

PART FOUR
THE COVENANT CONCLUDED
DEUTERONOMY 26 – 28

Introduction to chapter 26-28

The central section of Deuteronomy opened at 4:44. It began with a long exhortation, which set the appropriate atmosphere for listening and adhering to the statutes and edicts (chapters 12 to 25). As described by Brueggemann, this concluding section begins with ‘an oath of allegiance whereby Israel accepts its identity as YHWH’s holy people and swears to abide by the statutes’ (page 248).

¹When you have come into the land that YHWH your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, ²you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land that YHWH your God is giving you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that YHWH your God will choose as a dwelling for his name. ³You shall go to the priest who is in office at that time, and say to him, “Today I declare to YHWH your God that I have come into the land that YHWH swore to our ancestors to give us.”

⁴When the priest takes the basket from your hand and sets it down before the altar of YHWH your God, ⁵you shall make this response before YHWH your God: “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous.

Each year – seemingly on the occasion of the pilgrimage festival at the end of the grain harvest (the festival of weeks, see 16:9-12) – in solemn assembly, the people bring the first fruits of the harvest to the central sanctuary, acknowledging in this way that it is YHWH who has given them the land and expressing their gratitude for the blessing of the harvest.

This is the liturgical ‘today’ (26:3) during which each successive generation, every year, affirms its identification with those to whom YHWH first gave the Promised Land.

They remember the patriarchs: Abraham their ‘father’ (‘āb, 26:4), who first entered Canaan from Haran in Aram (Genesis 12:4), and spent his days between Canaan and Egypt as an alien (see Genesis 17:10, 12:8; 21:34), always on the move. It was the same for his son, Isaac. YHWH told him::

Reside in this land as an alien, and I will be with you, and will bless you; for to you and to your descendants I will give all these lands, and I will fulfil the oath that I swore to your father Abraham.

– Genesis 26:3

Jacob’s mother, Rebekah, was from Aram, and he spent many years there with his cousin, Laban (Genesis 29-31), whose daughters he married (Genesis 25:20; 28:5). Then:

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.

– Genesis 37:1

At the age of one hundred and thirty he went down to Egypt (Genesis 47:9) and died there an alien. According to the story, originally there were seventy members of Jacob’s family in Egypt:

But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.

– Exodus 1:7 (see Deuteronomy 1:10)

They recall the years of slavery in Egypt:

The Egyptians made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labour. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

– Exodus 1:14

The Israelites would not listen to Moses, because of their broken spirit and their cruel slavery.

– Exodus 6:9

They cried out to YHWH and he heard their cry. At the burning bush, YHWH declared to Moses:

I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their task-masters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey

– Exodus 3:7-8

They recall YHWH's 'terrifying display of power' against Pharaoh:

Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as YHWH your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

– Deuteronomy 4:34

And the 'signs and wonders' (see 6:22) that took them out of Egypt, across the Red Sea and accompanied them through the wilderness, and 'brought us into this place and gave us this land' (26:10).

As they recall the history of YHWH's special dealings with them, with hearts full of gratitude, they present their offerings, and 'together with the Levites' (see 12:12, 18; 14:27, 29; 16:11, 14) who have accompanied them and who are ministering in the sanctuary, and 'together with the aliens who reside among you' (see 14:29) – for they have just recalled their own origins – they 'celebrate with all the bounty that YHWH your God has given to you and to your house' (26:11). That worship is to be joyful is a favourite theme of the Deuteronomists (see 12:7, 12; 5:20).

'YHWH' is named seven times in verse one to five and seven again in verses six to eleven.

6When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labour on us, 7we cried to YHWH, the God of our ancestors; YHWH heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. 8YHWH brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders; 9and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

10So now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, YHWH, have given me."

You shall set it down before YHWH your God and bow down before YHWH your God. 11Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that YHWH your God has given to you and to your house.

