

# THE USE OF THE IMPERATIVE IN BLESSINGS IN THE HEBREW BIBLE<sup>1</sup>

**Wesley Hu**

China Evangelical Seminary  
Taiwan

## I. Introduction

"Blessing" is a word often used and much cherished throughout the history of the Church. A critical examination of its meaning and function, however, came only a few decades ago. The renowned scholar, Claus Westermann, published a book entitled *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* in 1978 (German original 1968).<sup>2</sup> One of the most stimulating points Westermann made is that blessing is not a magical transfer of power but a manifestation of divine activity. The God in the Bible is not One who comes to His people, but One who is present with them. This clarification of the

---

<sup>1</sup> An earlier draft of the paper was presented to the Third Congress of Ethnic Chinese Biblical Scholars, June 1-4, 2009, at Chung Yuan Christian University, Tao Yuan, Taiwan.

<sup>2</sup> Trans. Keith Crim (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

nature of blessing, along with other discussions in the book, has been widely acclaimed and Westermann's book will remain an important monograph for generations to come.<sup>3</sup>

In securing the concept of blessing, Westermann meticulously examined the relevant passages in the two testaments. There is one aspect missing in this book, however. In the blessings in the Bible, especially those of God, the imperative form is frequently employed. Unfortunately, Westermann did not elaborate on any of these occurrences. Such a use deserves some thought because it appears in texts of theological import. For example, in the blessing made to Abram, God said to him, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great." These words are immediately followed by *וְהָיָה בְרַכָּה* which literally means "and be thou a blessing." What is the function of the imperative here? What is the meaning of the imperative in a blessing? To these issues we now turn.

## II. Traditional Interpretation

Traditional interpretation follows standard Hebrew grammars in understanding that an imperative preceded by a direct volitive mood denotes result, purpose or consecution. One commonly cited authority is Joüon-Muraoka.<sup>4</sup> The examples, however, are not as conclusive as one would hope. For a cohortative followed by an imperative, two examples are given.<sup>5</sup> The first text is found in the counsel of Nathan to Bathsheba in 1 Kings 1:12: *אֵינְךָ נָא עֹשֶׂה וּמַלְטִי אֶת־נַפְשְׁךָ וְאֶת־נַפְשִׁי* which Joüon-Muraoka renders by "I want to give you

---

<sup>3</sup> For critical appraisals of the book, see Katharine D. Sakenfeld's review in *Interpretation* 34 (1980): 103-104 and J. J. Schmitt's in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 42 (1980): 113.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Joüon – T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Joüon-Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, § 116f.

some advice so that you may save your own life and the life of your son Solomon". The second passage is from Job 38:3, אָנֹכִי אֶשְׁאֵלְךָ וְתַגִּידְנִי וְתַגִּידְנִי וְתַגִּידְנִי. The translation of the last two clauses provided by Joüon-Muraoka is "I want to question you, and you will inform me". Although this way of understanding the function of the imperative is followed by modern commentators, in both cases there is evidence that ancient readers disagreed. The so-called Kaige edition rendered the imperative in question by ἐξελού (aorist imperative of ἐξαιρέω) and ἀποκρίθητι (aorist imperative of ἀποκρίνομαι) respectively. Not even a hint of consequence or purpose can be detected!

The imperative may be preceded by a jussive. One such example is Psalm 128:5, יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה מִצִּיּוֹן וְרָאָה בְּטוֹב יְרוּשָׁלַם כָּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ. Joüon-Muraoka's understanding of this use of the volitive mood is reflected in the translation which reads, "Yahweh bless you from Zion, so that you may contemplate the beauty of Jerusalem."<sup>6</sup> Analyzing the sentence structure in a different way, the LXX renders it by εὐλογῆσαι σε κύριος ἐκ Σιων καὶ ἴδοις τὰ ἀγαθὰ Ἱερουσαλημ πάσας τὰς ἡμέρας τῆς ζωῆς σου. There is no subordinate purpose clause, which in Septuagint Greek is usually expressed with ἵνα plus the indicative or the subjunctive.<sup>7</sup> Rather, the two aorist optative forms are coordinated with the conjunction καὶ, expressing two wishes. There is still another interpretation to be considered. It has been suggested that the imperative verb starts a new poetic line. For Briggs and Briggs, this is obvious because the use of the imperative is not harmonious with יְבָרְכֶךָ.<sup>8</sup> Dahood also supports this versification. For him, the same syllable count and the synonymous parallelism in

<sup>6</sup> Joüon-Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, § 116f. (emphasis theirs.)

<sup>7</sup> F. C. Conybeare, *A Grammar of Septuagint Greek* (Boston: Ginn, 1905), § 75 and § 106.

<sup>8</sup> C. A. Briggs and E. G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1907), 461.

וּרְאֵה-בָּנִים לְבְנֵיךָ שְׁלוֹם and וּרְאֵה בְּטוֹב יְרוּשָׁלַם כֹּל יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ and עַל-יִשְׁדָּאֵל are clear indicators.<sup>9</sup> Although these scholarly opinions, ancient or modern, do not invalidate Joüon-Muraoka's interpretation, they caution us not to jump to a conclusion. A closer look is needed.

