



The Theology of Blessings and Curses in Deuteronomy 28 and African Traditional Religious Worldview

Abstract

This paper examined how Deuteronomy 28's covenant blessings and curses interact with African Traditional Religion's own curse cosmology, and what happens theologically when the two frameworks merge inside contemporary Nigerian Christianity. The problem addressed is that this merger has occurred largely unexamined. It has produced a popular curse theology that blends biblical covenant language with indigenous ancestral sanction, applied by many pastors without distinguishing where one system ends and the other begins, sometimes with serious human cost, including continued witchcraft accusation against vulnerable women. Existing scholarship has documented the popularity of generational curse teaching and the witchcraft accusations it can fuel. It has done comparatively little sustained textual comparison of Deuteronomy 28 itself against African Traditional Religion's curse logic to establish precisely where the two frameworks agree and where conflation misrepresents both. From a qualitative, library-based comparative method, this paper filled that gap. It found that Deuteronomy 28 and African Traditional Religion share a covenantal, relational understanding of curse as consequence for broken obligation. The two frameworks diverge sharply, however, on curse's transmissibility, permanence and locus of remedy, differences popular Nigerian theology has largely collapsed. It concluded that a textually disciplined, comparative theology can correct this collapse without dismissing either tradition, and proposed a corrective framework for preaching and pastoral practice.

Keywords: Deuteronomy 28, blessing, curse, African Traditional Religion, generational curse, Nigerian Pentecostalism, witchcraft

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Introduction

Deliverance services across Nigerian Pentecostal churches now devote more pulpit time to breaking generational curses than most congregations spend on the doctrine of grace, a pastoral reality this paper treats as a live theological problem rather than a curiosity.

Deuteronomy 28 lays out, in exhaustive and deliberately uncomfortable detail, the blessings that follow covenant faithfulness and the curses that follow its abandonment, a text that has travelled further into ordinary Nigerian Christian life than almost any other Old Testament chapter, quoted in wedding sermons,

cited on church banners, and invoked nightly in deliverance services built around the specific ambition of breaking curses believed to travel down bloodlines. What has received less careful theological attention is how thoroughly this popular use of Deuteronomy 28 has merged with a separate and older cosmology, African Traditional Religion's own understanding of curse as ancestral sanction for broken obligation, producing a hybrid curse theology now standard across much of Nigerian Pentecostalism that few pastors or congregants could accurately trace back to either source alone. This paper treats that unexamined merger as a genuine theological problem, not because either tradition's underlying concern with covenant, consequence and moral order is illegitimate, but because collapsing two distinct frameworks without examining where they actually agree and where they diverge has produced pastoral practice, and in the more severe documented cases, witchcraft accusation and abuse, that neither tradition, read carefully, straightforwardly supports.

Scholarship on each side of this merger is substantial but has rarely been brought into direct textual comparison. Biblical scholarship on Deuteronomy 28 itself is well developed, with the chapter widely recognised as following the covenant treaty form common to the ancient Near East, in which blessing and curse function as the enforcement clauses of a suzerain-vassal relationship between God and Israel. On the African side, Ayelotan's (2024) study of witchcraft, curse and

Christian response within Yorùbá Pentecostalism documents in granular ethnographic detail how indigenous curse belief, understanding curse as consequence for broken relationship with a divinity or a wronged person, continues to structure how Nigerian congregations interpret personal misfortune, while Chung and Makponga's (2026) wider review finds this curse logic disproportionately directed at older, poor and socially marginal women accused of being its source. Sakupapa's (2023) broader analysis of decolonial currents in African Christian theology names the underlying methodological problem, that African Christian scholarship has often borrowed indigenous categories impressionistically rather than through disciplined comparison with the biblical text those categories are being read alongside.

What remains missing is the specific work of comparison this paper undertakes: reading Deuteronomy 28's covenant curse structure directly against African Traditional Religion's own curse cosmology to establish, with textual precision, where genuine theological convergence exists and where popular Nigerian curse theology has quietly substituted one framework's assumptions for the other's without acknowledging the substitution. This paper conducts that comparison, then traces its consequences within contemporary Nigerian Pentecostal practice, and closes by proposing a corrective theological framework capable of taking both

traditions seriously without collapsing them into an unexamined hybrid.

The discussion proceeds by first examining Deuteronomy 28 within its ancient Near Eastern covenant treaty context, then examining curse and moral causation within African Traditional Religion on its own terms, then tracing how the two frameworks have merged within Nigerian generational curse doctrine specifically, and finally addressing the human cost this merger has produced, particularly through continued witchcraft accusation, before proposing a corrective theological framework. It closes with findings, a conclusion, and recommendations for pastors, theological educators and denominational leadership.