¹²When you have finished paying all the tithe of your produce in the third year (which is the year of the tithe), giving it to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows, so that they may eat their fill within your towns, ¹³then you shall say before YHWH your God:

“I have removed the sacred portion from the house, and I have given it to the Levites, the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows, in accordance with your entire commandment that you commanded me; I have neither transgressed nor forgotten any of your commandments: ¹⁴I have not eaten of it while in mourning; I have not removed any of it while I was unclean; and I have not offered any of it to the dead. I have obeyed YHWH my God, doing just as you commanded me. ¹⁵Look down from your holy habitation, from heaven, and bless your people Israel and the ground that you have given us, as you swore to our ancestors—a land flowing with milk and honey.”

Every third year a tenth of the harvest is put aside for the poor:

Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that YHWH your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

– Deuteronomy 14:28-29

Here, when they gather at the festival to remember and celebrate, they publicly declare that they have fulfilled this obligation ‘in accordance with the entire commandment which you commanded’ (26:13). For the Deuteronomists proper worship cannot exist without fidelity to the ethical demands of the law, especially as regards caring for the poor (see also 10:18; 15:1-11; 24:5-22).

As with many statutes in Deuteronomy, this is educative. The prayer they are commanded to pray reinforces the holiness of YHWH, and therefore of the tithe that is set aside for the poor. These statutes are in accordance with the Priestly School (see, for example, Leviticus 22:3-6) in treating consecrated objects, including the tithe, in ways that demonstrate the contrast between what is YHWH’s (and therefore associated with life) and the forces that produce death. The tithes have not been associated in any way with rites of mourning, nor have they copied the Egyptian practice of offering it as food for the dead.

Note the wording of the prayer in verse fifteen. The Deuteronomists are careful to preserve the transcendence of God, who dwells in heaven, not in the sanctuary. Having honoured their obligation to the poor, they pray that YHWH will continue to bless the land that he has given them.

Notice the repetition of ‘today’(26:17), ‘today’(26:18), ‘this very day’(26:16). The word ‘today’ occurs forty-nine times in Deuteronomy. We are reminded of the cry of the psalm:

O that today you would listen to his voice!

– Psalm 95:7

This is the ‘today’ of the liturgy when the congregation is drawn into divine communion as it celebrates the past, prays for the future, and enters into and makes its own the history of Israel. The covenant is renewed. On his part YHWH has undertaken to be their God (26:17; see David’s prayer in 2Samuel 7:24), and to set his heart on Israel (7:7, 10:15) as his ‘treasured people’(26:18; see 7:6; Exodus 19:5). Again and again Jeremiah repeats the covenant formula: ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’(Jeremiah 7:23, 11:4, 24:7, 30:22, 31:33); as does Ezekiel (11:20, 14:11, 36:28, 37:23, 27).

On their part the people promise to observe YHWH’s statutes and edicts with all their heart and with all their soul (26:16; see 6:5; 10:12-13, 20-22), to ‘walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his edicts, and to obey him’(26:17).

YHWH’s offer is unconditional and will never be retracted. They, however, must welcome the offering for it cannot and will not be forced upon them. God is love. God has chosen them. They must choose (‘love’) God. If they do they will be YHWH’s pride and joy (see Jeremiah 13:11, 33:9), his ‘holy people’(26:19; see 7:6, 14:2, 21; Exodus 19:6), ‘as he promised’(26:19).

We recall the promise given to their ancestor, the ‘wandering Aramean’(26:5), Jacob:

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

– Genesis 28:15

The promise to Jacob is a promise to Israel (see the commentary on 6:3, page 81).

¹⁶This very day YHWH your God is commanding you to observe these statutes and edicts; so observe them diligently with all your heart and with all your soul. ¹⁷Today you have obtained YHWH’s agreement: to be your God; and for you to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his edicts, and to obey him. ¹⁸Today YHWH has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; ¹⁹for him to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honour; and for you to be a people holy to YHWH your God, as he promised.

Introduction to chapter 27

Chapter twenty-seven hearkens back to Moses' words just before he lists the statutes and edicts (chapters twelve to twenty-five):

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of YHWH your God that I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of YHWH your God, but turn from the way that I am commanding you today, to follow other gods that you have not known. When YHWH your God has brought you into the land that you are entering to occupy, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal. As you know, they are beyond the Jordan, some distance to the west, in the land of the Canaanites who live in the Arabah, opposite Gilgal, beside the oak of Moreh.

