

Proverbs 26:2: A Wisdom Recipe for Dealing with Ancestral Curses

Emmanuel O. Nwaoru

Introduction

That cursing is a reality of human condition is beyond any reasonable doubt. Both the biblical and extra-biblical literature, including oral and written folklore, testify to the phenomenon. The belief in curses has anthropological, cultural and religious rationale. Because no person is believed to suffer harm or misfortune for nothing or without any cause, the harm incurred is most often linked to a curse. In other words, curses are not accidental events; they have antecedents. They are often employed as a last resort in reaction/response to anti-social and unethical behaviour that deserve some punishment. Strangely, the antecedent may be real or imaginary, just as the response could take a verbal or ritual form. It would be abominable in the ancient world to give blessing to one who deserves a curse or vice versa. In either case the blessing or curse will be ineffectual. For attitudes toward cursing are essentially determined by people's idea of justice. It is the overriding factor that gives a curse its force.

It means that a curse without cause has no effect; and this makes the traditional belief in the transferability of ancestral curses very contentious. It raises the serious question on how and why future generations would be said to inherit the curses of their forebears, or the curses of parents transferred to their children. Is it logical to assume, as adherents to this belief tend to do, that the guiltless who did not participate in the evil deed of their ancestors would bear a curse? What happens to the traditional ethical-moral principle that has established that a curse is only effective, if the one uttering it is in the right while the cursed is in the wrong?

The reality is that this cultural belief is still widely affirmed in many traditions and religions, notwithstanding its apparent illogicality and contradiction. It is evidenced in folklores; and has constituted an

existential problem to contemporary society. Therefore, the conjecture that the frantic quest to remove or “cancel” ancestral curses is invented by specialists in traditional medicine and/or modern pastors and their collaborators is to say the least absurd. It projects the same attitude of indifference to people’s physical, mental and spiritual concerns that has for long characterised approach to serious issues in Africa. From antiquity, people have come to believe that there are divine forces that in the course of human events influence, in some way, the life and fortune of individuals, families and, even communities. Such divine intervention could be in form of blessings and curses. Those are realities that cannot be wished away. For this the *Mishna* articulates a general principle: “In exactly the same way as a blessing is uttered for boons, so is one uttered for misfortunes”.¹

Because ancestral curses are then seen as a potent factor in determining future harm, affliction, misfortune, destruction, disaster, etc., just as blessings guarantee the reverse, there is every need to approach the theme dispassionately. Given that, it will be preposterous to quickly dismiss the belief in ancestral curses or deny the reality of the fears associated with them without properly equipping the affected. This paper does not find the present approach of aiming at removing or annulling ancestral curses by matching the “force” behind them with equal or even greater forces as a definitive answer. The activities of supposed experts in numerous healing ministries and their prayer warriors engaged in this have frequently proved to be impotent. The belief and the fear have remained defiantly alive because a curse is believed to be self-realising because of its inherent power of carrying itself into effect. It is therefore on this ground that this paper proposes a biblical perspective that will deal with the root of the fear of ancestral curses. It will also examine why such curses can be said to be transferrable to subsequent generations as it is customarily believed and on what grounds/conditions they can be annulled or revoked. The sage in Prov 26:2 provides a recipe that is not only widely re-echoed but also has become a guiding principle in the Scriptures and in many other ancient cultures for dealing with such beliefs and fears. The text challenges the ignorant (“fool”) to appreciate the abortiveness of a causeless or undeserved curse. Because knowledge

¹ *Berakhot (Ber)* 54a.

is power this paper aims at challenging the present-day Christians who out of fear still live in the bondage of ancestral curses to appropriate the message of the text as a starting point for remedy.

Curse as Concept

The English term “curse” defies simple definition. It is a general term that connotes a lot of ideas. This is evident when one realises that it is used to translate the different biblical (Hebrew and Greek) words² irrespective of their contexts and linguistic nuances. A typical example is the English rendering of the three Hebrew words [*qll* (v. 1); *qbb* (v. 8); *'rr* (v. 8)] used as parallel terms in Job’s curse upon his birth in Job 3:1-9. English glossary indicates that its everyday usage covers a wide range of ideas from “an offensive word that people say when they are angry” to “magical words that are said to cause trouble or bad luck for someone or the condition that results when words are said”.³ Wenham defines a curse as “an ancient cultural means of invoking divine judgment against someone who had committed a crime or offense, especially one that was not easily brought to accountability by human effort, such as pervasion of justice (Deut 27:19)”.⁴ This definition brings out the primordial nature of a curse by relating its usage in antiquity to addressing crime and to the service of justice. Therefore, a curse, from an ethical-moral perspective, is “a powerful sanction of conduct”. The definition also draws attention to the fact that a curse is not a chance event; it has a supernatural or divine force behind it. The same idea is expressed by Urbrock when he says that, “the meaning of cursing is just opposite (of blessing)”. He then goes on to clarify the dual meaning of a curse when he delineates its verbal and nominal forms thus: “It (cursing) may refer to the pronouncement of evil which brings about punishment or harm to

² The common Greek words include: *ara*, *katara*, *anathema*, *eparatos*, *epikataratos*. At least not less than six Hebrew verb roots - *'rr*, *qll*, *'lh*, *qbb*, *nqb*, *z'm* - have been translated by the verb “to curse”. See TWOT “*'rr*” n. 168.

