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Blessing In the Old Testament: A Study of Genesis 12:3

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The Problem Stated

Since the appearance of the RSV of the OT, there has been much discussion of the section dealing with the blessing of Abraham, Gen. 12:1-3. The Hebrew text is rendered by the ASV: "and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." The RSV renders the same text: "and by you all the families of the earth will bless themselves." Many seem to fear that the rendering of the RSV destroys the messianic idea in the verse, and so they oppose the rendering.

Interpreting the Verse

Messianic. According to the messianic interpretation of the verse, "In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed . . . (ASV)" is understood to refer to the blessing received through Jesus the Messiah who came of the seed of Abraham, so that truly all families of the earth were blessed through Abraham. The new translation is just as susceptible of a messianic interpretation as the older translation, though with reflexive action. "By you all the families of the earth will bless themselves . . . (RSV) " is thus understood to mean that in the Messiah of the seed of Abraham, all the families of the earth would avail themselves of the blessings. Thus far, the new translation has really lost nothing of the reference to Christ seen in the verse by Christians from the early days of the church.

Non-messianic. The non-messianic interpretation of both translations would see in the verse only that the name of Abraham (or his descendants, Gen. 22:18) would be used in pronouncing a blessing. Notice the usage in Gen. 48:20 with the same Hebrew preposition "by thee" or "in thee" taken as instrumental. ASV "In thee will Israel bless, saying, God make thee as Ephraim and as Manasseh." RSV "by you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying, God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh . . ." In this sense, Gen. 12:3 would be understood to mean that when one "blessed himself" "in" or "by" Abraham, he would simply say, "God make me as Abraham" or one would be blessed by having someone say, "God make me as Abraham." The force of the words and the context of Gen. 12:3 alone would not determine the interpretation. Both are equally possible in the context.

The Early Christian Interpretation-Messianic

In the early church the messianic interpretation was given by inspired men, thus Peter (Acts 3:25f) and Paul (Gal. 3:8). This we accept without question. But this acceptance does not depend upon the passive translation of Gen. 12:3. The messianic idea is just as

clear whether the Hebrew be taken as reflexive or as passive: whether it be read "And . . . shall bless themselves . . ." or "and . . . shall be blessed . . ."

Some may wonder how one could accept the messianic interpretation of the New Testament quotations and yet admit the possibility of the difference of translation. Why did the RSV translators use the expression "bless themselves" in Gen. 12:3 and the expression "be blessed" in the NT quotations of this verse, whereas the word occurring in the Greek NT is the same form of the same word that occurs in the Greek translation (Septuagint) of Gen. 12:3? The solution to this problem is found in the text with which the translators worked in each instance. In the NT they worked with the Greek NT text; in the OT they worked with the Hebrew text, and presumably our Hebrew text of Gen. 12:3. is the same as that used by the translators who produced the Septuagint.

One may well doubt that the grammatical construction of a translation is to be regarded as inspired merely because it is quoted in the New Testament when the writer or speaker is simply giving the Septuagint rendering.[1] Now, if one should choose to make this an argument that God inspired the translation of the Niphal form as passive, the discussion must end there, for we accept Peter and Paul as inspired men. (However, one is then faced with more serious problems of text and canon, if this is taken as putting a divine seal on all selections of words, texts, and constructions in the Septuagint translation.) If, on the other hand, one understands that Peter and Paul were simply quoting the translation commonly used by their hearers and readers, then we may investigate the disposition of the Niphal form made by the Septuagint translators.[2]

The Hebrew Verb, Niphal Conjugation

In the Hebrew language, verbs are used in different forms to express person, number, voice, mode, tense, and extension of the root idea. The extension of the root idea of a verb is expressed by conju-

1 Editor's Note: Compare, for example, McGarvey's comment on Acts 7:14 where he explains the apparent contradiction between the figures 70 and 75 there and in Gen. 46:27 by saying that the difference is a difference between the Hebrew text of Gen. 46:27 and the Septuagint which Stephen was quoting and which was known by his hearers. New Commentary on Acts of Apostles, p. 120.

2 The translation of T. J. Meek in The Bible, An American Translation, published by the University of Chicago Press, represents the Niphal of Gen. 12:3 as reciprocal: ". . . through you shall all the families of the earth invoke blessings on one another." This is a force perfectly proper to the Niphal conjugation, but it is a highly specialized force. This translation would limit the meaning of the passage to the use of the name of Abraham in pronouncing blessings and would, in the judgment of this writer, unduly restrict the action of the verb. New Testament usage of this verse could not be justified if the force of the Niphal in Gen. 12:3 be understood as reciprocal.

gations; thus, the Qal conjugation is the simple active or stative form, the Niphal is the reflexive or passive of the simple active, the Piel is factitive or intensive or denominative, the Pual is passive of the Piel, the Hiphil is causative, the Hophal is passive of the Hiphil, and the Hithpael is reflexive. These are the basic meanings of the conjugations. With reference to the word "b-r-k" (translated "bless"), the problem of translation in the RSV centers in the Niphal conjugation which form occurs in Gen. 12:3. The earliest force of the Niphal conjugation in Hebrew was reflexive. Though in later Hebrew the Niphal came to be used more as a passive of Qal, the reflexive force was still common. Thus, Gen. 12:3 would in its earliest force be rendered "and they shall bless themselves" (the perfect tense occurring here with waw consecutive). But with many Hebrew verbs, the Niphal is used to express the passive voice only; and in many other verbs, the Niphal is used to express both passive and reflexive voices. So the use of the conjugation alone is not decisive. The Septuagint gives no help in this consideration for a Niphal is translated into Greek middle or passive voice as the translator understood the usage in the particular context. In the present and imperfect tenses of the indicative mode in Greek, the middle and passive voices are not distinguished in form, whereas the future middle is in a different verb system from the future passive. In Gen. 12:3, there is no possible confusion as to how the translator understood the Niphal. The Greek translated clearly the Niphal as future passive, which translation was cited by Peter and Paul in the NT.