– Deuteronomy 11:26-30

At the same time chapter twenty-seven sits awkwardly here. For one thing, one could easily pass directly from the last verse of chapter twenty-six to the first verse of chapter twenty-eight. Verses nine to ten may have been there as a link, but it seems likely that the rest of the chapter has been stitched in by a later hand. There are problems even within the chapter itself. Verses eleven to thirteen lead us to expect a series of blessings and curses (linking back to 11:26), whereas the rest of the chapter consists only of curses.

The reason for the insertion of this chapter (as well as 11:29-30) may be related to the constant theme of Deuteronomy concerning the centralising of the cult in one sanctuary. This is the first of the statutes and edicts pronounced by Moses (see 12:1-31):

You shall seek the place that YHWH your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there. You shall go there.

– Deuteronomy 12:5

This special 'place' is mentioned six times in chapter twelve (12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26), three times in chapter fourteen (14:23, 24, 25), once in chapter fifteen (15:20), six times in chapter sixteen (16:2, 6, 7, 11, 15, 16), twice in chapter seventeen (17:8, 10), once in chapter eighteen (18:6), once in chapter twenty-three (23:16), once in chapter twenty-six (26:2), and we will find it again in chapter thirty-one (31:11).

It is clearly the Jerusalem temple that the Deuteronomists are referring to. However, Jerusalem was in the hands of the Jebusites till it was captured by David (c. 1000BC) and made the capital of the united kingdom. David had a sanctuary there into which he brought the ark, but it was his son, Solomon, who built the temple. In wishing to trace the statute of the one central sanctuary back to Moses, the Deuteronomists necessarily had to use the rather vague expression 'the place that YHWH your God will choose'. Prior to the reign of David there was no sanctuary in Jerusalem. Furthermore, after the death of Solomon Israel did not include Judah (or Jerusalem). Each tribal area had its own sanctuary.

What we have here in 11:29-30 and in chapter twenty-seven comes from the traditions associated with the sanctuary at Shechem, in the valley between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim in the central highlands of Israel, a much older sanctuary than that of Jerusalem. It is the first site mentioned in Abraham's sojourning in Canaan (Genesis 12:6), Jacob built an altar there (Genesis 33:20), and it was there that Joshua gathered the tribes to commit themselves to the covenant (Joshua 24).

Erecting stones to commemorate important events or statutes was a common practice in the ancient world. Some had the inscription engraved into the stone. Others had the inscription painted onto plaster (as here in verse two). Archaeologists usually refer to these commemorative stones as ‘stelae’ (from the Greek *stēlai*). Moses, accompanied by the elders who will be responsible for seeing that the command is carried out, is portrayed as instructing the people to set up these stelae on Mount Ebal (27:4). The whole of Deuteronomy 12-25 is to be painted onto the large stones, thus ensuring a permanent record of the covenant.

They are also to build an altar there, of unhewn stone (27:6) as commanded in the ancient code:

If you make for me an altar of stone,
do not build it of hewn stones; for if
you use a chisel upon it you profane it.

– Exodus 20:25

They are to offer ‘burnt-offerings’ (‘ōlâ, 27:6; see 12:11), and ‘communion sacrifices’ (zēbah š‘lāmîm, 27:7; see 12:11), and enjoy a celebratory meal ‘before YHWH your God’ (27:7). This is patterned on the liturgy of the ratification of the covenant on Mount Sinai:

Moses sent young men of the people
of Israel, who offered burnt offerings
and sacrificed oxen as *communion*
sacrifices to YHWH ... they ate and
they drank..

– Exodus 24:5,11

As noted on the previous page, verses nine and ten link back to chapter twenty-six and forward to chapter twenty-eight.

¹Then Moses and the elders of Israel charged all the people as follows: Keep the entire commandment that I am commanding you today.

²On the day that you cross over the Jordan into the land that YHWH your God is giving you, you shall set up large stones and cover them with plaster. ³You shall write on them all the words of this law when you have crossed over, to enter the land that YHWH your God is giving you, a land flowing with milk and honey, as YHWH, the God of your ancestors, promised you. ⁴So when you have crossed over the Jordan, you shall set up these stones, about which I am commanding you today, on Mount Ebal, and you shall cover them with plaster. ⁵And you shall build an altar there to YHWH your God, an altar of stones on which you have not used an iron tool. ⁶You must build the altar of YHWH your God of unhewn stones.

