

Blessed (נְבָרְכֻי)

By

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Introduction

The term in blessed in God’s promise to Abram in Genesis 12:3 uses the Hebrew root *barak* (בָּרַךְ), which means “to bless”.¹ In the niph'al stem, the verb form may be used to specify “the passive voice or the verb’s implied object in the reflexive voice”.² The choice of verbal usage, has led to two different meanings in the verse’s translation based on the word *blessed* as rendered, passive or reflexive. This discrepancy, which divides interpreters and scholars as to the precise nuance of the verb *nibrĕkû* (נְבָרְכֻי) which means “will be blessed” in the passive voice or “will bless themselves” in the reflexive voice.³

The choice of passive or reflexive rendering of the verb *nibrĕkû* (נְבָרְכֻי) has significant theological implications, for how Christians ought to view the modern state of Israel within the framework of biblical theology. This short essay will research the verb *nibrĕkû* found in Genesis 12:3 and argue that the niph'al verb form of נְבָרְכֻי in the passive rendering provides the most plausible translation and meaning, thus affirming the need for Christians to support of the modern state of Israel.

Genesis 12:3

The precise meaning of the spiritual promise in Genesis 12:3 is disputed by theologians and biblical interpreters, nevertheless, traditionally the verse specifies that God, not Abram, is

¹ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 15.

² Ibid. 79.

³ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 1B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 115- 116.

the distributor of the blessing for the nations.⁴ Therefore, Abram has no restricted entitlement of God's blessing and God has exclusive claim on Abram and everyone who submit to his God.⁵ The following two sections investigate the passive and reflexive voice of *nibrěkû* (נִבְרַךְוּ).

Nibrěkû (נִבְרַךְוּ) Passive Voice

The traditional biblical interpretation understands the verb *nibrěkû* (נִבְרַךְוּ) as passive, “will be blessed through you” as record in ancient texts such as, the Septuagint and *Targum Onqelos*.⁶ Furthermore, this translation can be found in such English Bibles as the NIV, KJV, NASB and NRSV, which all affirm that Abram is the channel of the divine promise for the nations and avows that a particular plan is envisioned for the blessing of the nations.⁷ Furthermore, Abram did not only “receive a blessing”, but he was “be a blessing” as blessed by God to become a blessing and the passage of blessing to others.⁸

Thus niph'al form of the Hebrew verb נִבְרַךְוּ translated as “blessed” in its current conjugation is only used in the expressions of the Abrahamic covenant with parallel phrasing appearing a total of four times Gen 12:2-3: 18:18; and 28:14.⁹ This appears to denote the uniqueness of נִבְרַךְוּ as representing the word *blessed* in Genesis, from the term's use in other verses throughout the Bible.

Nibrěkû (נִבְרַךְוּ) Reflexive Voice

While, the reflexive denotation of the verb *nibrěkû* (נִבְרַךְוּ), “will bless themselves by you,” has been affirmed by individuals such as Skinner and Westermann, and translated in Bibles

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Mathews, *Genesis*, 115-116.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament 1* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson. 1996), 123.

⁹ Ibid.

such as the RSV, NEB, and REB.¹⁰ Based on the interpretation of this understanding, then Abram is just a “motivating example of faith” and not the “exclusive conduit,” hence the promise therefore pronounces future nations who will invite blessing in the name of Abram.¹¹ The rendering *nibrěkû* (נִבְרַכְוּ), as reflexive is illogical, since the special form of the hithpael is used to express the reflexive form in Deuteronomy 29:18, Palms 72:17, Isaiah 65:16, and Jeramiah 4:2, and the translation that all families shall wish that their prosperity may be as thine, is “shallow and incorrect”.¹²

However, Chisholm, asserts that based on the understanding of “you will be a blessing” in Genesis 12:2, it is plausible to render *nibrěkû* (נִבְרַכְוּ) in verse 3 in the reflexive form.¹³ Which would mean that God’s promise to Abram only provide the establishment for him to be bless so that other nations would learn of his prominence and recognize him as the archetype of “divine blessings in their blessing formula”.¹⁴ *In thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.* This was the promise that crowned all the rest; for it points at the Messiah, in whom *all the promises are yea and amen.*¹⁵

Israel’s Promise

Abraham is the key to understanding the biblical account concerning Israel, since Israel is the offspring of Abraham.¹⁶ However, a modern state of Israel, created in 1948, which has its roots in the Zionism efforts, was initiated in the latter part of the 19th century

¹⁰ Mathews, *Genesis*, 115-116.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² J. P. Lange, P. Schaff, T. Lewis, and A. Gosman, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Genesis* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software. 2008), 391-392.

¹³ Chisholm Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition*, 85.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ M. Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible: Complete and Unabridged in one Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1004), 34.

¹⁶ Lange, *Genesis*, 391.

by Jews living in the Russian Empire.¹⁷ Jews, who called for the establishment of a provincial Jewish state after persistent discrimination.¹⁸ However, while Christians in the West accept the political reality of the modern Jewish state, many deny that it has any theological importance in Jewish coming together in the Holy Land.¹⁹

Globally, there are basically, three fundamental Christian theological opinions concerning the modern State of Israel: 1) the state of Israel is of virtually no significance, 2) the state of Israel is extremely significant, and 3) an intermediary opinion.²⁰ While the Vatican and the American Presbyterian Church, differentiates between the return of the Jewish People to the land of Israel and assigning theological importance to the modern state of Israel, since it is believed that no government at any time can be the complete expression of God's will.²¹ Therefore, the State of Israel is recognized as a geopolitical establishment that has not been endorsed theologically by western Christian churches.²² It remains to be seen how Christian support for Israel is balanced with the realization that some of the Jews, the offspring's of Abraham have returned to the promise land.

Conclusion

The verb *nibrĕkû* (נִבְרַךְוּ) as found in Genesis 12:3 in the niph'al form as the passive rendering provides the most plausible translation and meaning based on the research presented in this essay. For, the passive translation expresses the context of the verse best, especially since this form of *nibrĕkû* is only used to confer this particular meaning of "blessed". Since God is the

¹⁷ Petra Heldt and Malcolm Lowe, "Theological Significance of the Rebirth of the State of Israel: Different Christian Attitudes," *Immanuel* 22, no. 23 (1989): 133.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Heldt and Lowe, "State of Israel," 135-139.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

source and Abram is the conduit of the promised blessing, and perpetuation of the vision of the divine plan for the nations.²³ Additionally, even though the leaders of major Christian religions have not all openly endorsed the theological value concerning the modern state of Israel, they have recognized that there are scriptural consequences and are compliant in the need to support the modern state of Israel.

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²³ Mathews, *Genesis*, 115-116.