The Niphal form of the verb b-r-k occurs only three times in the OT: Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 28:14. The Niphal is used often as a reflexive or passive of the Qal conjugation; however, the Qal (with the exception of the passive participle) occurs only twice in the OT and has the meaning "bend the knee" or "kneel" (2 Chron. 6:13; Psa. 95:6). The Qal passive participle does occur c. 72 times with the meaning "be praised" or "be blessed." The Piel form is the regular active form used in the sense "to bless"; the Pual form occurs as the passive of Piel "to be blessed." The Hiphil is the causative form of the root idea, "to cause to kneel" or "to cause to bend the knee." The Hithpael is properly reflexive "to bless oneself," but may bear the passive force "to be blessed." The Hithpael occurs only six times in the OT; in each passage, the RSV translates as a reflexive whereas the ASV translates three occurrences as passive (Gen. 22:18; 26:4; Psa. 72:17) and three occurrences as reflexive (Deut. 29:19; Isa. 65:16; Jer. 4:2). It should be noted that in each instance in which the text of the ASV translates the Hithpael as passive, the marginal reading is reflexive: "bless oneself." Also, one should note that the marginal reading of the RSV of Gen. 22:18 is passive: "be blessed."

The root idea of the verb b-r-k is "bend the knee," and the root is found throughout the Semitic family of languages with this meaning. In Hebrew, the Piel conjugation became specialized in the usage

"to bless." The Niphal and Hithpael conjugations are associated in meaning with the Piel; and the Qal passive participle is associated with the Piel and not at all with the active voice of the Qal. There are other Hebrew verbs in which this phenomenon is found, e. g. b-s-r "cut off." The Piel and Qal passive participle signify "fortify," the Niphal means "be restrained," the Qal active means "cut off." Of course, the Piel meaning is an extension of the root idea. (cf. also the root n-t-q). Furthermore, the root b-s-r also presents the Niphal in closer relationship (reflexive or passive) with the Piel than with the Qal. This shows a usage similar to that noted in the verb b-r-k. Thus, the Niphal on perfectly good linguistic grounds may rather be taken as a reflexive or passive of Piel than of Qal. That the Niphal need not be understood as passive can be readily seen in the verb d-b-r "speak" in which the Qal is active, the Niphal is middle-active, the Piel is active, and the Pual is passive.

B-R-K; Bless

The root meaning of the Hebrew verb b-r-k as already noticed is "bend the knee." As this was done in worship, it acquired the meaning "praise" or "bless" (give adoration to the deity). Since a "blessing" was spoken, the Greek translators uniformly render the verb by "eulogeo" with the force "praise" or "bless" (lit., to "speak well of," or to "speak good things"). The blessing to the Hebrew mind, however, does not correspond exactly to the English word "bless" as shown in that '-s-r (lit., "go straight") "to be happy" is translated in Psa. 1:1 "Blessed is the man . . ." Even the English word "bless" has acquired many connotations far removed from the root idea "to consecrate with blood." In the Hebrew idea of blessing, there was always the "pronouncement" of blessing. The blessing was "something said." The word (blessing) spoken then began its work to effect that which was desired; thus, "God blessed them (sea creatures), saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas . . ." (Gen. 1:22). The "blessing" was what God "said," then the word of God produced its effect. (This shows also something of the meaning of the curse by Jehovah in Zech. 3:2.) We may see further this idea of blessing in Gen. 48:20 as Jacob says concerning Ephraim and Manasseh, "In thee will Israel bless, saying, God make thee as Ephraim and as Manasseh . . ." Here again, the blessing was something spoken, and the spoken word was to effect that which was desired. We may work our way in each occurrence of the word throughout the entire Bible with this idea. There was something of the force of the whole personality involved in the blessing, and once given, it could not be recalled. So Isaac, having blessed Jacob, cannot recall the blessing and can give only a lesser blessing to Esau (Gen. 27:18-40; esp. vv. 37-40). A modern scholar expressed the idea quite well: "In the Bible blessing means primarily

the active outgoing of the divine goodwill or grace which results in prosperity and happiness amongst men."[3] Another said that ultimately all blessing must spring from God.[4] For those to whom the work is available, the psychological interpretation of the blessing from the Hebrew viewpoint is well expressed by Johs. Pedersen.[5]

Conclusion

It appears more likely, therefore, that Gen. 12:3 has immediate reference to the use of Abraham's name in pronouncing blessings, but that this interpretation must include a tacit recognition that through this Hero of Faith the Messiah also would come to pronounce new blessings of His own upon His people, Acts 3:25f; Gal. 3:8.

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Abbreviations-

RSV-Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible
ASV-American Standard Version of the Holy Bible
OT- Old Testament
NT- New Testament

3 *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson, p. 33, art. "Bless," by the editor.

4 *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, G. Kittel, Zweiter Band, ss. 751-763.

5 *Israel*, Johs. Pedersen, vol. I-II, pp. 182-212.