

# “I Will Bless the LORD at All Times”: Blessing God in the Old Testament

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Because of his love for them, God is disposed to bless all his children to some extent (see Matthew 5:45). However, in addition to God’s graciously bestowed blessings on all people, many divine blessings are primarily relationship dependent; that is, existing in a particular relationship with God allows one to obtain certain blessings that are often greater than those bestowed upon someone outside such a relationship.<sup>1</sup> The Bible indicates that by his power God blessed Adam and Eve (Gen 1:22, 28) and their faithful descendants, including Noah, Abraham, Sarah, and many others. For example, after Noah’s family left their ark, “God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. . . . I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you” (Genesis 9:1, 9).<sup>2</sup> To Abraham, God promised: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great. . . . I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse” (NRSV, Genesis 12:2–3). These specific covenant relationships required human obligation and participation for the covenant makers to receive the fullest measure of God’s blessings.

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In a religious context, “to bless” is commonly defined as bestowing divine assistance, favor, or power on someone.<sup>3</sup> Thus, “blessing presupposes a benefactor [God, who grants the blessing] and a recipient, and not infrequently there is a mediator who pronounces or confers the prospect of blessing from God to a human recipient.”<sup>4</sup> In ancient Israel, this “mediator” who verbalized “the prospect of blessing” was most often a prophet or priest.

However, the Old Testament also contains many passages in which individuals such as Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, and Daniel, in a seeming reversal of roles, invoked a blessing *on God* or encouraged other people *to bless God*. For example, Moses taught the Israelites, “You shall . . . bless the LORD your God” (NRSV, Deuteronomy 8:10). Under Joshua’s leadership, “the children of Israel blessed God” (Joshua 22:33). A few centuries later, when dedicating the Jerusalem Temple, Solomon proclaimed, “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel” (1 Kings 8:15). And in Psalms, Israelites are encouraged to “bless our God, ye people” (66:8). This practice of people blessing God is also attested in the Jewish Apocrypha;<sup>5</sup> in the New Testament, as found in the writings of Luke, Paul, James, Peter, and John;<sup>6</sup> and in later Jewish liturgical texts.<sup>7</sup> For example, James, in speaking of peoples’ mouths and tongues, wrote, “Therewith bless [*eulogoumen*] we God, even the Father” (James 3:9). But what does it mean to “bless God”? Since the word “bless” is generally defined as bestowing divine favor or assistance on someone or something, the very notion that a human can “bless” God may seem inconceivable.

The purpose of this paper is to explicate what this practice of “blessing God” consisted of among ancient Israelites, as reflected in the Old Testament, and to determine if it has any relevance for our worship of God in modern times. I will accomplish this by first reviewing the lexical root *b-r-k*, “to bless,” in the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament), after which I will give an overview of blessing passages, with a specific focus on passages in which people “bless” God. I will then analyze and explain what is intended by these passages, discuss how this practice fits into the worldview of ancient Israelites, briefly review how modern English translations render such passages, and conclude with some pertinent comments on how this practice relates to us in this latter-day dispensation.

### The Hebrew Word for “Bless”

The Hebrew lexical root *b-r-k* means “bless.” It occurs in verbal forms, usually in the *Piel* verbal stem, *bērēk*, “to bless.” The nominal form is *bē rākā*, “a blessing.” The lexical root *b-r-k* is most often attested in Genesis, Deuteronomy, and Psalms, but it is found in most of the books in the Hebrew Bible and in all the major genres (e.g., narrative, prophetic, wisdom, and psalmic) except legal texts.<sup>8</sup> Together, verbal and nominal forms of *b-r-k* occur nearly four hundred times in the Bible. The Hebrew root *b-r-k* is cognate with similar forms in other Northwest Semitic languages and is semantically related to the Akkadian *karabu*.<sup>9</sup> All forms of the English words “bless” or “blessing” in the biblical quotations that follow are derived from the Hebrew lexical root *b-r-k*.

#### God Blessing People and Things in the Old Testament

Not surprisingly, numerous passages in the Old Testament relate incidents of God blessing people as well as things. The following passages briefly represent such activity:<sup>10</sup>

*To the Israelites as a group, if they kept their covenant with God:*

Deuteronomy 7:12–13: “Wherefore it shall come to pass, if ye hearken to these judgments, and keep, and do them, that the LORD thy God shall keep unto thee the covenant and the mercy which he sware unto thy fathers: and he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: he will also bless the fruit of thy womb.”

Deuteronomy 26:15: “Look down from thy holy habitation, from heaven, and bless thy people Israel.”

*To individuals:*

Genesis 17:16: God spoke to Abraham about Sarah: “And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations.”

NET, Job 42:12: “So the LORD blessed the second part of Job’s life more than the first.”

*To nonhumans:*

Genesis 1:22: “And God blessed them [the water creatures and fowl, created on the “fifth day”], saying, Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.”