Definition of Terms

Covenant curse: within Deuteronomy 28, the specific negative consequences pronounced as the enforcement clause of Israel's covenant with God, activated by covenant breach rather than by external malevolent agency.

Ancestral curse: within African Traditional Religion, a spiritual sanction believed to result from a broken vow, disregarded obligation or offence against a divinity, ancestor or wronged person, capable of affecting the offender and, in some accounts, their descendants.

Generational curse doctrine: a teaching common within contemporary Nigerian Pentecostalism holding that specific

misfortunes, illness, poverty, infertility, are transmitted across family bloodlines as inherited spiritual consequence of ancestral sin or covenant, requiring deliberate deliverance to break.

Ancient Near Eastern treaty form: the standard literary and legal structure used in ancient suzerain-vassal covenants, comprising historical prologue, stipulations, and blessing and curse clauses enforcing the treaty, a form biblical scholarship widely recognises Deuteronomy as following.

Witchcraft accusation: the attribution of misfortune or curse to the malevolent supernatural agency of a specific, usually socially marginal, individual, followed by social, economic or physical sanction against the accused.

Comparative theology: a theological method that reads two distinct religious traditions alongside one another with sustained attention to both convergence and genuine difference, rather than assuming either equivalence or straightforward hierarchy between them.

Covenant Blessing and Curse as Ancient Near Eastern Treaty Form in Deuteronomy 28

Deuteronomy 28 belongs to a recognisable ancient literary genre, the suzerain-vassal treaty, in which a greater power binds a lesser one through stipulated obligations backed by pronounced blessing for compliance and curse for breach, a structure scholars have long shown parallels Hittite and neo-

Assyrian treaty documents from the same broad historical period. Within this structure, curse is neither arbitrary nor externally imposed by a hostile third party; it is the covenant's own enforcement mechanism, activated specifically by Israel's breach of stipulations laid out earlier in the book, and its scope, drought, military defeat, exile, disease, corresponds closely to standard treaty-curse language attested across the wider ancient Near East rather than representing something theologically unique to Israel's own imagination.

Two features of this covenant structure matter directly for the comparative argument this paper builds. First, blessing precedes curse in Deuteronomy's own presentation and receives proportionally less textual space, a literary choice scholars reading the chapter closely have noted departs from surrounding ancient Near Eastern treaty convention, in which curse clauses typically dominate, suggesting the text's rhetorical centre of gravity is fundamentally about the possibility of blessing rather than the inevitability of curse. Second, and more decisively for the pastoral practice this paper later examines, curse in Deuteronomy 28 is explicitly conditional and covenant-specific: it applies to Israel's own breach of the Sinai covenant, is reversible through the repentance and restoration described in Deuteronomy 30, and nowhere in the text is curse described as an inherited, bloodline-transmitted

affliction independent of the current generation's own covenant fidelity, a distinction the following sections show has been substantially blurred in contemporary popular application.

This textual precision matters because much of the pastoral use of Deuteronomy 28 within Nigerian Pentecostalism treats the chapter as though it establishes a general, transhistorical principle of inherited bloodline curse rather than the specific, conditional and reversible covenant enforcement clause the text actually presents. The gap between what Deuteronomy 28 states and what popular preaching frequently claims it states is not a matter of interpretation alone; it is a matter of a specific theological framework, examined next, being read into the text from outside.

Curse, Ancestral Sanction and Moral Causation in African Traditional Religion

African Traditional Religion's understanding of curse operates through its own coherent, relationally grounded logic rather than as a primitive precursor awaiting biblical correction. Ayelotan's (2024) ethnographic study of Yorùbá Pentecostal communities in Nigeria and the United Kingdom documents how curse within indigenous cosmology is understood as the consequence of a broken vow made with a divinity, a disregarded obligation to an ancestor, or an offence against another person whose grievance carries spiritual weight, a logic the study's interviewed pastors and

practitioners describe as distinct from the popular Western caricature of witchcraft as arbitrary malevolence. On this account, curse is relational and consequence-based, activated by specific broken obligation rather than existing as an ambient hereditary affliction attached to bloodlines independent of any triggering breach, a structural feature that, as the following section shows, resembles Deuteronomy's own conditional curse logic considerably more closely than popular Nigerian preaching typically acknowledges.