³ See *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1994). It further designates a curse as “a prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come upon one”, “a profane or obscene oath or word”, “evil or misfortune that comes as if in response to imprecation or as retribution”, “a cause of great harm or misfortune”, etc.

⁴ Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), 78.

someone, the actual harm or punishment effected, or an invocation of the same”.⁵

George Scheper moves from a simple to a more complex definition that adds other important elements to the meaning of a curse in his entry in the *Encyclopaedia of Religion*. By contrast he simply defines a curse as “the antithesis of blessing”. In a wider sense he identifies a curse as “a pan-global, pan-historical phenomenon in which language, spoken or written and with or without special accompanying actions, is directed at bringing down evil or misfortune upon an intended object, person, or community”.⁶ He highlights, as it were, the “matter” (accompanying action) and “form” (spoken or written word) of a curse and broadens the scope of its target to include not only the animate (person), but also the inanimate (object). It also embraces the community, meaning that the effect of a curse can be both individual and collective.

MolefiKete Asante attempts to give an African perspective when he asserts: “In Africa, a curse is any attempt to use an invocation to cause harm to someone”. It is “an utterance whose cause is to do damage to the intended victim”.⁷ There is no doubt that this definition does not cover the entire spectrum of the belief in curses in Africa. But it underscores the ultimate purpose for cursing: namely, to cause harm or do damage to the victim. In his entry he makes it clear that in Africa, a curse is not an accidental event; it always has a cause. For a cursed person is presumed to have done something that has merited the curse. This traditional African belief is of great advantage, if it is well-harnessed, in dealing with the thorny issue of ancestral curse.

The concept of ancestral curse is derived from the general definition of curses, although its usage still needs some clarifications in the context of this paper. Generally, parental curses are matters of grievous concern in all cultures and traditions. The dread for them is very much expressed in

⁵ William J. Urbrock, “Blessings and Cursing”, in D. N. Freedman, et al. (eds.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)* 1 (New York/ London: Doubleday, 1992), 755-761 (755).

⁶ See <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/cursing> Accessed 09/07/2018

⁷ See MolefiKete Asante, Ama Mazama (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of African Religion* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 188-189; 188.

a Moorish proverb that says: “If the saints curse you the parents will cure you, but if the parents curse you the saints will not cure you”.⁸ If that is the case with parental curse, one can then understand why ancestral curse is much more dreadful in contemporary society. For the sake of clarity, parental curse is not exactly the same as ancestral curse. Parental curse (paternal or maternal) is pronounced directly by one’s physical parents who can also revoke the same in person. But it has the potential of becoming ancestral when it is not revoked and its effect is transferred or transmitted to subsequent generations, sometimes to “the third or fifth”, or even more generations.⁹ Therefore, ancestral curse can simply be defined as an inherited curse from one’s forebears, with the forebear being either the object or performer of the curse.

One thing to be remarked here is that a curse is not a vow or an oath, although they may be interconnected. Actually, a curse may be pronounced to seal a vow or an oath in order to give it (vow or oath) its credibility.

A Curse: Its Object, Performer and Agent

Engelking’s identification of a curse as a three-tier process puts the concept in proper perspective. For her, a curse starts with the object who is its *primary cause*; it is continued by the performer of the curse, *the intermediary*, and is concluded by the *agent* of the curse, *the punishing Agent*. She demonstrates how the process works in a typical parental curse by identifying the disobedient child (the object) as the primary cause, the parent (the performer) as the intermediary and the punishing Deity as the agent.¹⁰

The object of a curse, as we have observed, could be an animate or inanimate being, a person or thing. The animate object may be any wrong or evil doer (cf. Gen 4:11), ranging from one’s enemies (2 Sam 16:5-13), guilty person (Prov 11:26; 24:24) to disobedient or misbehaved

⁸ Cited in George Scheper, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/cursing>.

⁹ See, Anna Engelking, *The Curse on Folk Magic of the Word*, Monographs 1, trans. Anna Gutowska (Warsaw: Institute of Slavic Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences, 2017), 257-258.

¹⁰ See Engelking, *The Curse*, 150.

child (Gen 9:22-23). The inanimate could be a serpent, the ground (Gen 3:14, 17), Mount Ebal (Deut 27:13), day of birth (Job 3:8), a fruitless tree (Mark 11:21), etc. The text of Deut 28:18 summarises it all: “Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, and the fruit of your ground, the offspring of your cattle, and the young of your flock”. Here is an indication that a curse could even be directed to one’s guiltless children on account of the parents (cf. Gen 9:25).