Another authoritative grammar is that of Gesenius.<sup>10</sup> He states:

The imperative, when depending (with waw copulative) upon a jussive (cohortative), or an interrogative sentence, frequently expresses also a consequence which is to be expected with certainty, and often a consequence which is intended, or in fact, an intention.<sup>11</sup>

His examples include Naomi's speech to the two daughters-in-law in Ruth 1:9, וַיְהִי יְהוָה לָכֶם וּמִצְאֵן מְנוּחָה אִשָּׁה בַּיִת אִשָּׁה (NRSV: "The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband"). Although adopting this interpretation, Campbell nevertheless feels constrained to seek a lost word to connect the two separate clauses.<sup>12</sup> An alternative takes the second clause introduced by וּמִצְאֵן as an object clause.<sup>13</sup> The passage then can be rendered by "May Yahweh allow you to find security, each of you in the house of your husband." The LXX puts forward yet another understanding. Its rendition has two aorist optative verbs δόη and εὔροιτε linked by καὶ. The clauses are coordinated. To summarize, Gesenius' explanation of consequence or intention in this case is not supported by ancient versions and is not accepted by modern scholars.

---

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III: 101-150* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 229.

<sup>10</sup> E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, trans. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910). This work will be referred to as GKC hereafter.

<sup>11</sup> GKC, § 110i.

<sup>12</sup> E. F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 65-66.

<sup>13</sup> See Joüon-Muraoka, § 177h. This interpretation is accepted by Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 22-24. Sasson and Joüon-Muraoka, however, do not explain the use of the peculiar imperative. We believe that it has its origin in the blessing formula. See the discussion on Ruth 4: 11 below.

Another example is from Elisha's instruction to Naaman, הָלוֹךְ וְרָחַצְתָּ שֶׁבַע־פְּעָמִים בַּיַּרְדֵּן וְיָשַׁב בְּשָׂרְךָ לָךְ וְטָהַר (2 Kings 5:10), which NRSV translates as, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." This view can claim support from most commentators.<sup>14</sup> Its analysis places וְטָהַר in subordination to וְרָחַצְתָּ. It seems reasonable to do so since the previous verb וְיָשַׁב is dependent on וְרָחַצְתָּ too.

The only problem, however, is that once again ancient speakers disagreed. When Naaman went away in a rage because of the way he was treated, his servants came up to urge him. Most important for us is their summary of the prophet's message. They said, וְיָשַׁב וְטָהַר כִּי־אָמַר אֵלֶיךָ רַחֵץ וְיָשַׁב (NRSV: "all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'").<sup>15</sup> Naaman's servants are clearly depicted as having understood the two imperatives not as one subordinate to the other, but as two consecutive commands.<sup>16</sup> Taking this fact into consideration, it is better, at least for the present, to remove this from the list.

Some other examples listed by Gesenius could be dismissed easily as non-conclusive. The imperatives in Exodus 14:16 וְרָחַצְתָּ וְרָחַצְתָּ וְרָחַצְתָּ (NRSV: But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it) are taken by most scholars as consecutive commands.<sup>17</sup> The case in Job 11:6 וְיִגְדֶלְךָ תַּעֲלָמוֹת חֻכְמָה כִּי־כַפְלִים לְחֹשֶׁה וְדַע כִּי־יִשָּׂה לָךְ אֱלֹהִים

<sup>14</sup> For example, Mordechai Cogan and Hayim Tadmor, *II Kings* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1988), 64. C. F. Burney, *The Book of Judges and Notes on the Hebrew Text of the Books of Kings* (New York: KTAV, reprint 1970), II, 6 and 280.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, this is how most commentators understand the two imperatives.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, it can be argued that these Aramaeans were not at home with the Hebrew language and therefore misconstrued Elisha's words. It will be shown in our discussion that this grammatical construction occurs in various Semitic languages. Unless we have enough evidence, arguing that some ancient writers or speakers were incompetent has little merit.

<sup>17</sup> For example, William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1 – 18* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1999), 463.

מַעֲוֹנָךְ (NRSV: and that he would tell you the secrets of wisdom! For wisdom is many-sided. Know then that God exacts of you less than your guilt deserves) is no different.<sup>18</sup>

Based on the discussion above, it seems reasonable to suggest a new understanding of the imperative following a volitive mood that has not been properly registered by the grammars. We assert that the imperative in such a grammatical construction may be chosen to express a positive command. This is not to deny the traditional understanding of purpose, result, consequence and intention, but to add one more choice, that is, command, to the range of meaning for the imperative following a volitive.

Having pointed out the possibility of another interpretation, we now proceed to consider its applicability in the blessing formula. Is this line of thought preferable or even demanded? Do we have any hard evidence to substantiate this claim? The first blessing in the Bible will be our point of departure.

Genesis 1: 22 records, וַיְבָרֶךְ אֱלֹהִים לְאמֹר פְּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ אֶת־הַיָּם וְהָעוֹף בַּיָּמִים וְהָעוֹף יִרְבֶּה בָאָרֶץ (NRSV: God blessed them, saying: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."). In the sentence, there are three imperatives followed by one jussive, expressing a series of commands. Intriguingly, these words of divine order constitute the first benediction in the eyes of the biblical writer. So the text explicitly states, God blessed them!

A blessing consisting of commands alone may seem bizarre to us. Yet this is not a single incident in the opening chapter of Genesis; it is in fact a recurring theme in the whole book. The same grammatical construction and vocabulary occur again in Genesis 1:28 (to the first man and woman), 9:1 (to Noah) and 35:11 (to Jacob). There is no ambiguity. Real imperatives do exist in blessings!

---

<sup>18</sup> For example, both NRSV and NIV translate the imperative as the command, "know!"

But how shall we understand these commands? Commentators of various theological orientations are in agreement on the solution. The reason why the imperatives are used is because the fiat of the Creator was the actual communication of the capacity to propagate and increase in numbers.<sup>19</sup> But this is not convincing, especially in the cases of Noah and Jacob. Human beings had already been invested with the power to procreate. The flood destroyed many lives, but not Noah's capacity to be fruitful and multiply. Why would God give something He has already given? Likewise, there is no hint in the text that Jacob's capability of procreation had been jeopardized. The explanation accepted by many is not satisfactory. As a result, we still need to look for an answer. Because the study of Biblical Hebrew as a language has benefited greatly from the study of other Semitic languages, in the following discussion, we will take a look at comparative Semitic studies and see what light may be shed.

