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## Dimensions of structure in the Hebrew verb system

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HEBREW "BE BLESSED" VERSUS "BLESS THEMSELVES".

Francis I. Andersen

Hebrew "be blessed" versus "bless themselves".

The Hebrew root b...r...k, "bless" is found in the following verb stems:

- A. bārūk, a passive participle (adjective) with no corresponding active forms.
- B. bērēk, active and transitive, with direct object of the thing blessed.

It is the common verb, with such combinations as

God blesses a man

God blesses a thing

A man blesses God

A man blesses another man

It is never used reflexively. The preposition "in" is used -- "to bless someone in the name of the Lord", using a form like Num. 6:24-26, an act called "putting the name of the Lord on someone" (Num. 6:27).

- C. bōrak, passive of the former. As is usually the case in Hebrew, the agent is never specified in the "passive" transform, except when the participle is nomen regens -- mabōrēket YHWH 'arsō, "may his land be blessed by the Lord" (Deut. 33:13); mabōrākāy, "those blessed by him" (Ps. 37:22), where the agent is a noun or suffix in "genitive" case. In one instance the blessing is mentioned as the instrument (II Sam. 7:29), with min-, "from" as preposition. Compare Gen. 49:25-26, with the active, where there is no presupposition.
- D. hitbārēk, reflexive or reciprocal. It can mean "to congratulate or bless oneself" (Deut. 29:18). Is. 65:16 points to the use of the name of the God of truth in benediction as well as in oath-taking. The idiom "to bless oneself in...." is always used (except in Deut. 29:18), generally "in" the name of God (Is. 65:16; Jer. 4:2), or in the name of Messiah (Ps. 72:17) or "in your seed", i.e. Abraham's (Gen. 22:18;

26:4). The mention of a human name in blessing was probably different from the invocation of the divine name. An idea of what might have been involved is given by Jacob's prediction about Ephraim and Manasseh (Gen. 48:20).

"In thee [the singular pronoun is unaccountable] Israel will bless [there is no object; supply "someone, anyone"], saying:

'God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh.'"

In every occurrence of hitbārēk (except Deut. 29:18), the question may be raised whether the verb is reciprocal: describing mutual blessings (greetings) not autobenedictions, in a style familiar in the culture (Ruth 2:4), or exchanged oaths.

E. nibrak. The meaning of this form is not as clear as the others. It occurs only three times, in almost identical expressions -- Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 28:14. "And nibrākū in you all the phratries of the land." In later Hebrew ni-- verbs are generally passive. In early Hebrew a middle meaning is more prominent. Since these are ancient texts, the latter is more likely, especially as the passive, if needed, is well provided for by C. A reflexive meaning for ni-- verbs would be most unusual, and this is provided for by D. D and E resemble each other: (a) in using a similar idiom "bless in---" and (b) in speaking of the blessing of all nations "in" Abraham (or Jacob) or "in" his seed. For these reasons, a reflexive meaning has been ascribed to nibrak, as if it were a dialectal equivalent of hitbārēk. But, as we have seen, there is little proof of autobenediction in Israel, except as disapproved by Deut. 29:18 -- which, be it noted, the person did not even dare to speak!

Hence we propose a reciprocal meaning for D, a middle meaning for E. An approximate translation would be "will find blessing" which avoids the passive and the active. This is adopted by NAB, for Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 28:14, but also for Gen. 22:18 and 26:4.

Such a neutral translation does not solve the problem fully. What does it mean to be blessed (or find blessing) "in" Abraham or "in" his seed. The attraction of a reflexive or reciprocal meaning is that it gives concrete significance to the use of Abraham's name as supplying the measure of blessedness. (compare Gen. 48:20). But it implies a human agent as the blesser. The content of Gen. 12:3 points in another direction. It anticipates the fame of Abraham's name; that name itself will be the blessing. Everyone's condition will depend on his attitude to Abraham himself. God promises to bless those who bless Abraham and to curse those who curse him. All this is done by God, who blesses Abraham in the first place, and then blesses others because of their relationship to Abraham. From now on, God's dealings with men are in terms of Abraham. It is "in him," i.e. in relationship to Abraham, and in response to what God has done in Abraham, that all nations of the world "find blessing." This emphasis on God as the blesser would seem to rule out a reflexive meaning for nibrākū in this context. If a passive is preferred to a middle, there should be no doubt that God is the unidentified agent.

New Testament quotations of these passages use verbs unquestionably passive (Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8); although no agent is identified, there need be no doubt that it is God. The translator would be advised to treat all these related passages similarly, and in keeping with the extended exposition in Galatians 3. Here Paul says, among other things, that Christian believers are "children of Abraham", they inherit "the blessing of Abraham" [surely an objective genitive], and are blessed "together with believing Abraham." See also Romans 4:13. It should be added that Paul makes the connection between the Christian and Abraham by arguing that Christ is the "seed" of Abraham spoken of in Genesis.