

To Curse or to Enlighten?

by [Petr Chylek](#) (November 2024)



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According to the Pew Research [website](#), in 2021 about 65% of the US population considered Christianity to be their religion, and 2.3% of people identified as Jews. The Christian Bible includes the Hebrew Torah as a part of the Old Testament. But, for a present-day audience, reading millennia-old scriptures and their centuries-old translations can lead to many notions that seem outdated, unbelievable, or simply wrong. New translations are often not better than old ones since modern translators have spent years reading earlier translations, instilling certain meanings in their minds that are difficult to change.

Many readers are probably familiar with the beginning sentences of Chapter 12 of the Book of Genesis. It goes like this:

God said to Abram, "Go to yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you ... I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse, and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." (Genesis 12:1-3) [\[1\]](#)

Here, Abram is the original name of a man whom God later renamed Abraham. When I read these few sentences for the first time, I wondered how it could be, that God would curse the one who curses Abram and yet all families of the earth would be blessed. What about the one who was cursed? Is not here a contradiction?

In English translation, there seems to be no problem. It is clearly said I will bless those who bless you and curse him who cursed you. In the original Hebrew, it is not so simple. The same verb root (BRCH) is used for the two blessings acts. However, for two curses, two different Hebrew roots are used

(KLL and AOR). Why does God use two different Hebrew words for cursing while He uses the same word for blessing? Does He want us to think about it? Does He indicate that things are not so simple?

While Hebrew words (KLL and AOR) may mean to curse, the second can be interpreted differently. The letter A before the verb denotes what can be grammatically translated as the first-person singular future tense: I will. The following two letters OR mean light,[\[2\]](#) to enlighten.

Thus, the considered phrase can be translated as:

God said to Abram, "Go to yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you ... I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will enlighten, and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."

Does not this make more sense? Is it not more useful to enlighten someone rather than to curse him?

Each translation from Hebrew to English is at the same time an interpretation. The early translators had a choice between "to curse" or "to enlighten." They made the choice that resonated at that time with their opinion. This created a division and set the stage for a fight. Those who bless Abram are blessed by God, and those who curse him are cursed by God. Since then, the phrase has been repeated many times.

God of the Old Testament is sometimes presented as an angry revenge-seeking God who punishes people for their trespasses. At least a part of this attitude is due to translators' selection of words. Hebrew words are like a basket filled with different fruits, and the translator is free to choose

whichever fruit he wishes; sweet or sour.

As far as I know, this understanding of differences in cursing (KLL against AOR) has not been discussed before. KLL is just darkness, whereas AOR indicates the possibility of changing the darkness to light. I have checked the Torah and two well-known Jewish commentaries by Rashi[\[3\]](#) and Bachya[\[4\]](#) and the teaching of Isaac Luria,[\[5\]](#) and none of them shows the difference between the two Hebrew expressions for cursing.

The Torah and the Old Testament contain many violent scenes, which by today's readers can be considered unethical, violating our current notions of basic human behavior. We have to realize that these scriptures were written about two thousand years ago and they existed in oral form for at least several hundred years before that. What was considered acceptable at that time is different from our current culture. An alternate possibility is not to consider scriptures literally and find a spiritual interpretation of the stories. As many old sages suggest, the new interpretation does not mean that the old one is wrong. Both should be considered side by side. For some people, the old one is correct, for others the new one is correct.

[\[1\]](#) N. Sherman, *The Chumash*, The Stone Edition, Mesorah Publications, Brooklyn, NY 2005

[\[2\]](#) The OR is one of two different spellings used in the Torah for light

[\[3\]](#) Rashi, *The Torah*, Y. I. Z. Herczeg translation and commentary, Mesorah Publications, Brooklyn, NY 2000

[\[4\]](#) A. Bachya, *Torah Commentary*, E. Munk translation, Lambda Publishers, Brooklyn, NY 2003

[\[5\]](#) I. Luria, *Apples from the Orchard*, M. Wisnefsky translation and commentary, Thirty Seven Books, Malibu, CA 2008

[Table of Contents](#)

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