

A CRITICAL NOTE ON ECCLESIASTICUS 44:21's
COMMENTARY ON THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT

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The debate over Genesis 12:3 focuses on whether to take *w'nivr'khu* as passive, "they will be blessed," or reflexive, "will bless themselves." The presence of the *niph'al* in Genesis 12:3, and in the parallel expressions in 18:18 and 28:14, would normally suggest the passive idea,¹ while similar passages using the *hithpa'el* (Gen. 22:18 and 26:4) would normally imply the reflexive meaning for these latter. Grammatical studies have it is true, shown that the *niph'al* can be used for the reflexive voice and the *hithpa'el* for the passive, at least occasionally.²

The precise contextual sense of the reflexive *hithpa'el* depends on whether the adverbial phrase *v'kha*, "in you," is comparative or instrumental. If *v'kha* were comparative it would carry this sense that the nations would congratulate themselves, i.e. would wish for themselves a blessing so as to be "like you," like Abraham's.³ If *v'kha* is instrumental, the meaning is that the nations will seek for themselves a blessing *through* Abraham.⁴

A significant clue, long noticed, is that the New Testament understands the promise as passive, looking forward to Christ, in whom all the nations of the earth are to be blessed.⁵ For those who accept the

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1. E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1964), p. 86; Chester K. Lehman, *Biblical Theology, Volume One: Old Testament* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1971), pp. 91-92; "In consequence of a looseness of thought at an early period of the language, *Niph'al* comes finally in many cases to represent the passive" E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, ed., *Gesenius Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), p. 138; yet Koehler and Baumgartner, ed. *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953), p. 153a, and Brown, Driver, and Briggs, ed., *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), p. 138b, reject this idea for *BRK* in the Abrahamic covenant.
2. "Only seldom is it the *hithpa'el* passive." Kautzsch and Cowley, p. 150.
3. Cf. Gen. 48:20 where the *niph'al* is used in a reflexive sense and *b'kha* is used in a comparative sense, as indicated by the following passage: *y'simkha 'elohim Kephraiyim w'khimnashsheh*.
4. This is supported by the use of *bo* as it refers instrumentally to Yahweh in Jer. 4:2: *w'hithbar 'khu vo goyim*, cf. Isa. 65:16, Dt. 29:19 (18 Hebrew). See also Gustav Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, Publishers, 1883), p. 62; J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), p. 189; and note the thought of blessing to all nations through Israel in Isa. 2:2-4; 19:23-25.

consistent authority of Biblical teaching, the passive becomes the natural interpretation.

An earlier testimony, however, to this passive understanding of *w'nivorkhu* in Genesis 12:3 has been provided by the Genizah of the Ezra Synagogue in Cairo, from its fragments of the book of Ecclesiasticus. Ecclesiasticus was probably composed by Ben Sirach about 180 B.C. Its use of *BRK* provides an early commentary on Genesis 12:3. The Hebrew text of Ecclesiasticus 44:21 reads: 'L KN BS [BW] 'H HQYM LW LBRK BZR'W GWYM: LHNHYLM MY M W'D YM WMNHR W'D 'PSY 'RS.⁶ The crucial term in *LBRK*, which may be either a pi'el or a pu'al of *BRK*. It is the infinitival form and in the context seems to be best rendered: "The Lord therefore promised him on oath to bless the nations through his descendants" (Jerusalem Bible). The use of the infinitive in such a pi'el stem is noteworthy, since in the Hebrew text of Ecclesiasticus there exists in general an "excessive use of the hiph'il and hithpa'el."⁷ If this ancient witness's understanding of the promise to Abraham had involved the reflexive sense, it would have been expected that he would use the hithpa'el. But since he did not use the hithpa'el, it is most likely that the meaning of *BRK* as it relates to the Abrahamic covenant was not considered by him to be reflexive.

Another early testimony to the passive interpretation comes from the LXX translation of both Genesis 12:3⁸ and the underlying Hebrew of Ecclesiasticus 44:21. Genesis 12:3 in the LXX reads: *kai eneulogethesontai en soi passai hai phulai tes ges.*⁹ In this context, the root idea of *eneulogethesontai en soi*, "to be blessed in you," has God as its source, showing that the peoples are not blessing themselves but are being blessed. Genesis 12:3 in the LXX is therefore translated, "And in thee shall all the tribes of the earth be blessed." Ecclesiasticus 44:21 reads: *eneulogethenai ethne en to spermatai autou,*¹⁰ "...for the nations to be blessed in his seed." Here, again, the passive understanding is supported. One therefore finds himself in ancient company when he maintains the passive sense of the blessing through Abraham to all nations.

5. Acts 3:25; Gal. 3:8. The use of *en to spermatai* in Acts 3:25 parallels the use of *b'zar'akha* in Gen. 22:18, indicating that it is a quote from that text.
6. Israel Levi, *The Hebrew Text of the Book of Ecclesiasticus* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1904), p. 59.
7. *Ibid.*, p. xii.
8. And the other parallel passages on the promised blessing to the nations: Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14.
9. Henry Barclay Swete, *The Old Testament in Greek According to the Septuagint*, Vol. I (Cambridge: University Press, 1934), p. 19.
10. *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 737. The presence of *en to spermatai*, as in Acts 3:25, parallels the use of *b'zar'akha* in Gen. 22:18, possibly indicating that even the hithpa'el was understood in a passive sense.