NRSV, Genesis 2:3: “So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation.”

NRSV, Exodus 23:25: “You shall worship the LORD your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you” (similarly, see Deuteronomy 7:12–13; 26:15; 28:4).

Throughout time, people have regularly petitioned God for blessings. One of many examples of this in the Old Testament is Hannah, who earnestly sought the Lord’s blessing to conceive and bear a son (see 1 Samuel 1:10–11, 27). Hezekiah’s plea to be healed when he was “sick unto death” provides another illustration of people petitioning God for a blessing (2 Kings 20:1–5). Significantly, the Bible consistently depicts YHWH (or Jehovah, usually rendered “the LORD” in English)<sup>11</sup> as the sole source of the Israelites’ blessings. As an aside, it is worth mentioning that the Bible also declares that Israel’s God is the source of and power behind all curses (see, for example, 1 Samuel 17:43). Curses are experienced as challenges, problems, and disasters. And according to the Bible, curses generally came upon the Israelites as the result of covenant violations, or ruptures in their relationship with God. Classic illustrations of the juxtaposition of blessings and curses are found in the extended covenant formulations in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28–29, which outline collective blessings to result from the Israelites’ covenant loyalty to Jehovah and curses that would just as surely follow disobedience or apostasy. This contrast between blessings and curses is also evident in the Moabite king Balak’s expression of frustration towards Balaam: “What have you done to me? I brought you to curse my enemies [the Israelites], but now you have done nothing but bless them” (NRSV, Numbers 23:11).<sup>12</sup>

### People Blessing People on Behalf of God<sup>13</sup>

Scripture often relates that an intermediary acted to announce, pronounce, or invoke God's blessings on people. Such blessings are related as primarily verbal acts, but sometimes they involve physical actions as well. For example, the account of Jacob blessing Ephraim and Manasseh relates that he laid a hand on each of their heads (see Genesis 48:14–20).

People often acted as divinely appointed intermediaries who were authorized to pronounce blessings. From a Latter-day Saint perspective, we assume these individuals had priesthood authority to act and bless on behalf of God. However, given the current state of the Old Testament, the text does not always indicate whether these individuals had the priesthood (as in the example just cited of Jacob blessing his grandsons). Additional illustrations of such activity include the following:

Genesis 14:19: “And he [Melchizedek] blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God.”

Genesis 47:7: “And Joseph brought in Jacob his father, and set him before Pharaoh: and Jacob blessed Pharaoh.”

1 Samuel 2:20: “And Eli [the Aaronic high priest] blessed Elkanah and his wife [Hannah], and said, The LORD give thee seed of this woman for the loan which is lent to the LORD. And they went unto their own home.”

The Aaronic priestly blessing recounted in Numbers 6:24–26 provides an important view of the mediating role of the Aaronic priests in ancient Israel: “The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them, The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them” (NRSV, Numbers 6:22–27).<sup>14</sup> The Old Testament does not specifically indicate when and how often the priests or high priest pronounced this blessing upon Israelites, although this presumably occurred when Israelites gathered for major holidays at the tabernacle and later at the temple. Leviticus 9:22 recounts one possible illustration of such activity:

“Aaron lifted up his hand toward the people, and blessed them, and [then] came down from offering . . . offerings.” Later Jewish texts indicate that priests in the late Second Temple period would emerge from the temple and raise their hands above their heads as they invoked the Aaronic priestly blessing upon the people, providing a dramatic reminder of their role in representing the Lord to his covenant people.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to authorized intermediaries, people with no special authority invoked God’s blessings on other people. These blessings are best considered thoughtful requests that God’s beneficence be extended to someone (presumably uttered with more faith than exhibited in the modern polite practice of saying “God bless you” when someone sneezes). Other passages indicate that a greeting, farewell, or expression of gratitude often included an invoked blessing:

NRSV, Genesis 24:60: “And they [her family] blessed Rebekah and said to her, “May you, our sister, become thousands of myriads; may your offspring gain possession of the gates of their foes.”

NRSV, Ruth 2:4: “Boaz came from Bethlehem. He said to the reapers, “The LORD be with you.’ They answered, “The LORD bless you.””

NRSV, Ruth 2:20: “Naomi said to her daughter-in-law [Ruth], ‘Blessed be he [Boaz] by the LORD, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!’”

NRSV, 2 Samuel 14:22: “Joab prostrated himself with his face to the ground and did obeisance, and blessed [*yěbārek*] the king” (KJV reads “thanked the king”).

These examples sufficiently illustrate the biblical depiction of God blessing people and things, as well as people blessing others on behalf of God. Our focus now turns to the biblical depiction of people blessing God.

