

INTERPRETING *B-R-KH* IN GENESIS 47

MICHAEL ALAN STEIN

After settling his family in Goshen, *Joseph brought in Jacob his father, and set him before Pharaoh. And Jacob greeted [va-yivarekh] Pharaoh . . . And Jacob bade Pharaoh farewell [va-yivarekh], and went out from the presence of Pharaoh* (Gen. 47:7-10). Nahum Sarna chooses to translate the Hebrew "*yivarekh*" as "greeted" and "bade . . . farewell."¹ Everett Fox uses the awkward but inclusive terms "blessing-as-greeting" and "blessing-as-farewell" in his translation.² Rashi comments it is "the greeting of peace, as is usual in the case of all who are granted an interview with kings . . ." ³ That is, it is a deferential salute to the king. Ramban says, "[It is] a real blessing . . . for it is customary for aged and pious people who come before kings to bless them with wealth, possessions, honor and advancement . . ." ⁴ Rashi adds that verse 10 (only) may imply a blessing that the Nile would rise and irrigate the land,⁵ appropriate for a time of famine.

Nonetheless, Rashi and Ramban consider such a "real" blessing to be deferential, as was Melchizedek's to Abraham (Gen. 14:19), however, there it is a ruler who shows respect to a patriarch. Is it likely that a man who converses with God is awed by Pharaoh? Jacob takes his own gravitas most seriously, and Pharaoh had reason to be awed by the hoary father of the man whose ingenuity had saved Egypt.

Jacob said to Pharaoh, 'The days of the years of my sojournings are a hundred and thirty years. Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life, and they have not attained the days of the years of my fathers in their days of sojournings' (47:8-9).⁶

I suggest the omniscient narrator intended neither a bland salutation nor a deferential blessing. Such interpretations do not allow for the full literary and theological implications of Jacob's first recorded blessings of another, at the age of 130. I will first show that Jacob as a literary character would not have understood "*b-r-kh*" as anything but a powerful invocation of the Divine, the

Michael Stein has a B.A. in English from Muhlenberg College, a B.S.E. in Electrical Engineering from the University of Pennsylvania and a J.D. from Villanova University School of Law. He is the CEO of ESL ElectroScience, an international high technology materials company, has published many papers in the field of microelectronics, and is a multiple patent holder. He has led seminars in Genesis at synagogues in the Philadelphia area for many years.

God by Whom he has been chosen, with Whom he is intimate. I will then show that the pre-Jacob narrative prepares readers for Jacob's understanding.

JACOB'S UNDERSTANDING OF "B-R-KH"

Jacob's own references for "b-r-kh" are his receipt of blessings or his observations of others' blessings. First, Jacob, posing as Esau, requests a blessing from Isaac: '*. . . eat of my game so that you may solemnly bless me*' (27:19). Isaac is convinced it is Esau (vv. 19-25) and invites blessings of prosperity (means of sustenance), prowess (military power) and prestige (among the nations)⁷ on this son:

'May God grant you from the dew of the heavens and the fat of the earth; May peoples serve you, and nations bow before you. Be overlord to your brothers, may your mother's sons bow before you. Those who curse you be cursed, and those who bless you, blessed' (27:28-29).

Later, Isaac summons Jacob by name to bless him with progeny (especially generations of descendents), property (the Land), and more: '*And may He grant you the blessing of Abraham, to you and your seed as well, that you may take hold of the land of your sojournings, which God granted to Abraham*' (28:1-4).⁸ Isaac's references to progeny and property,⁹ to God, and to Abraham, confer the birthright.¹⁰ God and b-r-kh are invoked in his blessing of Jacob-in-disguise, not in that of Esau (27:31-38). He foretells Esau's prosperity and an ambivalent prowess, the blessings he intended to give him earlier, without contradicting those blessings he has granted to Jacob-in-disguise.

One may infer that at times Jacob (25:31), Rebekah (27:6-13), Esau (27:36) and Isaac (27:37) believe that when one human blesses another he controls what is to come; that is, exercises magic. But the sense of Isaac's blessings of Jacob in Genesis 27 and 28, his invocations ('*May God grant . . .*') and uses of b-r-kh suggest a confluence of prayer, prophecy, and pep talk ('*Be overlord . . . take hold . . .*'). Isaac is teaching Jacob they are part of God's design and that Jacob has received the blessings God intended. Indeed, God immanently promises Jacob property, progeny, and prestige (28:13-15), the same three blessings plus God's powerful '*I am with you.*'¹¹