Where African Traditional Religion's curse cosmology diverges from Deuteronomy's covenant framework is in the specific mechanism of curse activation and its potential for cross-generational transmission. Indigenous belief holds that a curse resulting from serious offence against a divinity or wronged party can, in some accounts, extend to descendants who did not themselves commit the triggering breach, a transmission logic tied to lineage and bloodline responsibility that has no clear textual counterpart in Deuteronomy 28's own conditional, individual-generation covenant enforcement. This divergence is not a matter of one tradition being more primitive than the other; it reflects two genuinely different theological anthropologies, Deuteronomy's covenant curse bound to the current generation's own fidelity, African Traditional Religion's ancestral curse capable of extending responsibility across lineage in a way biblical covenant curse, read on its

own terms, does not straightforwardly support.

This divergence matters practically because remedy differs correspondingly between the two systems. Deuteronomy 30 locates the remedy for covenant curse squarely in repentance and covenant renewal by the generation currently under curse. African Traditional Religion's remedy for ancestral curse frequently requires ritual mediation, sacrifice, oath-renegotiation or reconciliation with the specific offended party or their descendants, a mediated and often specialist-dependent process rather than the more directly accessible repentance Deuteronomy describes. Both remedy structures are theologically coherent within their own systems; the difficulty examined next arises specifically when contemporary Nigerian Christianity borrows elements of both without acknowledging which remedy logic it is actually applying at any given moment.

Meet: Generational Curse Doctrine in Nigerian Pentecostalism

Generational curse doctrine as preached across much of contemporary Nigerian Pentecostalism represents, on the evidence examined above, a specific and largely unacknowledged hybrid: it borrows Deuteronomy 28's covenant vocabulary of blessing and curse while quietly importing African Traditional Religion's logic of cross-generational, bloodline-transmitted spiritual consequence, a logic Deuteronomy's own

text does not clearly support on its own terms. Ayelotan's (2024) interviews with Nigerian and diaspora Yorùbá Pentecostal pastors found this hybrid operating largely without the pastors themselves distinguishing which claims derived from which source, biblical texts and indigenous curse cosmology cited interchangeably as though they constituted a single, seamless theological system rather than two traditions merged through popular practice rather than deliberate theological reasoning.

This unacknowledged hybrid produces specific pastoral consequences the underlying texts, read separately and carefully, do not require. Deliverance ministries built around identifying and breaking inherited bloodline curses frequently treat present-day misfortune, illness, poverty, delayed marriage, as evidence of an ancestral spiritual transaction requiring ritual-adjacent Christian intervention, prolonged fasting, prophetic diagnosis, specific deliverance liturgy, a pattern structurally closer to African Traditional Religion's mediated ancestral-curse remedy than to Deuteronomy 30's more direct repentance-based restoration. The theological cost of this substitution is considerable: it can displace confidence in the finished, once-for-all character of Christ's redemptive work, a concern raised within contemporary Nigerian evangelical commentary itself, with believers directed toward an ongoing search for hidden ancestral cause rather than toward the covenant restoration

Deuteronomy's own text presents as already available through repentance.

Sakupapa's (2023) broader methodological critique of African Christian theology's impressionistic borrowing from indigenous categories applies to this specific case with unusual precision: the problem is not that Nigerian Pentecostalism has drawn on African Traditional Religion's curse cosmology, an engagement this paper's own comparative reading suggests has genuine theological resource to offer, but that it has done so without the disciplined comparison this paper has just conducted, producing a hybrid doctrine that neither Deuteronomy's covenant text nor African Traditional Religion's own curse logic, read carefully on its own terms, actually endorses in the specific bloodline-transmission form now widely preached.

Witchcraft Accusation, Curse Belief and Their Human Cost

The hybrid curse doctrine traced above carries a documented human cost that moves this paper's argument from an academic textual question to a pressing pastoral one. Chung and Makponga's (2026) evidence synthesis, drawing on material from Ghana, Nigeria and Malawi, finds that curse and witchcraft accusation disproportionately target older, poor and socially isolated women, a pattern Kimpinde's (2025) study of witchcraft belief in Ga-Rankuwa Township finds operating through precisely the logic this paper has traced, misfortune attributed to a specific

accused individual's spiritual agency rather than examined through the covenant-conditional, repentance-oriented framework Deuteronomy's own text actually presents. Waribo's (2024) documentation of the amosu phenomenon in Enugwu-ukwu, South-East Nigeria, and Amnesty International's (2025) investigation into witch camps in northern Ghana together establish that this is not a marginal or historical concern but an active, ongoing harm sustained in part by the very hybrid curse theology this paper has identified.