### III. In the Light of Other Semitic Languages

Blessing was a common theme in the textual evidence from the ancient Near East. Our first relevant document came from Tannach. It was a letter dated to the fifteenth century B.C. The text was first published by F. Hrozny in 1905.<sup>20</sup> Later E. I. Gordon and A. E. Glock collated the reading.<sup>21</sup> Their examination of the original tablet, however, is not available to us at this moment. Therefore, we follow Hronzy's text, but use Glock's revised translation.<sup>22</sup> The debated points of the reading make no material difference for our subject.

---

<sup>19</sup> Of Jewish tradition, see Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 11. From the conservative camp, see C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, reprint 1996), vol. 1, 38. For a critical approach, see Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, trans. J. H. Marks, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1973), 56.

<sup>20</sup> E. Sellin, *Tell Ta'annek*. Denkschr. Wien, Phil.-Hist. Klasse, vol. 50, No. 4 (Wien, 1904), 15-16.

<sup>21</sup> A. E. Glock, "A New Ta'aneke Tablet," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 204 (1971): 17-30.

<sup>22</sup> A. E. Glock, "Text and Archaeology at Tell Ta'aneke," *Berytus* 31(1983): 59-60.

TT 1:

<i>a – na <sup>m</sup>Ištar – wa – šur</i>	To Talwasur
<i>ki – be – ma</i>	speak.
<i>[u]m – ma <sup>m</sup>Gu – li – <sup>ilu</sup>Addi</i>	Thus (says) Ehli-Tesub:
<i>bu – lu – ut dam – ki – iš</i>	Live well!
<i>ilani li – iš – a – lu</i>	May the gods consider
<i>šu – lum – ka šu – lum</i>	your welfare, the welfare
<i>bîti – ka mârê – ka</i>	of your household, of your
	children.
<i>at – ta ta – aš – pu – rum</i>	You have written to me
<i>a – na ia – ši aš – šum kaspi...</i>	about the silver.
<i>u a – nu – ma a – na – di[n]</i>	And now I will give
<i>L kaspu<sup>pl.</sup> ki la e – [t]e – pu – šu</i>	50 silver. How could I not
	do so?
<i>ša – ni – tam a – na mi – nim</i>	Furthermore, why
<i>u – tir tu – wa – š[a] – ru – ni</i>	do you not send
<i>šu – lum – ka a – na – mu</i>	your greeting to me?
<i>u a – wa – tam mi – im – ma</i>	And whatever word
<i>ša ti – iš – mi</i>	that you have heard
<i>iš – tu aš – ra – nu – um...</i>	from there
<i>ḫât<sup>ilu</sup> Bêl – ra – am id – i</i>	send to me.
<i>ša – ni – tam u šum – ma</i>	Another matter, if
<i>i – ba – ši u – ba – an</i>	there is a finger
<i><sup>ilu</sup>A – ši – rat liš – ni – nu</i>	of <i>zarninu</i> -wood
<i>u – liš – mu – ur – ru</i>	and myrrh
<i>u it – ta – am</i>	then give (them) to me
<i>u a – wa – tam te – ra – ni</i>	And send back to me word
<i>aš – šum<sup>sal</sup> mârti – ka ni – du</i>	about the servant-girl, Kan...
<i>ša i – na<sup>al</sup> Ru – bu – te (ki)</i>	who is in Rubbuti
<i>[sa] Ša – al – mi – ša</i>	regarding her welfare
<i>u šum – ma i – ra – bi</i>	and if she is willing
<i>[t]a – da – an – ši a – na ša – ru – te</i>	sell her off for ransom money
<i>ši – i lu – u a – na be – lim</i>	or to the overlord.



What is interesting to our study is the blessing found in line 4, "Live well!" which, in the opinion of Rainey, is "an unusual blessing formula."<sup>23</sup> Unusual though it may be, Rainey himself supplies two other cases of the same greeting found in Alalakh, AT 109:3 and AT 116:15.<sup>24</sup>

According to Glock, Ehli-Tešub, the writer of this letter, represents an overlord, perhaps the Mitannian king Parattarna, contemporary of Idrimi of Alalakh to whom the *belim* of line 30 refers.<sup>25</sup> It is clear from the text that he requests various kinds of material and social arrangements from Talwašur, the same subject matter of another letter, TT 2.<sup>26</sup> These arrangements most likely reflect the political relationship between the rulers of that time. They formed alliance by the bond of love and friendship that befits brothers, and the visible expression of this bond was the exchange of gifts. The silver and various goods mentioned in the text were things of this nature. One wonders, could this unusual blessing formula reflect in some way the brotherhood relationship between Ehli-Tešub and Talwašur?

In the Amarna Letters, one piece of correspondence from a princess provides a lovely comparison.

---

<sup>23</sup> A. F. Rainey, *Canaanite in the Amarna Tablets* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), vol. 2, 274.

<sup>24</sup> Rainey, *Canaanite in the Amarna Tablet*, 274.

<sup>25</sup> Glock, "Text and Archaeology," 60.

<sup>26</sup> Glock, "Text and Archaeology," 62.