In African setting, a whole community, an individual, a family or (village) can also become the object of a curse by violating a treaty, vow, an oath, or by incurring a taboo. Because such a curse is self-inflicted and has power of self-realisation, it is said to be incurred automatically. In this way the primary cause (object) becomes also the intermediary of the curse. But there are those who are never objects of a curse. For instance, the Bible forbids, sometimes at the pain of death, the cursing of God (Lev 24:10-16; Exod 22:27a [E 28a]; cf. Job 2:9), the king (Exod 22:27b [E 28b]; Eccl 10:20; contrast 2 Sam 16:5-13 Sam), parents (Exod 21:17; Lev 20:9; cf. Prov 20:20); the deaf (Lev 19:14), etc.

In many communities in Africa, the intermediary of curses consists largely, besides the parents, of a maternal uncle, a paternal grandmother,¹¹ a chief or community leader, a traditional priest/priestess, sage, spiritualist, wizard or witch, a clan or family head, any aggrieved person,¹² including dying person, stranger, guest, beggar, victim of injustice. Evans-Pritchard observes what may appear to be the basic principle behind cursing among the Nuer in particular and perhaps among many other peoples in general. He states: “A person standing in any social relationship to another may curse him if he has been wronged by him. However, the more distant the relationship the less effective the curse, because the less the obligation and therefore the less the wrong”.¹³

¹¹ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), 166. Contrary to the biblical experience, Evans-Pritchard observes that among the Nuer the eldest child can curse the parents just as the eldest son of a man’s sister can curse the maternal uncle’s herd. And those curses are very much feared.

¹² See Moses Ohene Biney, “Punishment”, Asante and Mazama, *Encyclopaedia*, 547-548 (548).

¹³ Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 166.

From the nature of curses, it is only God who has the absolute power to pronounce a curse effectively (cf. Gen 3:14; 4:11). Besides divine maledictions, humans also exercise power as cursers (intermediary of curses) by invoking the name of a Deity. Those with such a power include holy men in prophetic curses (Gen 9:25; 49:7; Num 22; Deut 27:15; Josh 6:26; 2 Kings 1:10-12; 2:24; Lam 3:65; cf. Amos 7:17; Jer 28:16), parents —father or mother (Gen 9:25), one's enemy (1 Sam 17:43; 2 Sam 16:7-8), neglected poor (Sir 4:56), etc. However, the human performers of curses do not bring the curse to full efficacy because they are only intermediaries who need the power of the agent to cause the expected harm or evil to take place. In 1 Sam 17:43, God is specifically mentioned in human cursing as ultimate agent. In many extra-biblical traditions, the power of the divinities and other spirits are commonly invoked to effect the purpose of the curse. Therefore, the role of the curser must not be confused with that of the agent, the finisher of the process of cursing and guarantor of efficacy. That agent is usually the highest Deity of the people or community, or his/her emissaries. In the biblical context, it is God; while in other cultures and traditions, it is their supreme being, and other divinities, spiritual forces, or even ancestors as emissaries. And there rests the basis for fear and dread of curses. Occasionally, however, the supernatural being plays the role of both agent and intermediary in curses. They utter the curse as well as guarantee its fulfilment.

Motive and Potency of Curses

Viewed from the standpoint of modernity, or even Christianity, one may conclude that cursing is evil. But the ancient world considers cursing as a positive phenomenon designed to check or even stop wrongdoing in the community and to protect the weak and most vulnerable, especially within kinship relationship. The motive is preventive, when the injured chooses to vent emotions of anger and frustration through cursing rather than engaging in more heinous acts of revenge. It is an option for a lesser evil.

The motive for cursing is mainly punitive and retaliatory, especially when it is prompted by the desire to punish and/or revenge against unjustified curse. This is seen in the victim's counter-curse against the curser. It is perhaps in securing the observance of treaty and covenant

conditions both at the individual and communal levels that the motive behind curses becomes evident. In the biblical tradition, for instance, curses and oaths are used to guarantee one's words.¹⁴ Similarly curses, like blessings are employed greatly in reaffirming covenants and treaties. This motive features in YHWH's covenant with his people¹⁵ and in Suzerain-vassal treaties of the ancient world.¹⁶

Curses are dreaded because they are believed to have automatic potency that makes them self-realising, i.e., effective and effectual once they are pronounced (Num 22:5-6; 23:7-8). In almost every tradition, the power of cursing, just like of blessing, "is held to be very great". For this, David seeks revenge on Shimei (1 Kings 2:8-9), even though he acted as if he had not bothered about him (2 Sam 16:5-13). In general, Jewish folklore does not say much about transmission of curse to future generation but a curse is believed to hold power even over the dead. The force or power behind a curse is so great that the Talmud holds that "The curse of a sage - even when undeserved - comes to pass".¹⁷