### People Blessing God

In addition to passages in which the Old Testament depicts God blessing people, there are a number of passages in which people “bless God,” or invoke a blessing upon him. In these scriptures, some of which were quoted at the

beginning of this article, God is the object or recipient of a blessing, not the dispenser. Such passages divide easily into two broad categories: (1) what appear to be spontaneous expressions of blessing and (2) more formal expressions of worship, probably having functioned in some liturgical context. Two broad grammar-based categories of usage are also evident in these passages: (1) those expressions reported with an active verb form, “to bless,” and (2) those employing a passive verbal form, “to be blessed.”

*Less formal expressions of “blessing God.”* The following three passages illustrate narrated declarations of individuals and groups blessing God. These seem to be nonformal, or nonliturgical, expressions of blessing.

Grateful that the Lord had answered his prayer to find a fitting mate for Isaac, Abraham’s servant related to Laban and his household, “I bowed down my head, and worshipped the LORD, and blessed the LORD God of my master Abraham” (Genesis 24:48). The servant is certainly grateful, but the phrases “worshipped the LORD” and “blessed the LORD God” imply something greater than mere gratitude.

When the leaders of the Israelite tribes resolved an issue of concern (certain tribes had built a memorial altar near the Jordan River), scripture reports that “the thing pleased the children of Israel; and the children of Israel blessed God” (Joshua 22:33). Relief and thanksgiving were natural outcomes of this intertribal settlement. But again, the phrase “the children of Israel blessed God” seems to convey something more.

Following a joyous celebration of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (2 Chronicles 30), Chronicles records that King Hezekiah asked his people to contribute sacrifices to be offered at the Jerusalem temple during the coming year. “When Hezekiah and the princes came and saw the heaps” of contributions, they were impressed with the people’s generosity; therefore “they blessed the LORD, and his people Israel” (2 Chronicles 31:8). Gratitude was clearly part of their response, but more is implied in this and other biblical reports of Israelites “blessing” God.

*More formal expressions of blessing God.* Passages in the book of Psalms and elsewhere provide a similar depiction of people blessing God, often arising from gratitude for *his* blessings to them. These formulations, however, have a more formal tone, and they were likely used liturgically by Israelites worshipping at the temple and elsewhere, sometimes collectively. For example, Psalm 16:7 reads, “I will bless the LORD, who hath given me counsel,”

and Psalm 26:12 (NRSV) declares, “My foot stands on level ground; in the great congregation I will bless the LORD.” Other examples of more formal or liturgical use include:

Nehemiah 9:5: “Then the Levites . . . said, “Stand up and bless the LORD your God for ever and ever.”

NRSV, Psalm 68:26: “Bless God in the great congregation, the LORD, O you who are of Israel’s fountain!”<sup>16</sup>

Psalm 134:1: “Behold, bless ye the LORD, all ye servants of the LORD, which by night stand in the house of the LORD.”

*What does it mean to bless God?* These and other biblical passages confront us with the questions: What did it mean to the Israelites to “bless” Jehovah, their God? And more fundamentally, how can humans possibly “bless” God in the sense of bestowing a beneficial gift or power on him?

Some earlier biblical scholars thought such biblical passages as those quoted above represented a belief in the magical power of pronouncing words of blessing, that humans could thereby transfer power to God and thus increase his ability to bless others.<sup>17</sup> However, as the academic understanding of ancient religions has further developed, such perceptions are no longer viewed as tenable.

The realization that humans cannot bless God in the way that he blesses humans invites us to analyze what *is* intended in biblical passages in which people “bless” God. For some time now, many scholars have suggested that help in understanding the intent of these expressions is available in the Old Testament itself. Consider these four psalm passages:

Psalm 34:1: “I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth.”<sup>18</sup>

Psalm 113:1–3: “Praise ye the LORD. Praise, O ye servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD. Blessed be the name of the LORD from this time forth and for evermore. From the rising of the sun unto the going down of the same the LORD’s name is to be praised.”



Psalm 115:17–18: “The dead praise not the LORD, neither any that go down into silence. But we will bless the LORD from this time forth and for evermore. Praise the LORD.”

Psalm 145:2: “Every day will I bless thee; and I will praise thy name for ever and ever.

In these and other passages, a verbal form of *b-r-k*, “bless,” is parallel with a verbal form (often a masculine plural imperative) of *h-l-l*, “praise.” From the latter verb comes *halēlû-yāh*, or “hallelujah”: the plural imperative *halēlû*, “praise,” plus *yāh*, an abbreviated form of the divine name YHWH, or Jehovah. This and related biblical evidence that combines blessing and praising God suggest that when humans “bless” God, they are, at the very least, praising him.<sup>19</sup> This is evident even when the lexical root *h-l-l* does not occur in a passage. For example, Psalm 63:4—“Thus will I bless thee while I live: I will lift up my hands in thy name”—uses the act of lifting up one’s hands to convey an attitude that is parallel to the expression “I will bless thee [the LORD],” even though a verb specifically meaning “praise” is not included.<sup>20</sup>

In these passages in which people “bless” Jehovah, it is the *context* of the verb *b-r-k* that provides the intended meaning rather than its etymology. While etymological information is important, it cannot always be the main guide to accurately interpreting the meaning that a word has acquired over time.<sup>21</sup> Because the lexical root *b-r-k* acquired the meaning “praise” when used by people praising God, it is an example of polysemy, a term indicating that a word can have more than one meaning, depending on how and where it is used.