Then offer up burnt offerings on it to YHWH your God, ⁷make *communion sacrifices*, and eat them there, rejoicing before YHWH your God.

⁸You shall write on the stones all the words of this law very clearly.

⁹Then Moses and the levitical priests spoke to all Israel, saying: Keep silence and hear, O Israel! This very day you have become the people of YHWH your God. ¹⁰Therefore obey YHWH your God, observing his commandments and his statutes that I am commanding you today.

¹¹The same day Moses charged the people as follows: ¹²When you have crossed over the Jordan, these shall stand on Mount Gerizim for the blessing of the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. ¹³And these shall stand on Mount Ebal for the curse: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali. ¹⁴Then the Levites shall declare in a loud voice to all the Israelites:

¹⁵“Cursed be anyone who makes an idol or casts an image, anything abhorrent to YHWH, the work of an artisan, and sets it up in secret.” All the people shall respond, saying, “Amen!”

¹⁶“Cursed be anyone who dishonours father or mother.” All the people shall say, “Amen!”

¹⁷“Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbour’s boundary marker.” All the people shall say, “Amen!”

Half the tribes are on Mount Gerizim (27:12). The other half are facing them from Mount Ebal (27:13). This is a liturgical enactment of Israel’s acceptance of the covenant, with its ‘blessings’ (27:12) that will flow abundantly upon them if they are faithful to the covenant, as well as its ‘curses’ (27:13) that will be their lot if they are unfaithful. The shout of ‘Amen’ that echoes across the valley means the acceptance of both by all the tribes of Israel. As noted on page 172, it is surprising that verses fifteen to twenty-six consist only of ‘curses’ (that is to say, what will happen to them when they reject God’s blessings).

The Levites, who in Deuteronomy are the teachers of the law, are to ‘declare in a loud voice to all the Israelites’ (27:14), the statutes that Israel is to obey. It is unexpected that not all the twelve ‘curses’ are based on the statutes and edicts of Deuteronomy 12-25, and that some of the more important statutes mentioned there are missing. This chapter may record a liturgy traditionally associated with Shechem (see page 172).

1. The first edict covers the first commandment in the decalogue (5:8-10; see also 4:15-28). It is found in the ancient code (Exodus 20:4, 23; 34:17), and a parallel instruction is in code from the Priestly School (see Leviticus 19:4, 26:1). The significance of the ‘Amen’ is expressed clearly in Jeremiah scroll:

Jeremiah said, “Amen! May YHWH do so; may YHWH fulfill the words that you have spoken.

– Jeremiah 28:6

2. The second edict is also from the decalogue (5:16; see also 21:18-21). It, too, comes from the ancient code (see Exodus 20:12; 21:17) and is found in the code of the Priestly School (see Leviticus 20:9).