EA 12:<sup>27</sup>

1	<i>a-na</i> <sup>m</sup> <i>Bi-lí-ia</i>	To my lord,
2.	<i>ki-bí-ma um-ma</i>	say. Thus saith
3.	<i>mârat šarri-ma</i>	the daughter of the king:
4.	<i>a-na ka-šá</i> <sup>is</sup> <i>narkabâtí<sup>[ij]</sup>-ka</i>	With thee, thy chariot,
5.	<i>[a]-m[i]-l[u-t] [ù bîti-k]a</i>	thy [pe]ople, and th[y house]
6.	<i>lu-ú [š]ú-u[l-m]u</i>	may it be [we]ll!
7.	<i>ilâni šá<sup>m</sup>B[u]r-ra-bur-[i]a-áš</i>	May the gods of Burraburias
8.	<i>it-ti-ka li-li-ku</i>	go with thee!
9.	<i>šal-mi-iš a-li-ik</i>	Go in peace!
10.	<i>ù i-na šá-la-me</i>	And in peace
11.	<i>'i-ir-ma bîta-ka a-mur</i>	return thou and behold thy house!
12.	<i>i-na p[a] [ni-ka]</i>	To thy face
13.	<i>a-ka-an-n[a] u[l]_____</i>	Then_____
14.	<i>um-ma-a ul-tum g[i]</i>	thus: "Since_
15.	<i>mâr šip-ri-ia ši-ir-pa</i>	of my messenger coloured material
16.	<i>ú-še-bi-la a-na</i>	have I sent."
17.	<i>alâni-ka ù bîti<sup>ti</sup>-ka</i>	With thy cities and thy house
18.	<i>lu-ú ul-mu</i>	may it be well!
19.	<i>it-ti li-bi-ka</i>	ith thy heart
20.	<i>l[a] ta-[d]a-[b]u-[u]b_</i>	shalt thou no[t sp]eak_,
21.	<i>ù ia-a-ši it-ku l[a]</i>	and to me thou shalt [no]t
22.	<i>te-te-en-da-ni</i>	establish.
23.	<i>ardu-ka</i> <sup>m</sup> <i>Ki-din-addi</i> _____	Kidin-Addi, thy servant,
24.	<i>i-šá-ak-ni</i>	adds:
25.	<i>a-na di-na-an</i> _____	"Into the presence of
26.	<i>be-lí-ia lu-ul-lik</i>	my lord may I come!"

According to Moran, the script of the letter is Babylonian, not Egyptian and so the letter was probably written in Babylonia and sent

<sup>27</sup> Samuel A. B. Mercer, *The Tell el-Amarna Tablets* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1939), vol. 1, 38-39.

by a Babylonian princess.<sup>28</sup> The form of the opening as well as the appellation indicates that an inferior wrote this letter to a superior.<sup>29</sup> Before considering the function of the imperatives, let us first consider a different translation put forward by Moran which reads, "March in safety, and safely push on so you will see your house (again)."<sup>30</sup> This rendering understands the final injunctive form in line 11, *a-mur*, as expressing purpose.<sup>31</sup> This syntactical structure has its counterpart in Biblical Hebrew, which we have discussed above. Whether our proposal is applicable in Akkadian awaits further study.

Even if Moran's translation is to be preferred, one still needs to account for the imperative in line 9, *šal-mi-iš a-li-ik* (March in safety!).<sup>32</sup> Although this letter is different from TA 1 above, in that the sender was inferior to the recipient in terms of social status, they seem to share something in common. Since royal marriage was a common means for establishing political alliance, a kinship formed and a treaty mediated by this Babylonian princess very likely forms the background of the story.

Another germane document is the Assyrian ritual text, KAR 139. It contains the scenario for a specific cultic occasion. The supplicant performs in two parallel scenes acts of allegiance directed toward certain cult objects. Then, the priest pronounces declarations in the name of the goddess *Ištar* after each of the two scenes. The blessing is as follows.

---

<sup>28</sup> William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 24.

<sup>29</sup> For the implications of the relative social status of the forms of the letters, see Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, xxii-xxiii.

<sup>30</sup> Moran, *The Amarna Letters*, 24. Moran's translation of the text is significantly different at the end of the letter, but that is irrelevant to our discussion.

<sup>31</sup> John Huehnergard, *A Grammar of Akkadian* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), § 16.4.

<sup>32</sup> Some may argue that the same principle operates here also. The translation then will be, "May the gods of Burraburias go with thee so that you may march in safety." This seems fine, but the remaining *ù i-na šá-la-me 'i-ir-ma bita-ka a-mur* is difficult.

KAR 139 (reverse, partial):<sup>33</sup>

2 <sup>LU</sup> SANGA i-kar-rab-šu ma-a <sup>dU+DAR</sup> ša AN-e [     ]  
 3 dam-qa-te-ka lu tàq-bi ma-a ki-I zi-qu [an-ni-tu]  
 4 nam-ra-tu-ni na-ma-ra ša-la-ma <sup>dU+DAR</sup> lu ta-ši-m[a-ku]  
 5 ma-a a-ba-ta ù pi-ri-il-ta ša <sup>dU+DAR</sup> ú-šu[r]  
 6 ma-a a-ba-ta ša <sup>dU+DAR</sup> tul-te-ši-ma la ta-bal-laṭ  
 7 ù pi-ro-il-ta-ša la ta-ta-šar-ma la ta-ša-lim  
 8 ma-a <sup>dU+DAR</sup> pi-i-ka li-ša-an-ka lu ta-šur  
 9 ...

Translation:

The priest blesses him, saying: "May the heavenly *Ištar* speak nicely of you [to ...]! As [this] torch is bright, may *Ištar* decree brightness and prosperity to you. Guard the word and secrets of *Ištar*! Should you leak out the word of *Ištar* you shall not live, and should you not guard her secrets, you shall not prosper. May *Isûtar* guard your mouth and tongue!"