Thus, when individuals, such as Abraham’s servant, or groups of Israelites “blessed” God, they were not only expressing gratitude but praising him. All the passages quoted above, as well as others that follow below, are best understood as employing the word *bless* to mean “praise.”

Some scholars see this development of *bless* conveying praise for God as an “entirely inner-biblical development,” something not attested outside of the Bible, although we cannot tell exactly when, where, or how this development occurred.<sup>22</sup> Other scholars have questioned this assertion and have claimed that inscriptions contemporary with the Bible also express praise to

God using a form of *b-r-k*; however, the epigraphic evidence they muster to support their notion is not conclusive.<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly, verbal forms of *b-r-k* do occur in Israelite inscriptions, although many are in poorly preserved texts. Examples include the blessing invoked in the salutation of Arad ostrakon 16, lines 2–3: “I bless you to [or by] YHWH.” This formulation has essentially the same force as the grammatically passive biblical expression “may YHWH bless you” (see discussion below). Similarly, the dedicatory inscription on the edge of a stone bowl from Kuntillet Ajrud reads, “To Obadyaw (Obadiah), the son of Adnah. Blessed be he by YHW.”<sup>24</sup> These invocations of blessings on other people parallel those found in the Bible. However, there is no thoroughly accepted instance of someone “blessing God” in an Israelite inscription. For now, the best we can say is that this phenomenon is only clearly attested in Hebrew scripture and its subsequent textual traditions.

*The bārûk formula.* The last aspect of our discussion of blessing God deals with what is sometimes referred to as the *bārûk* formula. This designation derives from the fact that the *Qal* passive participial form of the lexical root *b-r-k* is *bārûk*.<sup>25</sup> This form commonly occurs in biblical texts in which people invoke God’s blessing on someone *and* in which people invoke a blessing, or praise, *on* God.<sup>26</sup> Examples of occasions on which people invoked a divine blessing on other people, sometimes in a greeting, include the following:

Judges 17:2: “And his mother said, Blessed be thou of the LORD, my son.”

NRSV, Ruth 2:19: “Her mother-in-law said to her, ‘Where did you glean today? And where have you worked? Blessed be the man who took notice of you.’”

NRSV, 1 Samuel 15:13: “When Samuel came to Saul, Saul said to him, ‘May you be blessed by the LORD.’”

There are many passages in which God is the object of invoked blessings. (Grammatically speaking, deity is the syntactic subject of these sentences, but because the blessing was invoked on God, he is semantically the object or recipient of the blessing, so I will refer to deity as the object of blessing even in this passive formulation in the Bible).<sup>27</sup> The use of the *bārûk* formula in this

context parallels the expressions of “blessing” God mentioned above in that some expressions seem more spontaneous, while others are clearly part of formal worship. As is evident in all these passages, Jehovah is most often referred to in the third person, and the text often includes a justification for invoking a “blessing” on God. Examples of both the less and more formal uses of *bārûk* with God as object include the following:

Exodus 18:10: “And Jethro said, Blessed be the LORD, who hath delivered you out of the hand of the Egyptians.”

NRSV, Ruth 4:14: “Then the women said to Naomi, ‘Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin.’”

1 Kings 8:56 (Here Solomon is dedicating the temple in Jerusalem): “Blessed be the LORD, that hath given rest unto his people Israel, according to all that he promised.”

1 Chronicles 29:10: “Wherefore David blessed the LORD before all the congregation: and David said, Blessed be thou, LORD God of Israel our father, for ever and ever.”

Psalm 28:6: “Blessed be the LORD, because he hath heard the voice of my supplications.”

NRSV Psalm 72:18: “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.”

Psalm 89:52: “Blessed be the LORD for evermore. Amen, and Amen.”

In harmony with the assessment presented above, passages in which the *bārûk* formula is used to invoke a blessing on God are best understood as expressions of praise born of gratitude. Gratitude and praise seem to be the predominant Israelite responses to the greatness, the goodness, the mercy, and the holiness of the Lord.<sup>28</sup> A blessing was invoked upon—or in other words, praise and gratitude were expressed to—the true giver of life’s blessings. As one scholar has observed, “Instead of calling for God to be blessed, i.e., to receive prosperity, fertility, etc., *bārûk* called for the praise of God. Praise was

what man could give to God *in lieu* of material benefits as an expression of appreciation for God’s benefaction.”<sup>29</sup> It is thus not surprising that the *bārūk* formula occurs in parallel with verbs of praise. For example:

1 Chronicles 16:36: “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel for ever and ever. And all the people said, Amen, and praised [*hallēl*] the LORD.”