The question is, if curses are so effective, where lies the secret of its potency? There are two divergent views: the one attributes a magical and efficacious power to the spoken word, and the other attributes the power and authority behind a curse to the "cooperative will and action of God or gods". Those who propagate the first view hold that once a curse is uttered, the curse-word "would practically take on a life of its own and continue in effect whether or not circumstances changed or the original speaker had a change of mind".¹⁸ Many ancient and even contemporary

¹⁴ See 1 Sam 14:44; 20:13; 2 Sam 3:9; 1 Kings 2:23; 2 Kings 6:31; see also Matt 26:72, 74; Mark 14:71; yet Jesus rejects it in Matt 5:33-37.

¹⁵ Deut 27:15-26; 28:15-19.

¹⁶ For more details, see Dennis McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament*, AnBib 21A (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), 121-122; F. Charles Fensham, "Malediction and Benediction in Ancient Near Eastern Vassal-Treaties and the Old Testament", *ZAW* 74.1 (1962), 1-9; Delbert Hillers, *Treaty-Curses and the Old Testament Prophets*, *Biblica et Orientalia* 16 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1964), Chapter 1.

¹⁷ *Ber.* 56a. See R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, Geoffrey Wigoder (eds.), *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 135. See also the Talmud, *Makkot* 11a.

¹⁸ Urbrock, "Blessings and Cursing", 755.

cultures seem to hold on to the power of the spoken word as the basis for the efficacy of curses. This belief instils in the mind of the adherent the fear that curses have both automatic and irrevocable power. However, the Bible is very wary about attributing *independent* power to the spoken word, without considering the disposition, the power and status of the speaker, and even the circumstances necessitating the utterance and the suitability and receptivity of the one to whom it is directed.¹⁹

The fact is that in many cultures, human curses are always sealed by invocation of a Deity or other divine beings for their efficacy. It is therefore unrealistic that a human curse-word on its own would have an independent power or force to produce expected result. In fact, not even the three elements – the speaker, the circumstance and the addressee – can altogether guarantee the efficacy of a curse without any divine authority behind the utterance. Those who have unusual powers of uttering efficacious curses do so in virtue of their relation to divine beings; for they appeal, explicitly or implicitly, to a Deity or other spiritual powers to approve and get the purpose realised. It is only on account of such a subtle but implicit appeal that efficacy is construed to be inherent in the spoken or written word of the curser. Certainly, a curse is not a blind force; its power to come true is not unlimited. In one word, a curse cannot be fulfilled at all costs and in every circumstance.

Types of Curses

There are different ways of classifying curses; but for the purpose of this paper only a few types will be considered here, namely justified and unjustified, conditional and unconditional, transferable and non-transferable, and reversible and irreversible curses.

Justified and Unjustified Curses

One idea that keeps on coming up in this paper, and from all indications has a consensus, is that in order for a curse to be effective the curser must have a good reason for cursing. The curser must be in the right, while the object of the curse is in the wrong. In other words, wrongdoing or evil is the prerequisite for efficacious curse. Such a curse is said to be justified

¹⁹ See, Anthony C. Thiselton, “The supposed power of words in the biblical writings”, *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974), 283-299.

because the victim deserves it. A *justified* curse is seen as an instrument of justice and it is considered valid. But oftentimes not all the curses meet this condition. Some people, out of envy, jealousy, hatred or sheer wickedness, pronounce unjustly curses on innocent people to cause them harm. This is the mark of *unjustified* curse and it has no moral force.

Conditional and Unconditional Curses

Conditional curses are situated within the context of vassal treaties and covenants of the ancient world. Here, the curses are seen as aftermaths of violation of the treaty or covenant conditions. They are imposed on the vassal or the inferior party by the suzerain or superior party as consequences of breaking the terms and conditions of the treaty or covenant. As has been earlier remarked, the highest and most powerful Deities of both parties become the agents of the curses. They are invoked, not only to witness to the treaty, but also to ensure the efficacy of the curses. On the part of the vassal, the conditional curse is an appeal for social justice, for protection and for sanctuary before the suzerain. Curses and blessings are *not directly* presented as elements required for the covenant between YHWH and his people as found among the Israelite ancient Near Eastern neighbours. However, there are curse sanctions modelled in the ANE treaty curses scattered here and there in the OT, based on disobedience to God's law or Sinai covenant (cf. Deut 27; 28:15-68; Lev 26:3-13, 14-39).