Before we comment on its significance, a few remarks on the language and style are helpful. According to Menzel, the language of this piece of literature is pure Neo-Assyrian.<sup>34</sup> Stylistically, although it is not purely poetry, it employs many poetic devices such as alliteration, chiasm, synonymous parallelism and parataxis. The feature of half prose, half poetry groups this document with many Neo-Assyrian prophecies.<sup>35</sup>

Not only is its literary association interesting, its religious aspect is worth comment. Oppenheim notes that, in general, the Mesopotamian priest acts as a personal servant of the deity to whom

<sup>33</sup> B. Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), II, 1.

<sup>34</sup> Menzel, *Assyrische Tempel*, II, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Simo Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecy* (Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1997), lxvii.

he offers hymnic praise and opulent sacrifices.<sup>36</sup> In this ritual, however, the devotee is the one who performs cultic acts to express his adoration to the deity. The priest appears as the spokesman of the deity and, as such, his function is entirely different from the Mesopotamian. On the role of the worshiper, Oppenheim writes,

the supplicant is granted in our ritual a more active cultic role, with a heavier moral responsibility placed upon him inasmuch as he has to assume certain permanent behavioral obligations in order to have a claim on the goddess' favor."<sup>37</sup>

Because of the emphasis on the worshiper's behavior and the warning of its dire consequence if the commands are not observed, the effect of the ritual is not automatic. The blessing that is pronounced by the priest does not depend on the goodwill of the deity alone. The supplicant has to obey the rules. These rules that are critical to the devotee's well being must have been known to him beforehand.<sup>38</sup> In fact, Oppenheim considers the relationship between the deity and the supplicant to be that of a "covenant."<sup>39</sup> In this covenantal relationship, each party has a role to play. But this document highlights one interesting fact, that is, their acts converge in actualizing the blessings. The worshiper is commanded to "guard the word and secrets of *Ištar*", and *Ištar* is also invoked to "guard the mouth and the tongue" of the worshiper.

The importance of Ugaritic literature to the study of Biblical Hebrew has long been noted. We shall now consider what it may provide us. With regard to the topic at hand, KTU 1.15 seems the most relevant. At Kirta's house, after the gods are assembled (II: 11),

---

<sup>36</sup> A. Leo Oppenheim, "Analysis of an Assyrian Ritual (KAR 139)," *History of Religions* 5 (1965): 254.

<sup>37</sup> Oppenheim, "Analysis of an Assyrian Ritual (KAR 139)," 254.

<sup>38</sup> Oppenheim, "Analysis of an Assyrian Ritual (KAR 139)," 255.

<sup>39</sup> Oppenheim, "Analysis of an Assyrian Ritual (KAR 139)," 255.

Baal invites El to bless Kirta (II: 13 – 16). The text goes on to tell of El raising his glass and pronouncing a word of blessing (II: 18 – 20). The blessing is recorded in II: 21 – III: 16 with about 15 lines missing at the beginning of column III. The assembled gods then give their blessing and depart (III: 17 – 19).

KTU 1.15:<sup>40</sup>

II.18 – 20	<i>brkm ybrk / [‘bdh]</i>	He blesses, yes, blesses [his servant]
	<i>ybrk il krt / [t‘</i>	El blesses Kirta [the Noble,
	<i>yml]m n‘m[n] ḡlm il/</i>	Prosper]ers the Pleasant, Lad of El:
21 – 23	<i>a[tt tq]ḥ ykrt</i>	The w[ife you have tak]en, O Kirta,
	<i>att tqḥ btk</i>	The wife to your palace you've taken,
	<i>ḡlmt tš‘rb / ḥzrk</i>	girl you've brought into your court,
23 – 25	<i>tld šb‘ bnm lk /</i>	Seven children to you she will bear,
	<i>wṭmn tṭmnm / lk</i>	Eight, she will bear to you eight!
	<i>tld yšb ḡlm</i>	She will bear you the Lad, Yassib,
26 – 28	<i>ynq ḥlb ‘ttrt /</i>	Who'll draw on the milk of Astarte,
	<i>mšš ṯd btlṯ [‘nt] /</i>	And suck at the breast of Maid [Anath],
	<i>mšnq[ṯ ilm]</i>	The wet-nurses [of the gods].
III. 2 – 4	<i>[mid rm] krt /</i>	[May you be much exalted,] O Kirta,
	<i>[btk rpi] arš /</i>	[Among] the Netherworld's [shades],
	<i>[bphr] qbš dtn /</i>	[In the midst] of Ditana's company!

<sup>40</sup> For the text, reconstruction and translation, we follow Edward L. Greenstein, "Kirta," in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon Parker (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 24-25.

The interpretation of this text has not been easy. Especially difficult is the precise value of the various verbal forms. For example, *tqh* in II.21 is a past event ("you have taken") in Greenstein's view, but for Wyatt, it is a jussive conveying a command, "Take a wife!"<sup>41</sup> More pertinent to our study is the reading in III.2 which is generally restored based on the parallel line in III.13 to be [*mid rm*] *krt*. The verb form is obviously an imperative and the clause can be rendered by, "Be greatly exalted, O Kirta." Greenstein, however, understands the imperative as jussive. His translation reads, "May you be much exalted, O Kirta."<sup>42</sup> Another possibility is Parker's view that the imperative functions like an indicative. On this understanding, the sense of the text is "Kirta will be great."<sup>43</sup>

To decide the intended meaning of the imperative seems to be a judgment call. We are not deprived of hints, however. In explaining why the indicative mood ("she will bear") is preferable to the jussive ("may she bear") in lines 23 to 25, Parker argues that "since it is a god who is speaking, the blessing can be expressed in the indicative and can spell out details of the future (the number, names, etc)."<sup>44</sup>

We commend Parker in his understanding of the predicative nature involved, but his claim that the imperative can be used as indicative finds little support. Based on our current knowledge of Ugaritic, it seems better to regard this imperative, just as those we have seen before, as expressing a positive command.