NRSV, Psalm 68:32, 34–35: “Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth; sing praises to the Lord. . . . Ascribe power to God, whose majesty is over Israel; and whose power is in the skies. Awesome is God in his sanctuary, the God of Israel; he gives power and strength to his people. Blessed be God!”

Psalm 106:48: “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting. . . . Praise ye the LORD [*halēlū-yāh*].”

### Modern English Translations

As is evident from the foregoing review, the King James Version regularly translates the Hebrew verb *b-r-k* as “bless” whenever God is the object or the recipient of expressions of blessing. However, a number of modern English translations of the Hebrew Bible, such as the NIV (New International Version) and the NET (New English Translation), follow the scholarly perspective just presented and render most occurrences of *b-r-k* as “praise” when God is the object or recipient of human blessing. For example, Psalm 28:6 is translated in the KJV as “Blessed be the LORD, because he hath heard the voice of my supplications,” but the NIV reads “Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy,” and the NET has, “The LORD deserves praise, for he has heard my plea for mercy!” Similarly, Psalm 34:1 is translated in the KJV as “I will bless the LORD at all times,” but the NIV has, “I will extol the LORD at all times,” and the NET reads “I will praise the LORD at all times.” Somewhat differently, the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) retains the older rendition of *b-r-k* as “bless” in some passages in which God is the object but renders *b-r-k* as “praise” in others, while the New Jewish Publication Society translation most often uses “bless” in the passages under review but occasionally renders *b-r-k* as “praise” or “thanks.”

Thus, when God is the object of verbal forms of *b-r-k*, the KJV accurately translates the basic etymological sense of the Hebrew word. But some modern English Bible translations (and many modern scholars) render verbal forms of *b-r-k* as “praise” in expressions in which God is the recipient of human “blessing.”

### Summary and Application: Expressing Praise

Based on the assessment just presented, when ancient Israelites “blessed” Jehovah, either in spontaneous expression or through more formal means, they were in effect praising and worshiping their God. Using active and passive verbal forms of *b-r-k*, they pronounced and invoked blessings or praise upon God. Praise is any worshipful expression in which the greatness and goodness of God are affirmed. As illustrated in the passages quoted above, as well as others found in the Bible, there were many reasons why people blessed or praised God. One example is found in 1 Kings 8:56 (quoted above): “Blessed be the LORD, that hath given rest unto his people Israel.”

As depicted in the Old Testament, praising Jehovah was a central feature of Israelite religion. Biblically preserved expressions of praise are “found sporadically throughout the historical writings [of the Bible] and rarely in the prophets. In the cult [priestly and temple activity], however, praise became a dominant theme. . . . The psalms describe the proper attitude toward God of pious individuals as well as of the nation as praise. . . . Praise expressed Israel’s faith in God’s goodness and trust in his future benefaction.”<sup>30</sup>

Israelite praise of the Lord was not restricted to mere verbal exclamations. Singing was also a part of Israelite worship, as indicated in Psalm 135:3: “Praise the LORD; for the LORD is good: sing praises unto his name; for it is pleasant” (see also Psalm 68:32–35). Furthermore, Psalm 150, the concluding psalm in the book of Psalms, illustrates well that instrumental music was incorporated into the praise and worship of Jehovah:

Praise ye the LORD [*halēlū-yāh*]. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power. . . .

Praise him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp.

Praise him with the timbrel and dance: praise him with stringed instruments and organs.

Praise him upon the loud cymbals; praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.

Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD. Praise ye the LORD [*halēlū-yāh*]. (Psalm 150:1, 3–6)

Physical movement often (or perhaps always) accompanied verbal or musical expressions of praising and blessing God, as exemplified in these three biblical passages:

1 Kings 8:22: “And Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands toward heaven.”

Psalm 95:6: “O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker.”

Psalm 134:1–2: “Behold, bless ye the LORD, all ye servants of the LORD, which by night stand in the house of the LORD.

Lift up your hands in the sanctuary, and bless the LORD.

It is likely that less formal, more spontaneous expressions of “blessing” God regularly included physical gestures or movement as well, as indicated in Genesis 4:48: “I bowed down my head, and worshipped the LORD, and blessed the LORD God of my master Abraham.”