In Genesis 30:27-30, Laban notes that his prosperity is due to Jacob. This is the prestige blessing of Genesis 27:29: '*. . . those who bless you be blessed,*'

which Isaac gave to Jacob-in-disguise and withheld from Esau.¹² In Genesis 32:1, Laban blesses his sons (presumably grandsons) and daughters, the only instance of undefined blessings between humans prior to Genesis 47:7. The circumstances make it likely it is Laban's request to his deity for favor and not a bland goodbye.¹³

In Genesis 32:30, Jacob wrests a blessing from an angel. God defines it in Genesis 35:9 with a renaming (similar to Abram/Abraham¹⁴) and the blessings of property and progeny (*'kings shall come forth from your loins'*) linking him to the covenant of Genesis 17:6. Jacob, in his 90s, has been blessed with children and re-entered the Land. Forty years later, Jacob for the first time uses his authority to bless.¹⁵ Pharaoh has saved his beloved Joseph and the clan. But Jacob has developed a solid, rueful conviction of his own destiny and, more than Joseph (45:5-8), of God's design.¹⁶ It is likely that Pharaoh is aware, through Joseph, of Jacob's stature as divinely-inspired patriarch and in Genesis 47:7 Jacob, with his 130-year-old gravitas, appears before a Pharaoh who is still stunned at the providence of the God of these nomads.¹⁷

BEFORE JACOB

Before the Jacob story, *b-r-kh* and its derivatives appear in the text some 29 times. Just as Jacob learns about *b-r-kh* from his experiences, the narrative "teaches" readers how to understand the term through usage. The first uses of *b-r-kh*, Genesis 1:22 and 28, and with emphasis in 5:2, are blessings of progeny, crucial to newly-created species. The third blessing, in Genesis 2:3, is of the seventh day and is undefined.¹⁸ Sarna notes that the Sabbath is an Israelite innovation; this and the first use of *k-d-sh* [holy], reflect the power implied in this *b-r-kh*. Then after Noah is blessed with progeny (9:1) he blesses God, the first use of *b-r-kh* by a human (9:26), and the most profoundly positive utterance he can imagine.¹⁹

With Abraham's covenant the blessings are defined.²⁰ God's first statement to Abram is a blessing for property, progeny, prosperity, and prestige: *'Go forth . . . to the land . . . great nation . . . I will bless you'*²¹ . . . *I will bless those who bless you'* [12:1-3].²² God's remaining blessings up to the time of Jacob are of these five categories.

When *b-r-kh* is from one human being to another, the text always defines them: Melchizedek blesses Abram with prowess (14:19); Laban and their

mother bless Rebekah with progeny (24:6); Laban invokes a blessing of Abraham with prosperity (24:31). These uses of *b-r-kh* are always important and powerful, never merely salutations.²³

CONCLUSION

Overall, the narrative from Genesis 27 to 47 subverts Jacob's initial, primitive idea of *b-r-kh* as a discretionary exercise of magic in favor of the subtler, humbling awareness of God's will and the destinies of those worthy to realize it. The meaning of *b-r-kh* is sometimes conjectural (for example, the seventh day) or unconventional (for example, Jacob's later oblique or harsh blessings of his sons²⁴). Nevertheless, translations other than "bless" and its derivatives impoverish the text by eliding stimulating ambiguities that the omniscient narrator chose.

In Genesis 47, Jacob, the dignified, long-suffering and inspired father of Egypt's savior, meets Pharaoh and condescends to bless him.²⁵

NOTES

1. N. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 319.
2. E. Fox [trans. and comment.], *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995) p. 221.
3. Y. Herczeg [trans. and annot.], *The Torah with Rashi's Commentary* (New York: Mesorah Publications / Artscroll Series, 1995) p. 514.
4. C. Chavel [trans. and annot.], *Ramban, Commentary on the Torah: Genesis* (New York: Shilo Publishing House, 1971) p. 562.
5. Herczeg, p. 515.
6. R. Alter [trans. and comment.], *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2004) p. 272-3. Sarna, p. 320, translates v. 8 as follows: *Pharaoh asked Jacob, 'How many are the years of your life?'* What we gain in clarity we lose in poetry, precision, and ambiguity. The rest of my biblical quotations are from Alter unless otherwise noted.
7. I have found the breakdown of the Divine promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 as property (the land of Canaan), progeny, and prosperity (means of sustenance; e.g., Sarna's note to Deuteronomy 7:13) to be insufficient. Two other categories are proposed: prowess (power over others, especially enemies) and prestige (high repute). The categories are not rigid or narrowly defined.
8. The use *m-g-r* [sojournings] is recalled in Genesis 47:9.
9. Abraham receives Divine promises in Genesis 12, 13, 14, 15, 17, 18, 22 and 24. He is promised all five categories of blessing: Progeny, property, prosperity, prowess, and prestige. See Note 7. But God uses the term *b-r-t* [covenant], only when speaking to him of progeny (17:2, 4, 7, 9-10) and property (15:18).
10. Genesis 28:3 implies correspondence between *b-r-t* and *b-r-kh* when used between God and

patriarch. See note 9.