In contrast to the concept of conditional curse is unconditional curse. As the name implies, a curse in this category is believed to be mechanically effective. That means cursing speech act must produce harmful result on the object once it is pronounced, irrespective of the circumstances or reasons behind the cursing. This opinion is very much held by earlier scholars who relied heavily on folklore. In his reference to Grimm, Crawley observes that the Irish believed that a curse once uttered "must alight on something".²⁰ This reflects much of Westermarck's definition of a curse as "a baneful substance, as a miasma which injures or destroys

²⁰ Alfred Ernest Crawley, *Oath, Curse, and Blessing*, Theodore Besterman (ed.), (London: Watts, 1934), 43; See Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology* 4 vols. trans. J.S. Stallybrass (London: George Bell and sons, 1882-1888), iii. 1227.

anybody to whom it cleaves”.²¹ Contemporary scholarship has raised genuine questions concerning attributing efficacy to cursing speech act without regards to the circumstances and other elements involved. But the truth is that curses rarely occur without causes or moral ground. Therefore, the idea that curses mechanically produce effect, even when they are unjustified, is problematic. The residual belief in such a curse constitutes a major issue that the present-day society has to grapple with in dealing with curses, particularly ancestral curses.

Transferrable and Non-Transferrable Curses

There are inferences in the OT that seem to indicate that curses can be either transferrable or non-transferrable. The traditional belief, though with only few textual evidences, is that a curse can be transferred to a secondary object. For instance, the ground is cursed for the transgression of humans (Gen 3:17, cf. 5:29) and Canaan is cursed for the guilt of his father Ham (Gen 9:24-25; cf. 9:22). Again, the earth and its inhabitants are cursed because the inhabitants violate the terms of the covenant with God (Isa 24:5-6). The objects that “inherit” a curse, consequent upon violation of covenant laws by others, are elaborately specified in Deut 28:18 as “the fruit of your womb, and the fruit of your ground, the offspring of your cattle, and the young of your flock”. For those who believe in transferred curses, the view is corroborated by Divine judgement, threatening to punish children for the iniquity of parents to the third and the fourth generations (Exod 20:5; 34:7; Num 14:18; Lam 5:7). It is also confirmed by the old adage found in variant expressions in ancient cultures, including the biblical that, “the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge” (Jer 31:29b; Ezek 18:2). The idea of transferred evil is not alien to the Greek literature²² and African thought.²³

In the context of the new covenant, God reversed the age-long idea that curses are transferrable. This paves way to individual responsibility and retribution (cf. Jer 31:29-30; Ezek 18:3). Moreover, Prov 26:2 comes up

²¹ E. A. Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas*² 2 vols. (London: MacMillan, 1912-1917), i. 57; cited in Crawley, *Oath*, 43.

²² Plato, *Laws* IX, 205 pdf.

²³ See the Igbo proverb, “*Nkita na-ara nsi, eze a na-ere eghu* (the dog eats the excreta and the goat gets decayed teeth)”.

to state in an unequivocal way the sage's new guiding principle with regard to curses: namely, that "causeless curse alights not". Therefore, for the innocent, every curse is non-transferrable, even if there is any cause for cursing him/her.

Reversible and Irreversible

Another nagging issue is whether a curse is reversible or irreversible. Although there is no consensus, the more common belief is that much depends on the conditions in which the curse is pronounced and the circumstances that give rise to it. In myths and folklores, there are reasons for people to believe that curses are irreversible. Some see it as the defining feature of a curse. Hence Engelking, based on the records she has gathered, presents the irreversible viewpoint thus: "A curse cannot be lifted regardless of its type (justified or unjustified, deliberate or not)".²⁴ For those who believe solely in the power of the spoken word as the basis for the efficacy of curses, it is understandable that once the curse is uttered, the harmful effect goes along with it without further mediation. Besides the power of the spoken word, many believe that a justified curse is irreversible. Most of such curses are provoked by wrongdoing or actions against justice. They have an ethical-moral base. The death of the curser is another factor that is believed to make a curse irreversible. In that case there is little the victim could do to avert the future misfortune. This last cause of irreversibility seems to suggest that there could be leeway to reverse or lift a curse if the curser were alive. That is definitely the case in many cultures and religious traditions.

We have already noted that although curse words have great potency, they are not in themselves absolute. The absolute power lies in the divine agent that is evoked. Therefore, any curse that the divine agent adjudges unjustified stands a reasonable chance of being lifted. In the same way, the change of behaviour of the object, his/her asking for forgiveness, and even the regret of the intermediary before death, can lead to a reversal. The fact is not only that unjustified curses are reversible; they can also become a boomerang to the curser. This has given rise to the common expression "Back to Sender" often heard in both public and private

²⁴ See Engelking, *The curse*, 263. She also gathered enough evidence to illustrate that curses can be lifted, especially unjustified curse. Cf. pp. 255-57.

lament prayers. This is why many parents try to recall or “cancel” a curse immediately they realise that it is an overreaction on their part, or a minor demeanour on the part of the child. It is important to observe that regrets may be enough for reversibility, only if parents are still alive; otherwise some ritual acts may be required to remove the curse.