Scriptural passages in which praise is expressed to God are not limited to the Old Testament. They are well attested in the New Testament and Book of Mormon, and to a lesser extent in the Doctrine and Covenants.<sup>31</sup>

Personally, although I largely agree with the generally accepted academic perspective that “blessing God” essentially overlaps with the concept of praising him, collectively these biblical passages suggest to me something greater than that; otherwise, why use the verb “bless” at all when God is the object or recipient of the blessing, when *b-l-l* or some other Hebrew verb would serve just fine?<sup>32</sup> In this regard, I agree with Jacob Milgrom’s assessment that “to bless God is more than to praise . . . Him; it implies that one must demonstrate to Him reverence and loyalty in deeds as well as words.”<sup>33</sup> Thus, biblical expressions of blessing God include but can be said to go beyond expressing praise. Blessing God seems to me to convey a whole-souled worship of and commitment to him

from whom all true blessings flow. Just as many divine blessings are primarily covenant-relationship dependent, so, I believe, the act of “blessing God” demonstrates a vital dimension of such a relationship. This attitude is demonstrated by a person’s faith, love, obedience, and consecration.<sup>34</sup>

Based on my own experience, the practice of using this language of “blessing God” is not evident in modern Latter-day Saint culture (although it still is in orthodox Jewish culture).<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, it seems to me that, other than verbalizing expressions of praise while singing hymns, many Latter-day Saints are less likely than ancient Israelite worshippers to verbally express praise to God, whatever the verb employed. Something is lost, in my opinion, when both spontaneous and more formal expressions of praising and blessing are absent from the vocabulary we employ in our relationship with God our Father and his Son. I hope this presentation encourages us all to think about reasons for and expressions of praise and worship in our own lives.

As a whole, Psalm 103 gives wonderful voice to the might and mercy of the Lord. In the spirit of offering praise and worship to the great God of Israel, YHWH or Jehovah, who Latter-day Saints understand is Jesus Christ, I conclude this presentation with a few verses from this psalm in which participants are exhorted to “bless” the Lord. Notice the prominent use of *b-r-k* in expressing praise to, but also a sense of adoration for, the Lord:

Bless the LORD, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits. . . .

Bless the LORD, ye his angels, that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word.

Bless ye the LORD, all ye his hosts; ye ministers of his, that do his pleasure.

Bless the LORD, all his works in all places of his dominion: bless the LORD, O my soul. (Psalm 103:1–2, 20–22)

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## Notes

The title quotes Psalm 34:1 (34:2 in the Hebrew version of the Bible). I express my thanks to my former student assistant, Courtney Dotson, for helping gather

materials used in preparing this paper. I also thank my wife, Jane Allis-Pike, for providing feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

1. For a discussion of this point, see Josef Scharbert, “*brk*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, trans. J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 2:293–94, 305 (hereafter *TDOT*); and Christopher Wright Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK “To Bless” in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 26.

2. Biblical quotations cited in this paper are from the King James Version (KJV) unless otherwise indicated. Other cited translations are the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the New International Version (NIV), and the New English Translation (NET).

3. See, for example, the definition in the *Guide to the Scriptures*: “to confer divine favor upon someone.” *Guide to the Scriptures*, “bless, blessed, blessing,” accessed April 8, 2013, <http://www.lds.org/scriptures/gs/bless-blessed-blessing?lang=eng&letter=b>.

4. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), “blessing, blessedness.” See also Mitchell, *Meaning of BRK*, 2.

5. See, for example, Tobit 8:15; 12:6, 17–20; 2 Maccabees 15:29, 34. It is also worth noting that the biblical passages in which deity is the object of human “blessing” are routinely translated with a form of the verb *eulogeō*, “to bless,” in the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures (third to second centuries BC). This indicates that the Jewish translators of the Septuagint were comfortable in continuing to use a word meaning “bless” in expressions with God as the object or recipient.

6. See, for example, Luke 1:68; 2:28; 24:53; Ephesians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3.

7. For example, the *‘amidā*, “the main statutory prayer in Jewish public and private worship since the [Roman] destruction of the Second [Herod’s] Temple”—the “prayer par excellence”—begins with the phrase, “Blessed are You, Lord our God,” which is repeated multiple times (sometimes without “our”) throughout the prayer. Peter Lenhardt, “Amidah,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Jewish Religion*, ed. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 42.

8. For convenience, see the charts of attestation accompanying the entry “*brk*,” in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997), 1:267 (hereafter *TLOT*); and in Mitchell, *Meaning of BRK*, 185.

9. See, for example, L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. and ed. under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1:160–61 (hereafter *HALOT*). For discussions of the possible relationship between Hebrew *b-r-k* I, “to kneel,” and *b-r-k* II, “to bless,” and of the cognate evidence, see Scharbert, “*brk*,” in *TDOT*, 2:279–84; Mitchell, *Meaning of BRK*, 8–16; and Timothy G. Crawford, *Blessing and Curse in Syro-Palestinian Inscriptions of the Iron Age* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 7–12.

10. There are more examples of most of these categories, but space is a limiting factor here. Furthermore, the examples provided here represent broad categories of usage. The



interested reader can pursue the finer points of this discussion by consulting Mitchell and other sources cited in my notes.

11. For a discussion of the form of the divine name YHWH, usually vocalized “Yahweh” by scholars and traditionally rendered “Jehovah” by English speakers, see Dana M. Pike, “The Name and Titles of God in the Old Testament,” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 1 (2010): 17–31, especially 19–21; and Dana M. Pike, “Biblical Hebrew Words You Already Know, and Why They are Important,” *Religious Educator* 7, no. 3 (2006): 97–114, especially 106–9.