---

<sup>41</sup> N. Wyatt, *Religious Texts from Ugarit* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 209.

<sup>42</sup> Greenstein, "Kirta," 25.

<sup>43</sup> Simon Parker, "The Marriage Blessing in Israelite and Ugaritic Literature," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 26.

<sup>44</sup> Parker, "The Marriage Blessing in Israelite and Ugaritic Literature," 27.

The parallel of this blessing to the one in the book of Ruth (4:11-12) is striking. Parker identifies many similarities between the two blessings.<sup>45</sup> First, the literary setting is the same. The scene of the blessing is between the contracting and consummation of a marriage. Second, both blessings have the same form in that they are addressed to the bridegroom, but speak immediately of the bride. Third, the greatness of the groom is a real concern. To this list, we may add that the grammatical form chosen to express this concern is the same – they are imperatives!

There are some differences to be noted, too. In the mythic-epic Kirta text, the scene is cultic. Wyatt has documented the iconographical evidence related to this ceremonial use of the libation by El in the presence of the gods.<sup>46</sup> He concludes that this is a cultic occasion in which the relationship of the king Kirta to the gods (who later bless Kirta also) and to El in particular is affirmed.<sup>47</sup> In such a situation, the imperative could naturally be understood as a command to Kirta for his willing participation in the advance of the divine will and the fulfillment of the divine promise.

In the real-life situation in Ruth, this part of the story took place in the city gate, which was the social, legal and economic center. Here all the people who were at the gate uttered the blessing to one powerful man in the city. The attitude of this group of people indicated the community's "official position" on the impending marriage.<sup>48</sup> In other words, they acted corporately as the most prominent person in a marriage feast who pronounced the marriage blessing, much like El in the case of Kirta. The imperatives in Ruth 4:11, וַעֲשֵׂה-הֵיל בְּאַפְרָתָה וּקְרֵא-שֵׁם בְּבֵית לָחֵם conveyed some force

---

<sup>45</sup> Parker, "The Marriage Blessing in Israelite and Ugaritic Literature," 23-30, especially 30.

<sup>46</sup> Wyatt, *Religious Texts*, 208, n143.

<sup>47</sup> W. G. E. Watson & N. Wyatt eds., *Handbook of Ugaritic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 570.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy M. Willis, *The Elders of the City* (Atlanta: SBL, 2001), 280.



of exhortation and encouragement.<sup>49</sup> In this way, it formalized their approval of Boaz's action. The people had gladly invoked Yahweh to bless the woman. They then turned to encourage Boaz to join in the work of the Lord and, in continuing to do so, to actualize the blessing. This understanding accords well with the research conducted by Myhill and Smith. In their study on the use of the imperative they observed that verb-initial signals cooperation while non-verb initial is associated with obligation.<sup>50</sup> The verb-initial imperative is employed to urge Boaz to cooperate with God to make the blessing a reality!

At this juncture, it may be helpful to compare another similar case, that is, the blessing on Rebekah in Genesis 24:60, וַיְבָרְכוּ אֶת־רֵבְקָה וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהּ אַחֲחַנּוּ אֶתְ הַיְי לְאַלְפֵי רֵבְבָהּ אֶת שְׂעָר שְׂנְאָיו וַיִּירֶשׁ וַיְרַעַד אֶת שְׂעָר שְׂנְאָיו (NRSV: And they 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"). This blessing is different from the one in Ruth in that there is no mention of deity. We may surmise that the biblical writer was unwilling to introduce any foreign god, and yet he could not put the name of the Lord into the mouth of the idol worshipers. Therefore, the valediction begins with a vocative. It is similar to many blessings in the Bible, however. One similarity is the concern for progeny. The imperative form also links this blessing with Genesis 1:28, 9:1 and 9:7. The other likeness involves security. In fact, it repeats almost word for word the promise made to Abraham in 22:17: your offspring will possess the gate of their enemy.

According to the traditional interpretation, the imperative is used to express a wish, as the above translation from NRSV shows. This view is certainly possible, but so many parallels we have seen alert

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Mayer Lambert, *Traité de Grammaire Hébraïque* (Hildesheim: Verlag, 1972), § 719.

<sup>50</sup> John Myhill and Laura A. Smith, "The Discourse and Interactive Functions of Obligation Expressions," in *Modality in Grammar and Discourse*, eds. Joan Bybee and Suzanne Fleischman (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995), 282.

us to consider otherwise. Observing the grammatical construction, one finds that two different verbal forms express the two concerns of the blessing: one imperative and the other jussive. If we allow the imperative to be understood according to its form, these words beautifully link the worlds of the divine and human. The non-initial imperative, signaling obligation as Myhill and Smith have observed, is used by the brothers to make clear to her that she has a responsibility to bring forth the good wishes. This is in harmony with Schmid's idea that "to be blessed" is to be in a state of existence in accordance with the divine created order.<sup>51</sup>

Taking the imperative as it is has another advantage that the importance of present time is acknowledged. No doubt the time frame extends to the future, as the second line of the blessing clearly suggests. But Rebekah's family members do not simply utter words of blessing and let the "here and now" be blurred in the hope of something in the future. Rather they seize the moment, and the future aspect in the blessing is, in a sense, a repetition and accumulation of the present time. The importance of "here and now" can be seen in another ancient inscription from the fifth century B.C., the famous Carpentras stele written in Egyptian Aramaic.