But rituals only cannot effect expected result without sincere reparation. As Evans-Pritchard puts it: “Sacrifice without reparation is of no avail”. There must be redress on the part of the object, the one cursed, and a resolute determination to undo the past wrong and change cause of vengeance.²⁵ The rituals for removing curses operate by either subverting or even neutralising the harmful effects of the curse word, or by rendering inefficacious the evil forces behind the curse. A typical example is given by Abusch of an exorcist who evokes the power of water, Ea and Asalluhi to render a sorcerer’s curse word powerless, thus:

My mouth is water, your mouth is fire:

May my mouth extinguish your mouth,

May the curse of my mouth extinguish

the curse of your mouth.

May the plot of my heart extinguish

the plot of your heart!²⁶

This old Mesopotamian approach of matching force with equal or greater force is not foreign to contemporary society as religious ministers and traditional mediums use similar formulas in rituals and prayers to lift ancestral curses. The biblical perspective is that God has not only power to remove people’s curse or misfortune, but also to effect a blessing in its place. Only he has absolute power of reversal (Jer 18:7-10). For instance, when the cursing power of the non-Israelite prophet and diviner Balaam

²⁵ See E.E. Evans-Pritchard, “Curses and Ghostly Vengeance”, *Africa* 19,4 (1949) 288-292 (292). Such a belief goes beyond Africa as the study of Engelking, (*The curse*, 263) has demonstrated among the Slavic.

²⁶ Tzvi Abusch, *Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft Beliefs and Literature*, Ancient Magic and Divination V (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 132; also 18.

met with greater power of God of Israel, he was forced to change his curse into blessings (Num 22-24). Similarly, the Pharaoh of Egypt has to request Moses to plead with God to remove the disaster caused by the plagues and bring blessing on the land (Exod 12:31-32). Confession of guilt, remorse and the mother's invocation of the divine name earn Micah of Ephraim blessings in place of the curse he incurred by stealing from the mother (Judg 17:1-3). The text of 1 Sam 14:24-30, 36-45 shows that a couple of things played a role in neutralising the curse incurred by Jonathan, the son of Saul. The utterance of the curse is said to be a rash action taken by Saul (v. 24). Jonathan inadvertently incurs it (v. 27) and confesses it immediately he realises what has happened (v. 43). The intervention and plea of the people and their appeal to God helped finally to overturn the horrible consequence of the curse (v. 45).

All things being equal, no curse is irrevocable or irreversible, so long as the enabling conditions are fulfilled. The God of reversals is always there to revoke the irrevocable when the afflicted turn to him in genuine repentance. But to stay clear of a curse, including ancestral curse is far beneficial. The sage in Prov 26:2b offers a recipe, which this paper considers one of the greatest and most direct in the OT, to help his audience avert incurring any curse.

Proverbs 26:2: Its Background and Structure

The book of Proverbs recognises the reality of a curse. It is not ignorant of the use of a curse and, indeed, approves of it. That a curse is the portion of the wicked, the one who does evil while blessing is for the righteous, the one who does the right thing, is a running theme in the book (Prov 3:33; 11:26; 28:27). Hence a person who curses his/her parents is met with misfortune (20:20; cf. 30:11). The one who declares the wicked innocent deserves curse (24:24), just as the one who is a partner in crime (29:24) and a slanderer (30:10). It is only in Prov 26:2 that a curse is specifically said to be inefficacious, futile, null and void. That makes the text unique in the entire biblical literature.

The book of Proverbs, "Proverbs of Solomon the son of David", as we know it today by its title (1:1), is a composite piece made up of a collection of admonitions and isolated wise sayings, treating of wisdom and wise conduct. In this composite piece are two large collections (Prov

10:1-22:16 and Prov 25-29), prefaced by an introductory section (Prov 1-9) and with each large collection marked off by various appendices. Our text (Prov 26:2) belongs to the second large collection which is supposedly transcribed by the “men of Hezekiah”²⁷ (cf. Prov 25:1). Although Proverbs 26 shares many features in common with the opening chapter (25) of this collection, especially the use of comparisons, it distinguishes itself from it by reintroducing, in its first unit (vv. 1-12), the term *k’sil* (“fool”) found in the earlier chapters. Again, it is only in Prov 26:2 that this defining vocabulary of the unit is missing.