12. See Jeremiah 17:5–8 for another pointed example of the contrast between blessing and cursing. I note, without further discussion in this paper, that traditionally it has been accepted that occasionally biblical scribes euphemistically used *b-r-k*, “bless,” to avoid writing that someone “cursed God” (commonly suggested examples include 1 Kings 21:10, 13; Job 1:5, 11). See comments on this by J. K. Aitken, *The Semantics of Blessing and Cursing in Ancient Hebrew* (Louvain: Peeters, 2007), 112 (A.9), 114 (A.6). See also Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 360: “The Bible records another nuance to *berekh*: With God as the object it is [sometimes] a euphemism for *killel*, ‘to treat God lightly, disparagingly’ (e.g., 1 Kings 21:13; Job 1:5, 11; 2:9).”

13. Deuteronomy 29:18–20 and Psalm 49:16–19 (in the Hebrew Bible, verses 17–20) suggest the futility of trying to “bless” oneself. As emphasized above, the blessing comes from God when one is in a proper relationship with him.

14. For brief remarks on the contents of the Aaronic priestly blessing, its occurrence on two small silver foil amulets found at Ketef Hinnom (western Jerusalem), and related matters, see Dana M. Pike, “Israelite Inscriptions from the Time of Jeremiah and Lehi,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS/BYU, 2004), 213–15; and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Dana M. Pike, and David Rolph Seely, *Jehovah and the World of the Old Testament* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 2009), 129, 329.

15. The late Second Temple period includes the last few centuries BC until AD 70, when the Romans destroyed the Jerusalem temple. The late Second Temple–period text most cited in connection with this priestly blessing is in the book of the Apocrypha known as the Wisdom of Ben Sira(ch); see 50:14–21, especially verses 20–21 (NRSV): “Then Simon [the Aaronic High Priest] came down and raised his hands over the whole congregation of Israelites, to pronounce the blessing of the Lord with his lips . . . and they bowed down in worship a second time, to receive the blessing from the Most High.” For a discussion of whether the text in Ben Sira 50 is describing a daily practice or that of the holiday Yom Kippur, see Jeremy Penner, *Patterns of Daily Prayer in Second Temple Period Judaism* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 45–48. Post-temple sources on the priestly blessing include the Mishnah, *Sota* 7:6 and *Tamid* 7:2.

16. Psalm 68:26 is 68:27 in the Hebrew Bible.

17. For references to and a brief overview of older theories on God blessing people and people blessing God, see Mitchell, *Meaning of BRK*, 17–27, 143, 171–77.

18. Psalm 34:1 is 34:2 in the Hebrew Bible.

19. Publications providing an explanation of “blessing God” similar to what is presented herein include Aitken, *Semantics of Blessing and Cursing*, 112–16; Mitchell, *Meaning of BRK*, 133–64; Jenni and Westermann, *TLOT*, 269–70, 281–82; Scharbert, “brk,” in *TDOT*, 2:292–93; *HALOT*, 1:160; and Herbert Chanan Brichto, “Blessing and Cursing,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Macmillan, 1971), 4:1084: “When man is the subject of the verb *berekh* and the Deity is the object, the verb denotes praise, for nowhere in the Bible is there any indication that the power of God is itself increased by man’s pronouncements.”

20. Psalm 63:4 is 63:5 in the Hebrew Bible.

21. See, for example, Aitken, *Semantics of Blessing and Cursing*, 3–4, for comments on the role of context in determining the meaning of a given term. An analogous situation, in my opinion, is what occurred with the expression rendered “hosanna” in the New Testament (*hōsanna* in Greek). This term, exclaimed in Aramaic by some Jews during Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Matthew 21:9; John 12:13)—“Hosanna to the Son of David”—conveyed praise and adoration. However, it is derived from a Hebrew imperative form of the verb *y-š-*, with an appended particle (*-nnā*) that strengthens the request conveyed by the imperative. Thus, viewed etymologically, “hosanna” translates as “save, please” or “save now.” Although this exact form does not occur in the Hebrew Bible, it is presumably based upon, or is at least related to, *hōšī-ā-nnā*, which occurs in Psalm 118:25. In its context in the New Testament, the imperative form “save now,” a plea for deliverance, had become an expression of praise to the one divine being who was actually capable of saving them (and us). See Marin H. Pope, “Hosanna,” in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 3:290–91, for a survey of theories on the history of the development of “hosanna.” Subsequent Christian usage continued employing “hosanna” as a form of praise for Jesus. For example, the term “hosanna” as an expression of praise was “introduced into the Christian liturgy at a very early date. . . . The words ‘Glory be to thee, O Lord, most High’ in the Sanctus of the Anglican BCP [Book of Common Prayer] are a rendering of the *Hosanna in excelsis* (‘Hosanna in the highest’) in the medieval and modern Latin rite.” “Hosanna,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., ed. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (New York: Oxford, 1997), 792. This trend is also evident in Latter-day Saint hymns, such as “The Spirit of God,” with its line “Hosanna, hosanna, to God and the Lamb.” William W. Phelps, “The Spirit of God,” *Hymns* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 2. Whatever one’s view on the development and meaning of “hosanna” in the New Testament and the era in which it was produced, “hosanna” clearly became an expression of praise.

