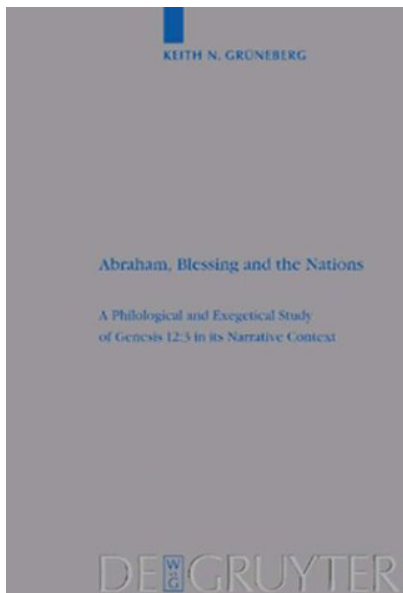


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Grüneberg, Keith N.

Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context

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This book is a publication of the author's doctoral thesis, written at the University of Durham under the supervision of Walter Moberly. It addresses an often overlooked but significant translation problem in Gen 12:3b. Although many, particularly Christian, commentators understand this half-verse to be a promise by God to Abraham that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (NRSV), Moberly and others (e.g., Rashi, Erhard Blum) have plausibly argued that the promise might be better rendered as a reflexive, "by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves" (NRSV note). In contrast to his doctoral adviser, Grüneberg argues in this book, particularly on grammatical grounds, that the former translation, "be blessed," is better.

The book wanders a bit on its way to (and from) this thesis. After a helpful introduction to the translation issue at the heart of the book, the balance of the first chapter is devoted to Grüneberg's discussion of his focus on "the final form of the text." Though he recognizes the efforts of some—such as the present reviewer—to argue for a mixed approach, he argues that attentive readers can perceive the crosscurrents of a multilayered text well enough without having to investigate the probable contours of those different layers (6–7). This review could engage that perspective, but it would not be relevant to how the book is actually written. In point of fact, Grüneberg himself states his intent to include diachronic considerations in discussion of his central text (11), and later on he

does indeed include such considerations at this and other points (e.g., 155–59, 177). So the extensive elaboration of final form focus in chapter 1 is somewhat misleading in characterizing the operative method of the book.

After a fairly brief discussion of parallels to the blessing formula in Gen 12:3a (“I will bless those who bless you and curse the one who treats you lightly”), Grüneberg moves to the heart of his study in chapter 3: a survey of the uses of the Niphal in Hebrew. Depending particularly on work by S. Kemmer on identifying semantic domains that are often marked off as “middle” from active constructions (*The Middle Voice* [Typological Studies in Language 23; Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1993], Grüneberg then attempts to classify the uses of the Niphal in Hebrew, particularly a limited set of domains where the Niphal expresses a “middle” sense. For example, the Hebrew Niphal expresses actions done for one’s own benefit, reciprocal actions, verbs of grooming and other verbs where one moves/hides oneself (“‘self-move’ middles”), and so forth. Outside of this limited set of “middle” uses, Grüneberg argues that the vast majority of uses of the Niphal are passive constructions. The examples of true direct reflexive use of the Niphal, Grüneberg argues, are rare and questionable (“indirect reflexives” are classified by Grüneberg as a form of middle Niphal). Based on this, Grüneberg concludes that נְבִרְכֶנּוּ in Gen 12:3b is passive in meaning. The direct reflexive Niphal is rare and would be clearly marked in a case such as this, and the verb בִּרַךְ does not fit in the limited categories of middle verbs in Hebrew.

This argument then proves to be the foundation for much of the rest of his discussion of Gen 12:3b and related texts. For example, in chapter 4 Grüneberg considers the two other texts in Genesis (besides Gen 12:3b) that use the Niphal of בִּרַךְ to describe the promise to Abraham, Gen 18:18 and 28:14. In the case of Gen 18:18 he builds a good case from its narrative context that the promise is focused on Abraham and his descendants, not the nations (74–76). Nevertheless, he rejects the possibility that נְבִרְכֶנּוּ can be translated middle or reflexively, based on the previous chapter (on the Niphal). Likewise in the case of Gen 28:14, Grüneberg builds an excellent case for understanding this promise as a promise that other peoples will look to Jacob as a paradigm of blessing but rejects this because “we have argued (ch3) that on grammatical grounds passive force for the niphal is most likely” (84).