Proverb 26 has a tripartite structure (vv. 1-12; vv. 13-16; vv. 17-28). The overwhelming presence of the word *k’sil* (“fool”) in its first unit (26:1-12) semantically places the unit in the context of the fool’s image, proposing strongly that “honour is not fitting for a fool” (26:1). The second and third units go on to give more details about the image of the fool in his various acts of foolishness, the one ridiculing the laziness of the fool (vv. 13-16), and the other his lying and deceiving lips (vv. 17-28). Simply put, the book of Proverbs regards the fool as a direct opposite of the wise (cf. 10:1; 15:2, 20) and the clever (12:23; 13:16); and makes a fool comparable to a scorner (19:29). Because a fool is incorrigible, he despises instruction (Prov 15:5). For this, Prov 26:3 holds that a fool deserves nothing but a whip for his back. Hence the one who attempts to teach a fool makes oneself look like a fool (Prov 26:4). Nevertheless, the fool needs to know the value of wisdom and the importance of loving knowledge and truth (Prov 8:5; cf. 7:7).²⁸ With Prov 26:2 standing out in the first unit, it means its message is directly addressed to the hearers to make them eschew the gullibility of the fool.

The text may not be a popular proverb, but it has its parabolic characteristic. The poetry is dense; and the poet, in a clear and explicit way, communicates in few words, using the motif of things displaced to demonstrate the futility of cursing the innocent unjustifiably. By using the comparative form, he also draws similarity from events of the natural

²⁷ Those were “a group of scribes, counsellors and scholars who were tasked with gathering and then recording the oral traditions and sayings of King Solomon”. See <https://menofhezekiah.com>. Accessed 11/10/2018.

²⁸ David E. Pratte, *Commentary on the Book of Proverbs: Bible Study Notes and Comments* (Wood Dale, IL: St. Paul, 2015), 12.

and everyday life. This literary style does not only make the audience or reader see with the poet the similarities between the two constituent panels (referents) of the simile but also the very essence of the comparison, namely the fool's inability to comprehend that undeserved curse does not carry any effect. Consequently, it is a subtle warning against the fool's cursing of the innocent, given that curses are meant for evil doers (cf. Prov 3:33; 11:26; 28:27; 29:24; also 24:24).

Text and Its Content

The text of Prov 26:2 reads:

v. 2a	<i>kaṣṣippôr lān ûd</i>	As a sparrow by flitting
v.2b	<i>kaddê rôr lā ûp</i>	As a swallow by flying
v, 2c	<i>kēn qil^e lat ḥinnām lō' tābō'</i>	So a curse without cause does not alight

A critical look at the variant translations of the text exposes the general difficulty in grappling with the poetic and parabolic nature of the text. Moreover, the only outstanding textual problem does not make rendition any easier. The text is among the fifteen instances²⁹ where *lō'* a negative particle is supposedly written by error for *lô* (preposition *l* + 3rd. person masculine singular pronominal suffix) probably due to confusion in sound. Occasionally, both particles are interchangeable, with final aleph (') serving as *mater lectionis*. Following the marginal note (*Qere*), verse 2c will read: "So a curse without cause will come *upon him* (who utters it and not on him who is cursed)". It has to be remarked here that such a reading implicitly depicts the curse as having a double outcome, namely a futile effect on the cursed and a boomerang effect on the curser (Psa 109:17-18; cf. Matt 7:2).

Perhaps the clarification of the LXX is outstanding. It reads: "As birds and sparrows fly, so a curse shall not come upon any one without a cause".³⁰ Many modern translators have retained the *k^ethib* with the understanding that the negative reading communicates better the purpose

²⁹ See BDB, 520. The *Qere* is supported by the Talmud, Midrash.

³⁰ See Brenton's *English Translation of the Septuagint* (LXE) in M.S. Bushell, M.D. Tan, BibleWorks LLC 6, 1992-2003. The reading is supported by the Syr. Tg.

of the comparison. There is a possibility that the *k^ethib* is influenced by *lō'* of the preceding verse (v. 1), given that it shares the same compositional style with it, or it could be an attempt to give full sense to a somewhat incomplete referent (v. 2c). Nevertheless, the different readings unequivocally point to the core message of the text. The ground for each of the two first comparative panels (v. 2a + v. 2b) is affirmed by the third (v. 2c) introduced by the adverbial particle *kēn* in answer to the *k^e* of the preceding panels.³¹ In other words the three panels have the same message –venture at futility. For the effect of a causeless curse is comparable to a directionless hovering of birds in the air; it does not land. This is subtly expressed by the use of infinitive verb prefixed by a *lamed* (*l^e*) in each of the two comparative panels to state a motive clause. The birds are there for the purpose of flitting and flying with no perching in sight.

The key word of the text is the unique phrase *qil^elat ḥinnām*. It is made up of the feminine noun *q^elālāh*³² (curse) in construct form with an adverbial particle *ḥinnām* (gratuitously, undeservedly, without cause, causeless, groundless) that is treated as a substantive and used as epexegetical genitive in the context.³³ This peculiar phrase has a wide range of renditions – causeless curse or curse without cause, undeserved curse, groundless curse. Here is the only instance in the OT where a curse is described as *ḥinnām*. The phrase serves as the subject of the verb *bô'* (to go in, enter, come, arrive, [come = happen, be fulfilled]), thus evoking the idea of whether or not a curse would come or arrive. Whichever, the verb can take any of the readings (*Qere* or *K^ethib*) to communicate the intended message of the sage, which as we have earlier indicated is: “A curse uttered without cause does no harm to the person that is cursed”. Instead the inevitable consequence takes place, namely the curse returns to the curser.