3. The third edict is found only in Deuteronomy (see 19:14).

4. This fourth edict is new, though compare Leviticus 19:14. It has been used as a warning to teachers.
5. The fifth edict picks up a favourite theme of the Deuteronomists: the obligation that the covenant places on the community to ensure justice and care for the poor (see 10:18; 14:29; 15:1-11; 16:11, 14; 24:5-22). See the ancient covenant code (Exodus 22:21-24; 23:9), and the parallel from the Priestly School (Leviticus 19:33-34).
6. The prohibition against having sexual relations with one's step-mother is repeated from 22:30. See Leviticus 18:8, 20:11.
7. The edict against bestiality is new in Deuteronomy. See Exodus 22:18 and Leviticus 18:23, 20:15.
8. The edict against have sexual relations with one's half-sister is also new in Deuteronomy. See Leviticus 18:9, 20:17.
9. This is the first time Deuteronomy has spoken of the prohibition against having sexual relations with one's mother-in-law. See Leviticus 18:17, 20:14.
10. The edict prohibiting striking down a neighbour in secret is also new in Deuteronomy. On murder, see the decalogue (Deuteronomy 5:17; Exodus 20:13, 21:12; Leviticus 24:17).
11. On the taking of bribes see Deuteronomy 10:17, and especially 16:19. Also Exodus 23:8
12. The final curse is a catch all: 'Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them'(27:26). It is the twelfth curse corresponding to the twelve tribes, and so symbolising the all-embracing nature of the law and its acceptance by all the tribes.
- 18" Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind person on the road." All the people shall say, "Amen!"**
- 19" Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice." All the people shall say, "Amen!"**
- 20" Cursed be anyone who lies with his father's wife, because he has violated his father's rights." All the people shall say, "Amen!"**
- 21" Cursed be anyone who lies with any animal." All the people shall say, "Amen!"**
- 22" Cursed be anyone who lies with his sister, whether the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother." All the people shall say, "Amen!"**
- 23" Cursed be anyone who lies with his mother-in-law." All the people shall say, "Amen!"**
- 24" Cursed be anyone who strikes down a neighbour in secret." All the people shall say, "Amen!"**
- 25" Cursed be anyone who takes a bribe to shed innocent blood." All the people shall say, "Amen!"**
- 26" Cursed be anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by observing them." All the people shall say, "Amen!"**

¹If you will only obey YHWH your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, YHWH your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; ²all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey YHWH your God:

³Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.

⁴Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock.

⁵Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

⁶Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

In concluding the covenant with a series of blessings and curses, the Deuteronomists are following what was normal practice in the international treaty texts of the day. It may be the Deuteronomic School that is responsible for the concluding verses of the covenant code (Exodus 23:2-33) which also speaks of the blessings that will follow on compliance. See the independent conclusion of the Holiness Code from the Priestly School in Leviticus 26:3-45.

The word that provides the key perspective for the whole of chapter twenty-eight is the first word of verse one: 'If'. It must be stressed that this does not imply that YHWH's offer of blessing is conditional. The offer is unconditional. It is the receiving that is conditional upon the blessing being welcomed, and the only way to welcome the blessing is to heed YHWH and follow the way YHWH directs.

In verses three to six, the word 'blessed' (*bārûk*) occurs six times. There is no mention of the one giving the blessing (this will change in verse seven). It is as though the blessing flows necessarily as a consequence 'if you obey YHWH your God' (28:2).

This is the third time that Deuteronomy has listed the blessings that follow on obedience (see 7:12-16, 11:13-15, 22-25). The theology is necessarily simplistic. The aim is to attract people to obey. The Deuteronomists are quite aware that there is no direct relationship between prosperity and goodness (see 9:4-6). Experience demonstrates that the good suffer. The prophet Habakkuk asks YHWH:

Why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?

– Habakkuk 1:13

This is a central question of the Book of Job. In the tradition of the Deuteronomic School the death of king Josiah must have profoundly shaken any simplistic notions people might have had in regard to goodness and being blessed.

However, it is also true that blessings were often experienced as flowing from living a good life, and this is the central point that is being made here.

These verses complement the previous ones. Verses three to six present the blessings as the consequence of obedience. These verses penetrate more deeply: the source of all blessings is YHWH.

It was belief in YHWH's promise of blessing that sustained the faithful in Israel during the years of Assyrian oppression, and the Deuteronomists in Judah during the long years of Manasseh's reign. Manasseh had no choice but to enter into a treaty with Assyria as a vassal state with its lord. These verses are a reminder that there is a more basic treaty: that between Israel and its lord, YHWH, and that ultimately those who were faithful to this treaty, this covenant, would be blessed.

It was belief in YHWH's promise of blessing that gave energy to the agenda of Josiah who took advantage of Assyria's preoccupation with Babylon to cast aside the treaty with Assyria and set about redrawing the map with a view to establishing, once again, the kingdom of David.

It was belief in YHWH's promise of blessing that sustained the Deuteronomists when their hopes were shattered by the untimely death of Josiah and by the terrible years that followed, which led to the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile.

It was belief in YHWH's promise of blessing that sustained the small community in Persian Yehud (Judah) in the years after the return from exile. A similar hope inspired the post-exilic members of the Isaiah School:

Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom YHWH has blessed.

