CHAPTER TWO

THE GRAVITY OF SPEECH AND THE PARTICULAR POTENCY OF THE OATH IN THE BIBLE

It is a matter of dispute as to the source of the binding power of the oath, the reason for its effectiveness. The following questions will be addressed in this chapter: What is the attitude towards the spoken word and how may this impact upon the value of the oath? Can the contemporary speech-act theory, which regards an oath as a performative act, influence our apprehension of the oath’s power? Is the oath meant to be regarded as a purely human creation, implemented by mutual consent so that society should be able to function on the basis of trust in the assurance of fellow man? What is God’s role in the oath, if any? Is every oath religious in nature, whether or not it contains a reference to a deity or the sacred? Does the oath’s potency emanate from its inevitable association with divine powers? Alternatively, the oath may be regarded as effective as a result of a conditional curse associated with it. Does every oath indeed contain a curse? In short, we can summarize by asking the basic question: what is behind the power of the oath? Is it the fear of a potential loss of honor resulting from the failure to uphold one’s word or perhaps a restraint generated by the reverence accorded the spoken word? Does the attitude toward the oath emanate from the threat of sanctions which the oath implicitly contains or the apprehension of incurring a divine punishment for perjury and violating God’s name?

In this chapter, I will examine the prevailing attitudes and perceptions of the oath’s power in different ancient cultures as well as the Bible. This examination should yield a broader and deeper understanding of the theological and practical role of the biblical oath.

The Seriousness of the Spoken Word

As a prerequisite for understanding the cogency and consequence of the oath, one must examine the manner in which the ancient world views man’s spoken word. At the early mythical level of thought, the
spiritual and material planes are deeply intertwined. It follows that word and object, idea and actuality are undifferentiated. The word’s power extends beyond the realm of the mind and includes the ability to give the world material expression. In this schema, for example, reciting a creation myth guarantees the continued existence of the created world. Even as culture developed, language was not restricted to the description of objects, but retained a mysterious power to produce something new or to intensify something already in existence. Generally, the belief in the effective power of the spoken word is well-attested to in the ancient world and among Israel’s neighbors in the ancient Near East.

There is little doubt that the Bible regards man’s spoken word with immense gravity. The assumption of the efficacy of prayer (Gen. 20:7, I Sam. 12:19), the power of a curse or a blessing, the prescription for oral confession of a crime (Lev. 16:21, Josh. 7:19, Ezra 10:1), the effectiveness of a spell, and the fear of certain utterances throughout biblical narrative, testify to the biblical portrayal of the power of articulated language.

The reason for the consequence ascribed to human speech is a matter of dispute. Some scholars maintain that in the Bible the spoken word is perceived as something which becomes an objective reality with mysterious power whose action cannot be stalled. While a delayed effect is possible, the word, according to Dürr, is *kraftgeladen*; it operates as a

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1 See Von Rad’s discussion of this concept in *Theology*, II, pp. 80–81.
4 Von Rad, *Theology*, II, p. 82.
6 This perception underlies the unique position of the human being, who, alone among all other creatures, retains the gift of speech, which empowers him. It is not my intention to examine the philosophical underpinnings of this idea. I am concerned here primarily with the manner in which the Bible perceives speech.
7 E.g. Gen. 27:12–13, 33; Ex. 12:32; Judges 17:2. The entire colorful story of Balak and Balaam told in great detail in Num. 22–24 is testimony to the belief in the power of uttered curses.
8 A spell may be defined as a statement whose spoken words have the power to produce a desired effect. Blank, *Curse*, pp. 85–87, has detected spells in Num. 21:17; and Josh. 10:12.
9 Although there are allusions to the possibility of blasphemy, there is a total absence of curse formulae directed against God in the Bible. Biblical characters employ instead phrases which suggest a curse, but literally mean quite the opposite. See I Kings 21:13; and Job 2:9 for examples.