*CIS II, 141 (KAI 269):*<sup>52</sup>

1	<i>brykh tb' brt thpy</i>	Blessed is Tb' daughter of Thpy
2	<i>tmnh' zy 'wsry 'lh'</i>	a 'worthy' of the god Osiris
3	<i>mnd'm b'yš l' 'bdt</i>	She did no evil thing
4	<i>wkrsy 'yš l' 'mrt tmh</i>	nor spoke slander of any man here
5	<i>qdm 'wsry brykh hwy</i>	Be blessed before Osiris
6	<i>mn qdm 'wsry myn qhy</i>	take water from before Osiris.
7	<i>hwy plhh nm'ty</i>	Serve the 'holy barque'
8	<i>wbyn hsyh...</i>	and among the praised...

<sup>51</sup> H. H. Schmid, *Frieden im alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Verlag, 1971), 54-56.

<sup>52</sup> The English translation is taken from J. C. Greenfield, "The 'Periphrastic Imperative' in Aramaic and Hebrew," *Israel Exploration Journal* 19 (1969): 202.

This text has several noteworthy features. First of all, stylistically it is highly elevated. Torrey argues that it has unquestionable syllabic meter.<sup>53</sup> Although there is no scholarly consensus with regard to meter in Aramaic, the rhythmic swing of our text can hardly escape one's notice.

Secondly, as Torrey notes, this is interesting as a religious document, and especially as an expression of human affection coupled with the conviction that the personal qualities which endeared this girl to her relatives and friends on earth will give her a favored place before the gods of the lower world.<sup>54</sup>

The third significant feature is the use of the so-called periphrastic imperative in line 7.<sup>55</sup> In this grammatical construction, the imperative of *hwy* is used together with the participle of another verb. In his study on this particular use, Greenfield notes that, "the periphrastic use of *hwy* allowed for a durative and iterative nuancing of the tenses."<sup>56</sup> In other words, the present-future are closely combined and yet each perspective is equally in view.

In Biblical Hebrew, there is no concrete evidence of this use, though a couple of possible occurrences can be cited (Ex 34:2; 19:11, 15 and Ps 30:11). By contrast, there is extensive use in Mishnaic Hebrew, due perhaps to the Aramaic influence.<sup>57</sup> Again in those texts, the present time and the action on the part of addressee are emphasized. In light of these discussions, it seems reasonable to conclude that the occurrence of the periphrastic imperative in the

---

<sup>53</sup> Charles C. Torrey, "A Specimen of Old Aramaic Verse," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 46 (1926): 242 & 246.

<sup>54</sup> Torrey, "A Specimen of Old Aramaic Verse," 244.

<sup>55</sup> Since in all the examples of periphrastic imperative, the word order is *hwy* plus participle. It is better to analyze *brykh hwy* in line 5 as an adjective followed by the simple imperative of *hwy*. See Greenfield, "The 'Periphrastic Imperative' in Aramaic and Hebrew," 204.

<sup>56</sup> Greenfield, "The 'Periphrastic Imperative' in Aramaic and Hebrew," 201.

<sup>57</sup> See Greenfield, "The 'Periphrastic Imperative' in Aramaic and Hebrew," 209 for a list of the texts.

Carpentras blessing is no accident. The writer adopts a grammatical construction suitable for this purpose to give priority to the fusion of the present and future.

#### IV. Re-examining the Passages in Genesis

With a better understanding, we shall now reexamine the biblical passages. As we have seen, the imperative in the blessing formula comes in two forms: one preceded by the conjunction *waw* after a volitive, the other standing alone. The following discussion will start from the second type, and for this type, from Genesis 1:22.

We have argued that practically all commentators misunderstand the nature of God's oral blessings in saying that God's spoken words somehow bestowed upon the people and animals the power of fertility or the ability to reproduce. Mitchell agrees. He says, "...the animals and people had already been created and were already capable of reproduction. In all four verses, *brk* Piel simply means 'to pronounce a blessing formula.'<sup>58</sup> He then offers another interpretation, "because the formula is a blessing, it expresses God's approval and desire that they reproduce. The formula is an illocutionary utterance equivalent in meaning to God saying: 'I hereby declare my desire for you to reproduce and so fill the earth.'<sup>59</sup> In other words, for Mitchell, the imperative signifies intention.

Mitchell's sensitivity to the issues involved is notable. His view, however, does not do full justice to the text. He agrees that the recurrent phrase אֱלֹהִים יְאָמַר followed by יְהִי־כֵן (1:6-7, 9, 11, 14-15, 24) communicates that the divine word itself is sufficient.

---

<sup>58</sup> Christopher W. Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "To Bless" in the Old Testament* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 62.

<sup>59</sup> Mitchell, *The Meaning of BRK "To Bless" in the Old Testament*, 62.

Nevertheless, he fails to recognize its authority. To say that God's words signify merely His intention downplays the gravity conveyed by those words.

When the blessing formula is pronounced in a setting of covenant making or renewing, the mutual relationship is in focus as we have seen in KTU 1.15, KAR 139, and possibly in TA1 and EA 12. Since the Creation account has been demonstrated to have a covenant form and content,<sup>60</sup> we shall understand the imperatives in light of our previous discussion. From the suzerain's point of view, it can be explained as God's intention and desire. From the side of the vassal, it conveys a command to humankind, demanding their cooperation. With this understanding we can appreciate Wenham's insight when he says, "Divine blessing continues God's benevolent work in creation, and the writer exploits the verbal similarity between the terms [בָּרַךְ and בְּרָא] to draw attention to their theological relationship."<sup>61</sup> God can bring the creation into existence and has done so. Now He delegates and commissions. The creatures and humankind in particular are entrusted with the work God himself does. By aligning themselves with God, continuing His work, they are indeed blessed!

