CHAPTER THREE

Introduction

The phrase יוסיף וכה (abbreviated henceforth as יוסיף) appears twelve times in the Bible in a variety of forms. On two occasions this phrase is introduced by the words לאמר ויעשה (II Sam. 3:35; I Kings 2:23). This constitutes evidence that this rather enigmatic phrase functions in biblical narrative as an oath formula.

Nonetheless, like other oath formulae, in most cases it is found without the introductory verb שבע. Literally, this phrase can be translated “So shall He do . . . and so shall he continue.” The inherent difficulty in explicating this phrase may be indicated by briefly examining the manner in which the translations of the Bible have rendered it. While most Bible translations translate this phrase literally, without resolving the precise nature of the expression,

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1 A slightly abridged form of this chapter has appeared in JBL 126 (2007) 59–81, entitled, “‘So Shall God Do . . .’: Variations of an Oath Formula and its Literary Meaning.”

2 I Sam. 3:17; 14:44; 20:13; 25:22; II Sam. 3:9; 3:35; 19:14; I Kings 2:23; 19:2; 20:10; II Kings 6:31; Ruth 1:17. The full text of these sources appears at the beginning of this chapter. Note that this oath formula is only found in the books of Samuel, Kings and Ruth. This, alongside several other stylistic affinities, leads Lehmann to conclude that the authorship of these books belongs to the same period (Biblical Oaths, p. 79).

3 Morris, Ruth, p. 261, n. 2, cites Wisemen, in an oral communication, who informed him that this same oath formula is found in Mari and Alalakh in the eighteenth century BCE. Sasson, Ruth, p. 30, avers that it is recognized “by all authorities” that this is indeed an oath formula. Nevertheless, there may be exceptions. Unlike all of the other translations which I encountered, Soncino’s translation never explicitly identifies this formula as an oath.

4 Bible translations which offer a literal translation of the phrase include the Septuagint, which consistently renders this phrase, τάδε ποιήσαι...καὶ τάδε προσθε, meaning literally, “this shall [he] do . . . and this again,” the Aramaic Targum Jonathan (כד...יעביד כד), and several English translations. The English translations render this phrase literally with distinct, but insignificant, variations. For example, the King James Version has, “May the Lord do so to me and more also,” while TOT has
some modern translations opt for a rendition which is intended to reflect the meaning of the phrase rather than the words. These translations often reflect a lack of consistency, arbitrarily selecting a loose equivalent for this oath formula, dependent on context.  

Any attempt to understand the literal meaning of this phrase is further complicated by the fact that the phrase itself appears to be meaningless, inasmuch as it is lacking a direct object. It is not clear, therefore, what exactly God is going to do to the one to whom the phrase refers. Its literal formulation does not even elucidate whether this thing that God shall do is positive or negative.

Segal, citing I Kings 22:20, suggests that הָלַע is a word which indicates that one does not wish to articulate further. This would seem to derive from a fear of uttering curses. Likewise, many scholars suggest that the absence of explicit curses accompanying this oath is a result of the fear of uttering the curses.

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5 The New English Bible renders Ruth 1:17, “I swear a solemn oath before the Lord,” I Sam. 3:17, “God forgive you if,” I Sam. 14:44, “Then Saul swore a great oath,” and II Sam. 3:9 “But now, so help me God” (cf. II Sam. 3:35; 19:14; I Kings 2:23). Unfathomably, The New English Bible sometimes chooses to maintain a literal translation of this phrase, as in I Sam. 20:13; 25:22; I Kings 19:2; 20:10. Picking up on the implication of severe punishment which is bound to come upon the violator of the spoken oath, the Good News Bible also offers an interpretation rather than a direct translation: “God will punish you severely” (I Sam. 3:17), “May God strike me dead” (I Sam. 14:44), “May the Lord’s worst punishment come upon me” (Ruth 1:17). The arbitrary variations in these translations do not do a tremendous service to the reader, or to the scholar attempting to discern the usage and distinctive nature of this phrase.

6 Echoes of this oath formula may be discerned in I Sam. 17:27 in which David is told that the man who slays Goliath shall be amply rewarded. The phrase used is הָלַע אָשֶׁר לָא יִשָּׂא אֶחָד. To support the connection between this phrase and the oath formula הָלַע אָשֶׁר לָא יִשָּׂא אֶחָד, one can cite I Sam. 11:7 which many scholars associate with this oath formula although it only contains the words הָלַע אָשֶׁר לָא יִשָּׂא אֶחָד. In any case, whether or not the phrase in I Sam. 17:27 bears any relationship to the oath formula depends on whether oath formulae can contain blessings for those who fulfill the oath, as we discussed in the previous chapter.

7 Segal, Phrases, p. 217; Segal, Samuel, p. 36.

8 Loewenstamm, שבועה, p. 483; Blank, Curse, pp. 90–91; Bar-Efrat, I Samuel, p. 84. See my analysis of this subject in the previous chapter. Brichto, Curse, p. 211, rejects this position, suggesting that this phrase is a shorthand on the part of the biblical speaker or narrator, when he does not know, or is simply not interested in detailing, the specific content of the maledictions connected to the oath.

9 Barnes, Kings, p. 155; Oesterley and Stinespring, Oath, p. 708; Bush, Ruth, p. 82. Gray, Joshua, p. 388, suggests that when one was directly involved in the adjuration, such that the curses were designed to come upon him, he may have refrained from