In subsequent chapters he discusses the semantic range of “blessing” roots in Hebrew (ch. 5), the translation and interpretation of Gen 12:3 in the context of the preceding parts of Genesis (ch. 6), the meaning of the Hithpael in Hebrew (ch. 7), and parallels to Gen 12:3b in Genesis that use the Hithpael rather than the Niphal of בִּרַךְ (ch. 8; ch. 9 is a brief summary). Overall, Grüneberg maintains that the divine promise of blessing in Gen 12:3b—using the Niphal—should be translated on grammatical grounds as a passive: “all

the families of the earth shall be blessed through you,” while the parallel divine promises of blessing in Gen 22:18 and 26:4 that use the Hithpael should be translated as reflexives, “all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by you.” Nevertheless, along the way, he raises some important considerations that would counter this approach. For example, in parts of chapters 5 and 6 Grüneberg argues compellingly that calling a person a ברכה means that they are “either a byword of blessing or signally in receipt of blessings.” Thus the imperative to “be a ברכה” in Gen 12:2b is focused on Abraham as a signal example of blessing to others (117–21, 146), and this would lead naturally into a promise in Gen 12:3b that clans of the earth would bless themselves by Abraham. Similarly, Grüneberg notes ways in which the preceding promise in Gen 12:3a is likewise focused primarily on Abraham’s superlative blessing (167–76), thus leading well into a promise that other families of the earth would recognize that blessing and wish a similar blessing on themselves (Gen 12:3b [178–79]). In these and other ways Grüneberg builds parts of a case for a reflexive or middle understanding of the Niphal ברך in Gen 12:3b. Nevertheless, he rejects that option, again primarily on the grounds of his treatment of the Niphal in chapter 3.

Thus, the core argument of the book stands or falls on the grammatical arguments in chapter 3 (34–66). Nevertheless, this reviewer did not find the argumentation there to be decisive. First, as Grüneberg repeatedly recognizes, there are a number of examples of Niphals that are functionally “indirect reflexives,” such as אָחַז, שָׁאֵל, and שָׁמַר, where the actor does something for his or her own benefit (46–47, 62). It is not hard to imagine ברך as a fourth such example, especially since its semantic field is somewhat similar. Second, Grüneberg’s arguments that each of the direct reflexive uses of the Niphal are really a “nuance of the passive” (62–64) does not obviate the fact that the Niphal occasionally is used for the reflexive, albeit more rarely than the Hithpael. Third, especially given the ambiguity of the Niphal and the relative rarity of its use for (indirect) reflexive action, it is easy to imagine that an earlier set of promises using the Niphal in this rare reflexive sense (esp. Gen 12:3; 28:14; cf. 18:18) might be supplemented by a later set of promises that express that reflexive sense more clearly through the stem, Hithpael, that was more commonly used for that sense (Gen 22:18; 26:4; see D. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996], 155–58).

Once it is clear that language use allows either translation, the decisive arguments must come from the context in which these promises occur. On this point, Grüneberg himself shows that the contexts of Gen 12:3; 18:18; and 28:14 correlate strongly with a translation of these promises as reflexive or middle: focused on Abraham and his heirs as signal examples of blessing. The one main text that Grüneberg repeatedly adduces as an example of Abraham as a conduit of blessing for others, Gen 18:22–32, is a slender

branch on which to hang such a theory. After all, the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah, on whose behalf Abraham pleads, are eventually destroyed. Indeed, a broader survey of the pentateuchal narrative after Gen 12:3b turns up repeated examples where Abraham and his heirs are signally blessed and that blessing is recognized by others. There are few clear examples of other families/nations of the earth being blessed through him or his heirs. Often they are cursed (see Carr, *Reading the Fractures*, 186–94). In other words, a “final form reading” of Gen 12:3b in the context of Genesis would favor an interpretation of it as a promise that “all families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.” Furthermore, this translation correlates better with the royal and ancestral promises on which this formulation probably is based (especially Ps 72:17b; Gen 48:20; cf. Zech 8:13).

The passive translation of the Niphal in Gen 12:3b—“all the families of the earth will be blessed through you”—makes good sense only in another literary/scriptural “context”: that of a broader Christian Bible where emphasis is placed primarily on interpreting the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. If one is doing a reading of Gen 12:3b primarily from the perspective of the mission to Gentiles so prominent in the New Testament, then one might reread Gen 12:3b, as Paul does (Gal 3:8), and interpret it as an anticipation of the blessing of other families of the earth through Jesus. That kind of broader final-form reading of the Christian Bible is a worthy and intellectually respectable enterprise. It is not, however, attempted in this book.

At the very least, this book should raise the consciousness of scholars to the significant translation issue in Gen 12:3b. Though it might seem odd to focus so much on the translation of one verb in one half-verse, it turns out that highly intelligent and otherwise thorough theological proposals, such as that by Ken Soulen (*The God of Israel and Christian Theology* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996], esp. 120, 140) have been seriously weakened by lack of attention to this issue. And though Grüneberg may not have established a persuasive case for the translation of this verse as passive (“all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you”), his balanced treatment sometimes strengthens the case for the view he opposes: the probably correct translation of Gen 12:3b and its parallels (Gen 18:18; 28:14) as “all families of the earth shall bless themselves by you.”