CURSES AND BLESSINGS: SOCIAL CONTROL AND SELF DEFINITION IN THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

JEFF S. ANDERSON
Wayland Baptist University

Nearly fifty years ago, J.L. Austin’s How To Do Things with Words developed the notion of performative utterances that do not merely describe or report events, but are simultaneously a verbal utterance and a deed performed.¹ With these illocutions, to say something is literally to do something. For Austin, performatives become effective to the extent that they are uttered in appropriate ways and in appropriate social circumstances.² As it pertains to ritual speech acts of blessings and curses, Austin’s work has tended to shift the discussion away from a Frazerian dichotomy between magic and religion, as well as away from the magical power of words or notions of power of the soul. Social anthropologists have widely applied Austin’s theory of performative utterances and illocutionary speech acts to functional models of societal social control and self definition.³ Performative language thus enables one to approach

² Austin posits four conditions for effective performatives: There must be an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect. Second, the particular personas and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure. Third, the procedure must be executed by all participants, both correctly and completely. Finally, if a procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts and feelings, then the person participating in so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts and feelings (Austin, How to Do Things with Words, 14–15).
ritual words from the fundamental linguistic level to see how words actually can accomplish certain ends, apart from magical or symbolic notions alone.⁴

Biblical scholars have applied the notion of speech acts to blessings and curses, viewing them as illocutionary utterances whose power lies in the nature of human language uttered under appropriate circumstances by appropriate individuals.⁵ The words of blessing and curse are not magically self-fulfilling yet are nevertheless incredibly potent in proper social contexts. These performatives can at once both maintain and challenge social structures, serving as social propagandists and iconoclasts alike. When associated with legal collections, these illocutions can coerce the community to conform to a rigid set of social norms at the same time as they maintain the distinct social solidarity and identity of that community. Blessings and curses often employ stereotypical language combined with vividly enacted intramural rituals that evoke the powers of the blessing or curse.⁶ While no destructive ritual acts typically accompanied these biblical utterances, they were nonetheless powerful. When paired together, the typically lopsided sanctions of the curses evoke effective social functions of these rituals.

The covenant community at Qumran employed ritual blessings and curses widely in ways consistent with the witness of the Hebrew Bible, acting out biblical traditions, but also modifying them significantly according to the Yahad’s own halakhah. Consistent with their use of other traditions of the Bible, the community acted out biblical rituals, conflated

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⁴ Austin discusses three categories of fallacies which render speech acts impotent: misinvocations, misapplications, and misexecutions (How to Do Things with Words, 14–15).