22. Mitchell, *Meaning of BRK*, 12 (see also 134). Mitchell is aware that “the root [*b-r-k*] is used [elsewhere] for the praise of divinities only in Palmyrene dedication formulas from the second to fourth centuries A.D., aside from post-biblical Jewish literature,” but he attributes this later use to biblical influence (as do others).

23. Aitken, *Semantics of Blessing and Cursing*, 113, for example, cites a line from an inscription often designated En Gedi 2 as “an extra-biblical example of man ‘praising’ God” by use of the verb *b-r-k*. The line in question (4) is fragmentary, however, as is the rest of the inscription. Line 4 reads *brk yhw*[—]. Aitken cites Crawford, *Blessing and Curse*, 157–58,

as agreeing with his assertion. However, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp observes, “It is possible that this [yhw] is the complete DN [divine name] . . . or that one should read yhw[h]. Yet it seems more likely that we have here the beginning of a theophoric PN [personal name].” F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp and others, *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Periods of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale, 2005), 151. Likewise, I do not consider the claim by Crawford and Aitken (including their comments on line 7 of the same inscription) to be conclusive at the present time.

24. For these texts (Arad 16; KAjrud 9) and references to related ones, see Dobbs-Allsopp and others, *Hebrew Inscriptions*, 32–33, 283–84. See also the discussion in the previous note. Besides that disputed reading, the only other possible example in an Israelite inscription of a human invoking a blessing on Deity is line 5 of KAjrud 15, in the faded remains of ink writing on plaster. The text in question is presented in *Hebrew Inscriptions*, 287, as *lbrk b'l bym mlh[mb]*, which has been translated as “for the blessed one of the lord on the day of the bat[tle]” (brackets in original). However, Aḥituv translates this as “to [b]less Baal on the day of wa[re].” Shmuel Aḥituv, *Echoes from the Past* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 325; brackets in original. Due to differing translation possibilities (and in some cases, differences in proposed readings), this text cannot be taken as conclusive inscriptional evidence for the practice of “blessing” Deity.

25. A relatively rare alternative to the *bārûk* formula is *mēbōrak*, a *Pual* participle. This participle occurs in conjunction with the name of God, and has essentially the same meaning as *bārûk*, in Psalm 113:2; Job 1:21; and Daniel 2:20 (here in the Aramaic *Pael*). This form is not dealt with further in this study.

26. This is the same Hebrew form used in the name of Jeremiah’s scribe, Baruch (see Jeremiah 36:4–5).

27. I thank Jonathon Owen for reviewing with me the grammatical particulars of passive subjunctives and the translations of these biblical passages in particular.

28. It is possible that other emotions were expressed by Israelites as they “blessed” God, but it is not possible to identify these from what is included in the biblical text. Furthermore, Israelites in antiquity and in the present may conclude that living a faithful, virtuous life is a form of praising God; however, that is not the focus of this study.

29. Mitchell, *Meaning of BRK*, 147.

30. Mitchell, *Meaning of BRK*, 133.

31. This claim can easily be verified by searching for the word “praise” at <http://www.lds.org/search?lang=eng&collection=scriptures&query=praise&sortBy=book>, or with any other search engine that includes all Latter-day Saint scripture.

32. Besides *h-l-l*, another verb meaning “to praise” that commonly occurs in the Hebrew Bible is *y-d-h* (*Hiphil* verbal stem). This latter verb, sometimes rendered “give thanks,” occurs in parallel with *h-l-l* (e.g., Psalms 35:18; 106:1; 109:30) and a few times in parallel with *b-r-k* (Psalms 100:4; 145:10). Such attestations do not negatively impact the view of “blessing God” presented in this paper, in my opinion.

33. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 360.

34. This understanding of “blessing God” thus involves consecrating oneself to him. For a classic sermon on consecration, see Neal A. Maxwell, “Swallowed Up in the Will of the Father,” *Ensign*, November 1995, 22–24.

35. Some Latter-day Saints have occasionally used the language of blessing God. For example, in a letter written to Vienna Jacques, dated September 4, 1833, Joseph Smith wrote, “I received your Letter some time since containing a history of your Journey and your safe arrival for which I bless the Lord.” Quoted in Steven C. Harper, *Making Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2008), 338. In my experience, such usage, presumably influenced by familiarity with the Bible, is rarely if ever employed by Latter-day Saints in the twenty-first century. For Jewish usage of the phrase “bless God,” see note 7 above.