– Isaiah 61:9

How often their descendants have had to rely on this faith right up to our own time.

⁷YHWH will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven ways.

⁸YHWH will command the blessing upon you in your barns, and in all that you undertake; he will bless you in the land that YHWH your God is giving you.

⁹YHWH will establish you as his holy people, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of YHWH your God and walk in his ways.

¹⁰All the peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of YHWH, and they shall be afraid of you.

¹¹YHWH will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit of your womb, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your ground in the land that YHWH swore to your ancestors to give you.

¹²YHWH will open for you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings. You will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow.

¹³YHWH will make you the head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom – if you obey the commandments of YHWH your God, which I am commanding you today, by diligently observing them, ¹⁴and if you do not turn aside from any of the words that I am commanding you today, either to the right or to the left, following other gods to serve them.

¹⁵But if you will not obey YHWH your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you:

¹⁶Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field.

¹⁷Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

¹⁸Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock.

¹⁹Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.

²⁰YHWH will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me.

For earlier threats see 4:25-28, 7:4, 8:19-20, 11:16-17.

Verse fifteen balances verses one to two. There Moses promises blessings 'if you will obey'. Here he promises curses 'if you will not obey'

Verses sixteen to nineteen are the reverse side of verses three to six. Once again the passive is used 'cursed' ('ārûr) with no mention of who is doing the cursing. Disobedience necessarily has these results.

Then, in verse twenty, as earlier in verse seven, YHWH is named as the one bringing about the 'punishments'.

1. Seven afflictions from pestilence (28:21-22)

²¹YHWH will make the pestilence cling to you until it has consumed you off the land that you are entering to possess. ²²YHWH will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, and with blight and mildew; they shall pursue you until you perish.

2. Drought and defeat in war (28:23-26)

²³The sky over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you iron.

²⁴YHWH will change the rain of your land into powder, and only dust shall come down upon you from the sky until you are destroyed.

'Until you are destroyed' (28:24) echoes like a refrain (see 28:45, 51, 61; see 7:23).

²⁵YHWH will cause you to be defeated before your enemies; you shall go out against them one way and flee before them seven ways. You shall become an object of horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. ²⁶Your corpses shall be food for every bird of the air and animal of the earth, and there shall be no one to frighten them away.

3. Seven more afflictions (28:27-29)

²⁷YHWH will afflict you with the boils of Egypt, with ulcers, scurvy, and itch, of which you cannot be healed. ²⁸YHWH will afflict you with madness, blindness, and confusion of mind; ²⁹you shall grope about at noon as blind people grope in darkness, but you shall be unable to find your way; and you shall be continually abused and robbed, without anyone to help.

4. Violent loss of family, home and property (28:30-33)

³⁰You shall become engaged to a woman, but another man shall lie with her. You shall build a house, but not live in it. You shall plant a vineyard, but not enjoy its fruit. ³¹Your ox shall be butchered before your eyes, but you shall not eat of it. Your donkey shall be stolen in front of you, and shall not be restored to you. Your sheep shall be given to your enemies, without anyone to help you. ³²Your sons and daughters shall be given to another people, while you look on; you will strain your eyes looking for them all day but be powerless to do anything. ³³A people whom you do not know shall eat up the fruit of your ground and of all your labours.

5. Abuse leading to insanity (28:33-34)

You shall be continually abused and crushed, ³⁴and driven mad by the sight that your eyes shall see.

6. Disease (28:35, see Job 2:7)

³⁵YHWH will strike you on the knees and on the legs with grievous boils of which you cannot be healed, from the sole of your foot to the crown of your head.

7. Exile (28:36-37)

³⁶YHWH will bring you, and the king whom you set over you, to a nation that neither you nor your ancestors have known, where you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone. ³⁷You shall become an object of horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where YHWH will lead you.

8. Loss of everything (28:38-42; contrast 28:8)

³⁸You shall carry much seed into the field but shall gather little in, for the locust shall consume it. ³⁹You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall eat them. ⁴⁰You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off. ⁴¹You shall have sons and daughters, but they shall not remain yours, for they shall go into captivity. ⁴²All your trees and the fruit of your ground the cicada shall take over.