A corrective theological framework, built directly from the comparative reading conducted above, requires three specific commitments rather than a wholesale rejection of either tradition. First, preaching and pastoral teaching on Deuteronomy 28 should restore the text's own conditional, current-generation covenant logic, resisting the popular but textually unsupported reading of the chapter as establishing an inherited, bloodline-transmitted curse independent of the present generation's own covenant standing. Second, engagement with African Traditional Religion's curse cosmology should proceed through the same disciplined comparative method this paper has modelled, naming explicitly which claims derive from which tradition rather than presenting a merged doctrine as though it were straightforwardly biblical. Third, pastoral response to claimed curse or misfortune should be built around Deuteronomy 30's repentance-and-restoration remedy

rather than around the search for a specific human agent, an accused witch, believed to be curse's active source, directly addressing the accusation dynamic Chung and Makponga (2026) and Kimpinde (2025) document as the pattern's most severe human cost.

This corrective is not a call to abandon African Traditional Religion's genuine theological resource, its relational, consequence-based understanding of curse converges meaningfully with Deuteronomy's own covenant logic and offers African Christian theology real interpretive material, but a call to engage that resource with the textual precision this paper has demonstrated is both possible and, given the documented human cost of its absence, urgently necessary.

Findings

Deuteronomy 28 presents covenant curse as conditional, current-generation and reversible through the repentance Deuteronomy 30 describes, a structure considerably narrower than the inherited, bloodline-transmitted curse popular Nigerian preaching frequently attributes to the chapter. African Traditional Religion's curse cosmology, examined on its own terms, shares Deuteronomy's relational and consequence-based logic while genuinely diverging on cross-generational transmission and ritual-mediated remedy, a divergence reflecting two coherent but distinct theological anthropologies rather than one tradition's error awaiting correction by the other

(Ayelotan, 2024). Contemporary Nigerian generational curse doctrine represents a largely unacknowledged hybrid of these two frameworks, borrowing Deuteronomy's covenant vocabulary while importing African Traditional Religion's bloodline-transmission logic without textual warrant from either source read separately (Sakupapa, 2023). This hybrid doctrine carries a documented and serious human cost, contributing to a pattern of witchcraft accusation disproportionately harming older, poor and socially isolated women across Nigeria, Ghana and Malawi (Chung & Makponga, 2026; Kimpinde, 2025; Waribo, 2024). A corrective theological framework restoring Deuteronomy's own conditional covenant logic, engaging African Traditional Religion's curse cosmology through disciplined rather than impressionistic comparison, and redirecting pastoral response toward repentance-based restoration rather than accusation, is both textually defensible and pastorally necessary.

Conclusion

Deuteronomy 28's blessings and curses and African Traditional Religion's ancestral curse cosmology are not the same doctrine wearing different theological clothing, and treating them as such, the pattern this paper has traced across much of contemporary Nigerian Pentecostal practice, has produced a hybrid curse theology that neither source, read carefully, actually supports and that

has contributed to genuine and documented harm against vulnerable people. The two traditions converge meaningfully on curse as relational consequence for broken obligation rather than arbitrary malevolence, a convergence worth taking seriously as a resource for African Christian theology. They diverge just as meaningfully on curse's transmissibility across generations and on where its remedy properly lies, Deuteronomy locating remedy in the current generation's own repentance, African Traditional Religion frequently requiring ritual mediation extending across lineage. A theology that collapses this divergence without examination inherits the least defensible features of both systems, unbounded bloodline liability without Deuteronomy's textual warrant, displaced accusation without African Traditional Religion's own emphasis on specific, examinable offence. Restoring the distinction this paper has drawn is not a defensive move protecting either tradition from the other, but the precondition for a genuinely African Christian theology capable of engaging both scripture and indigenous cosmology with the seriousness, and the care for human consequence, both traditions deserve.

Recommendations

Building on this conclusion, the following steps are recommended. Nigerian theological seminaries should include Deuteronomy 28 within a required comparative module examining its

ancient Near Eastern covenant form directly alongside African Traditional Religion's curse cosmology, equipping graduating pastors to distinguish the two frameworks rather than preach them as an unexamined hybrid.

Denominational leadership overseeing deliverance ministry should issue clear doctrinal guidance restoring Deuteronomy 30's repentance-based remedy as the primary pastoral response to claimed curse or misfortune, explicitly cautioning against practices that direct congregants toward identifying a specific accused human source of affliction (Chung & Makponga, 2026).

Biblical scholars should extend the comparative method modelled in this paper to other frequently conflated Old Testament and African Traditional Religion themes, sacrifice, oath-taking, ritual purity, building a broader body of textually disciplined comparative theology for African Christian scholarship to draw upon.

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