11. There is no record that God spoke to Isaac. I Genesis 28:13, God tells Jacob He is '*the God of Abraham your father.*'

12. This foreshadows Joseph's bringing prosperity to Potiphar (39:5); to the warden (39:23); and to Pharaoh (41:49). See also Rashi on Genesis 47:10.

13. Fox and Alter translate *b-r-kh* throughout Genesis as "bless" and its derivatives. Sarna determines that twice it is merely a farewell (32:1, 49:28). Regarding the latter, see note 24. Sarna does not comment on his choice for Genesis 32:1. Laban is seeing his daughters and grandchildren for the last time. He kisses them. The text has previously established his concern (31:43, 50), and a blessing is natural; e.g., Laban and their mother blessed Rebekah (24:6). Implicit blessings have precedent; e.g., Adam (5:2) where one can hardly suggest God is saying goodbye rather than blessing.

14. Isaac is never re-named.

15. Rashi comments on v. 10 that the Nile will rise and irrigate at Pharaoh's approach; prosperity for Egypt and fulfilling of Jacob's prestige blessing.

16. Alter, *supra*, p. 272: " . . . it would be entirely in keeping with his own highly developed sense of his patriarchal role that he . . . should pronounce a blessing on pharaoh." As Alter wrote to this author "[T]he act is beautifully in character for Jacob -- he evinces a grand sense of his dignity . . . "

17. Pharaoh knows all Egypt has been saved through Joseph's inspiration (41:25ff); he is in awe (41:38ff). In Genesis 45:8, Joseph remarks, '*God . . . has made me father to pharaoh.*'

18. Exodus 16:20 and Rashi's comment to Exodus 20:11 suggest prosperity: extra manna on the sixth day which may be preserved for the seventh.

19. Humans bless God in Genesis 9:22 (Noah '*blessed be the Lord God of Shem*'); 14:20 (Melchizedek '*blessed be Elyon*'); 24:27 and 48 (servant '*Blessed be the Lord, God of my master Abraham*'); their intentions are undefined.

20. *B-r-t* (a term first used in Genesis 6 and 9 regarding the survival of humankind) is first included in the Divine promises to Abraham with reference to progeny (17:2, 4, 7, 9-10) and to property (15:18). This is another indication of the primacy of these blessings, signaled by circumcision (17:11). The *b-r-t* with Isaac refers to Abraham's *b-r-t* (7:19, 21). The uses of *b-r-t* in Exodus 2, 6, Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 4, 5, 7, 8 refer to the forefathers.

21. Despite the reference to progeny, this may be a prosperity blessing; see Deuteronomy 7:13.

22. Rashi suggests '*you shall be a blessing*' means Abram has discretion to bless; in Genesis 25:5 Abraham delegates it to Isaac. I am confused by the idea of a discretionary blessing other than as God's agent. Rashi does not explain (cf. Numbers 23-24). Ramban says the phrase means that well-wishing is made effective by invoking Abraham.

23. In its various forms *b-r-kh* appears 67 times in the text prior to Genesis 47:7. Thirty-one times, it refers to God's blessings of His creations, and all but three of these are His blessings of humans. There are four references to a human blessing God, and 32 references to a human blessing another human. Rashi and Ramban do not note that any of those instances are a salutation rather than a blessing. See note 24.

24. Sarna's note to Genesis 49:28 explains that not all the tribes received blessings and he translates the phrase *yivarekh otam ish asher k'virkhato bayraykh otam* as "he bade them farewell, addressing to each a parting word appropriate to him." Alter's translation of v. 28 (similar to

Artscroll's) is more literal and stimulating: *'blessing them, each according to his blessing, he blessed them.'* Rashi, in his comment on Genesis 49:28, says Jacob blessed "all of them" and the blessings "include them all." Perhaps v. 28 reports but does not quote separate blessings Jacob gives after his speech. Regardless, and though it may confuse us, evidently all receive the blessings of Abraham.

25. Cf., note 17. In Genesis 41:43, Pharaoh orders that Joseph's servants call out *'Abrekh.'* Rashi suggests "father of the King" or "bend the knee!" (e.g., Genesis 24:11). Alter and Sarna suggest it is an Egyptian word of unknown meaning.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

July	II Samuel	6 – 24
	I Kings	1 – 9
August	I Kings	10 – 22
	II Kings	1 – 15
September	II Kings	16 – 25
	Isaiah	1 – 19
October	Isaiah	20 – 49
November	Isaiah	50 – 66
	Jeremiah	1 – 11
December	Jeremiah	12 – 40