9. Impoverishment and debt (28:43-44; contrast 28:12-13)

⁴³Aliens residing among you shall ascend above you higher and higher, while you shall descend lower and lower. ⁴⁴They shall lend to you but you shall not lend to them; they shall be the head and you shall be the tail.

Resumé (28:45-48)

⁴⁵All these curses shall come upon you, pursuing and overtaking you until you are destroyed, because you did not obey YHWH your God, by observing the commandments and the decrees that he commanded you. ⁴⁶They shall be among you and your descendants as a sign and a portent forever.

This is a terrible reversal, especially when we recall that ‘sign and portent’ has been used for the plagues of Egypt (see 4:34, 6:22, and 34:11).

⁴⁷Because you did not serve YHWH your God joyfully and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything, ⁴⁸therefore you shall serve your enemies whom YHWH will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and lack of everything. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed you.

10. An enemy sent by YHWH (28:49-51; see Jeremiah 5:15; 25:9; 27:6)

⁴⁹YHWH will bring a nation from far away, from the end of the earth, to swoop down on you like an eagle, a nation whose language you do not understand, ⁵⁰a grim-faced nation showing no respect to the old or favour to the young. ⁵¹It shall consume the fruit of your livestock and the fruit of your ground until you are destroyed, leaving you neither grain, wine, and oil, nor the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock, until it has made you perish.

11. The terrors of siege warfare (28:52-57)

⁵²It shall besiege you in all your towns until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout your land; it shall besiege you in all your towns throughout the land that YHWH your God has given you. ⁵³In the desperate straits to which the enemy siege reduces you, you will eat the fruit of your womb, the flesh of your own sons and daughters whom YHWH your God has given you. ⁵⁴Even the most refined and gentle of men among you will begrudge food to his own brother, to the wife whom he embraces, and to the last of his remaining children, ⁵⁵giving to none of them any of the flesh of his children whom he is eating, because nothing else remains to him, in the desperate straits to which the enemy siege will reduce you in all your towns. ⁵⁶She who is the most refined and gentle among you, so gentle and refined that she does not venture to set the sole of her foot on the ground, will begrudge food to the husband whom she embraces, to her own son, and to her own daughter, ⁵⁷begrudging even the afterbirth that comes out from between her thighs, and the children that she bears, because she is eating them in secret for lack of anything else, in the desperate straits to which the enemy siege will reduce you in your towns.

12. Until you are destroyed (28:58-68)

Notice again the ‘if’ that governs this whole passage. Moses is not saying what will come to pass. It all depends on Israel’s fidelity to the covenant. Israel can choose its future.

⁵⁸If you do not diligently observe all the words of this law that are written in this book, fearing this glorious and awesome name, YHWH your God, ⁵⁹then YHWH will overwhelm both you and your offspring with severe and lasting afflictions and grievous and lasting maladies. ⁶⁰He will bring back upon you all the diseases of Egypt, of which you were in dread, and they shall cling to you. ⁶¹Every other malady and affliction, even though not recorded in the book of this law, YHWH will inflict on you until you are destroyed.

‘The book of this law’ is Deuteronomy (see 1:5).

⁶²Although once you were as numerous as the stars in heaven, you shall be left few in number, because you did not obey YHWH your God. ⁶³And just as YHWH took delight in making you prosperous and numerous, so YHWH will take delight in bringing you to ruin and destruction;

you shall be plucked off the land that you are entering to possess. ⁶⁴YHWH will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known. ⁶⁵Among those nations you shall find no ease, no resting place for the sole of your foot. There YHWH will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and a languishing spirit.

⁶⁶Your life shall hang in doubt before you; night and day you shall be in dread, with no assurance of your life. ⁶⁷In the morning you shall say, “If only it were evening!” and at evening you shall say, “If only it were morning!”—because of the dread that your heart shall feel and the sights that your eyes shall see. ⁶⁸YHWH will bring you back in ships to Egypt, by a route that I promised you would never see again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but there will be no buyer.

To choose disobedience is to choose slavery. It cannot but result in Israel losing its identity, its very reason for being.