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'niv'r'khuh 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, 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 true, shown that the niph'al can be used for the reflexive voice and the hithpa'el for the passive, at least occasionally.

The precise contextual sense of the reflexive hithpa'el depends on whether the adverbial phrase v'khuh, "in you," is comparative or instrumental. If v'khuh 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. If v'khuh is instrumental, the meaning is that the nations will seek for themselves a blessing through Abraham.

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. For those who accept the

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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'khuh is used in a comparative sense, as indicated by the following passage: y'simkha 'elohim Kephirayim w'khimmashsheh.

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

An earlier testimony, however, to this passive understanding of \textit{w'ntwr'khu} 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: LHNYLM MY M W’D YM WMNHR W’D’PS ‘RS:’ The crucial term in LBRK, which may be either a p'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 p'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.” 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 12:3 and the underlying Hebrew of Ecclesiasticus 44:21. Genesis 12:3 in the LXX reads: \textit{kai eneulogethesontai en soi passai hai phulai tes ges}. In this context, the root idea of \textit{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: \textit{eneulogethenai ethne en to spermati autou, “...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 \textit{en to spermati} in Acts 3:25 parallels the use of \textit{b'zar'akha} in Gen. 22:18, indicating that it is a quote from that text.
7. \textit{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.
10. \textit{Ibid.}, Vol. II, p. 737. The presence of \textit{en to spermati}, as in Acts 3:25, parallels the use of \textit{b'zar'akha} in Gen. 22:18, possibly indicating that even the hithpa'el was understood in a passive sense.