, globally, it takes different forms. The Vatican, for instance, is planning a meeting on exorcism next year (2019) and emphasises the need to train professional exorcists because of the rise of Satanism and cultism in the world. This is because “Cases of people possessed by evil spirits is on the increase (500,000 in Italy alone)”;²⁸ it is not clear whether those possessed believe that their evil spirit possession is the result of a curse. Nevertheless, the dehumanising effect on humans is the same.

God’s children are increasingly being subjected to the powers of darkness in many ways. Jesus took the issue of demon possession seriously. As believing Christians, experts in biblical studies, we need to proclaim Christ, God’s gospel, God’s unfailing and unsurpassable blessing as God’s remedy from fear of all forms of demonic powers over their lives.

May God’s Holy Spirit teach and lead us to the complete truth in this matter. So that being liberated ourselves, we may be in

²⁸ Doug Stanglin, “Demand for exorcisms is up threefold in Italy, so Vatican is holding conference” in *USA TODAY*, published 2:12 p.m., Feb. 23, 2018; updated 6:56 p.m. ET Feb. 23, 2018.

a better position to offer our people the solid knowledge of the truth that alone can set them free.

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