³¹ Cf. *BDB*, 486.

³² It is important to observe that *q^elālāh* is the opposite of *b^erākāh* blessing” (1 Kings 21:13) and often designates curses in the event of disobedience (Deut 11:26, 28-29; 27:13; 28:15, 45; 29:26; 30:1, 19; Josh 8:34), or total dishonour or destruction (Jer 24:9; 25:18; 42:18; 44:8, 12, 22; 49:13). See E. Jenni & C. Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1428.

³³ See *GK* §128 w; 1 Kings 2:31; Prov 24:28; also, Ezek 30:16).

Proverbs 26:2 and Contemporary Society

Proverbs 26:2 is presented to the audience, including the fool, as one important lesson to be learnt; that causeless curse is ineffectual. This lesson is also very valid in contemporary society where groundless fear has made many “fools”. It has given rise to the real evil that presses upon the mind of people the dread for ancestral curses, even if they were innocent. One sees traces of the message of this text in wise sayings imbedded in other ancient traditions. They shed light on the text. For instance, a Palestinian proverb succinctly and bluntly states: “Do not be an oppressor and you do not need fear curses”.³⁴ So also does an Igbo adage say: “*Onye na-enweghi ihe obu, enweghi ihe ọna-akuwa* (If you carry nothing, you break nothing)”. The famous saying of Lady Macbeth to her husband is instructive:

The sleeping and the dead

Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood

That fears a painted devil.³⁵

The principle here is that there is some correlation between wrongdoing and punishment or its consequent misery. If the one is lacking, the other has no cause to exist. To engage in uttering groundless curse is to violate this moral principle, which in traditional African setting will result in self-harm. As Evans-Pritchard remarks with regard to the Nuer people: “If they utter curses without due cause (*cuong*), the curses will either be ineffective or harm the speakers of them”.³⁶ Moreover, from biblical perspective, causeless curses have proved ineffective (Num 23:4, 8; 1 Sam 17:43; Neh 13:2). What it takes on the part of the one so cursed, as essential remedy, is to trust in God (2 Sam 16:12; Psa 109:28).

Unfortunately, many individuals and communities today have sustained the cultural beliefs and folklores that children inherit the curse of their parents and ancestors. Many have been talked into believing that they inherited ancestral curses. They have psychologically made themselves

³⁴ Cited in T. Canaan, “The Curse in Palestinian Folklore”, *Journal of the Palestine Oriental Society* 15 (1935), 235-279 (263).

³⁵ W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 2, Scene 2.

³⁶ Evans-Pritchard, *Nuer Religion*, 165.

victims in absolute need of help. They consider those biblical passages that seem to support their belief without any recourse to others that call for individual responsibility and retribution. Consequently, the dread for curses, particularly ancestral curses, still persists, in spite of the guiding principle enunciated by Prov 26:2 and its extra-biblical corroborations. The message is clear: Only merited and deserved curses are to be dreaded because they have moral justification. A causeless curse has no effect. Therefore, if one's ancestors committed crimes that brought a curse on them, such a curse has no effect on their descendants, if they do not continue to perpetuate the evil of their forebears.

Therefore, this paper advocates that those who find themselves in such a situation deserve to be empathically heard rather than be cajoled. This pastoral approach calls for efficient counselling and not elaborate rituals in which all curses are purportedly declared cancelled. For that will be to deny the correlation between wrongdoing and punishment. It also demands that people be effectively instructed to endeavour to observe the natural and divine rule: "*Cease to do evil, learn to do good*" (Isa 1:16b-17a). This is the safest way to stay clear from curses, the dread of them, and their harmful consequences. "If you carry nothing, you break nothing!"

Conclusion

At the end of this paper, one can rightly conclude that cursing is a reality of human condition which may not be easily wished away. The belief in curses is anthropological and, therefore, has cultural and religious components. The complexity of the dynamics of cursing is exposed even more in the understanding of curses in traditional African setting. Here, a curse is held to be unqualifiedly transferrable to subsequent generations, notwithstanding the belief that unjustified curse produces no effect. Only proper education can resolve such conflicting beliefs and provide remedy for fears associated with ancestral curses. The study of Prov 26:2 has made significant contribution towards achieving that. It has demonstrated that the innocent and the just have nothing to fear about curses, including ancestral curses. For "*an undeserved curse has no effect. Its intended victim will be no more harmed by it than by a sparrow or swallow flitting through the sky*". It is hoped that these words of the sage will be the

starting point of the process of reorienting the minds of those living in the bondage of the fear of ancestral curses.