Similarly, the additional imperatives God addresses to the man, "subdue the earth and rule over the fish..." (1:28) do not somehow instill within the man the ability to exercise dominion. Instead by them God confirms the natural order which he had already built into the creation. God declares that he wants people to exercise dominion because he had designed the creation with dominion as humankind's natural function. The man is to obey and function as God's representative on earth, since he is made in God's image (1:26). In taking on the role God has played, human beings have a chance to demonstrate the divine image externally and to experience it internally. Indeed, it is a supreme blessing!

---

<sup>60</sup> Jeffrey J. Niehaus, *God at Sinai* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 144-153.

<sup>61</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco: Word, 1987), 24.

We shall now turn to the other type, that is, the imperative conjoined with *waw* preceded by a jussive. The passage we will discuss is the pivotal passage, the divine promise to Abraham.

As students of the Bible know, the imperative is the most forceful way to ask someone to do something in Biblical Hebrew. Genesis 12:1-3 begins with such a command from God to Abram, "Go from your country." With a simple imperative, God's plan of salvation and gift of blessing start to unfold.

The meaning of the following words is debatable, especially with regard to the phrase *וְהָיָה בְרָכָה*. Noting that the precise interpretation is uncertain, Wenham nevertheless renders 12:2 in this way, "I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, *and you shall be a blessing*."<sup>62</sup> He appeals first to Gesenius' grammar which we have demonstrated to be unconvincing. His second line of evidence comes from Zech. 8:13, *וְהָיָה בְרָכָה*. The verbal form, however, is not an imperative, but a suffix conjugation conjoined with relative *waw*.

That the expression is unusual is recognized by all, but not many are willing to go as far as Speiser. Acknowledging that the ancient versions concur with the reading in the MT, he nevertheless feels obliged to revocalize the "unacceptable text."<sup>63</sup> Instead of *וְהָיָה בְרָכָה*, he reads *וְהָיָה בְרָכָה* and translates by "it [Abraham's name] may be a blessing."

Although Speiser's ingenious proposal may solve the problem for him, it does not do so for others. Since the majority of ancient versions agree on the allegedly unacceptable reading,<sup>64</sup> it is more likely that we fail to understand the imperative correctly.

---

<sup>62</sup> Wenham, *Genesis*, 276. [Italic mine.]

<sup>63</sup> E.A. Speiser trans., *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1964), 86.

<sup>64</sup> The Samaritan Pentateuch reads *וְהָיָה*.

Though not often heard, some pioneers have opted to read the imperative as an imperative. Such is the position of Moulton<sup>65</sup> and Andersen.<sup>66</sup> In a recent article, Yarchin elaborates the arguments for this position. His conclusion is that the employment of the imperative as such "functions both as a consequence and as a furtherance of its preceding imperative."<sup>67</sup>

Yarchin's paper has not gained the attention it deserves, partly because he limited himself to this passage only and partly because he tried to combine two distinctive syntactical functions in one use, which goes against linguistic principles.

Before we apply what we learn from all the parallels, a closer look at the text is in need. Following the first command "go" (v. 1) is a series of consequences (v. 2a). The three heaped up *I will's* reveal how great the promise is and how much is on God's part. On Abram God bestows the promise of nationhood, a great name and prosperity. What a privilege he enjoys! But the call of Abram is not intended for his benefit alone. The second command, "be thou a blessing" (v.2b), leads to another series of three verbs which extend the divine favor to "all the families of the earth" (v.3b). Standing in between the two aspects of God's promise, to an individual and to every individual, the function of our imperative seems clear. First, it advances the first command. Abram is not simply to leave, but to go and be a blessing. Second, it makes clear that Abram has to play an active role in God's plan. He is to be a blessing. This may seem strange to the eyes of modern readers. But we shall not fall to the temptation to modify the biblical understanding of blessing by the cultural opinion of the present or to approach it in any different way. We shall follow as closely as possible the original conception and mold our theological understanding accordingly.

---

<sup>65</sup> R. Moulton, *The Modern Reader's Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1946).

<sup>66</sup> F. I. Andersen, *The Sentence in Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Mouton, 1974), 108.

<sup>67</sup> William Yarchin, "Imperative and Promise in Genesis 12: 1 – 3," *Studia Biblica et Theologica* 10 (1980): 174.

Blessing is the very power of the soul, or that which maintains the soul and serves as the underpinning of the soul's function in the world. Wherever one finds the capacity for blessing, the demonstration of that act is a matter of course.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, blessing is something external as well as (and perhaps even by virtue of its being) internal.<sup>69</sup> It follows, then, that the bestowal of all material and spiritual wholeness is designed to transform his being. Abram had to acknowledge this and be willing to strive for that end so that all the families of the earth could partake of the divine benevolence.

Thus these three verses manifest a promise-obedience or blessing-command duality that echoes the parallels we discussed previously. It bears witness to the covenant relationship between the sovereign God and his chosen servant, Abraham, and, through the present-future scheme implied in the use of imperative and the explicit reference to the families of the world, looks forward to its fulfillment.

## V. Conclusion

Our study suggests that the best way to interpret the imperative used in blessings, whether it stands alone or is conjoined with *waw* preceded by a volitive, is to take it as a real imperative, denoting a positive command. This use is attested in many Semitic languages, including Biblical Hebrew. Understanding the biblical passages in this way, we believe that the covenantal relationship and the duality of blessing-command could be well represented. It also brings the present-future aspect of the promise-obedience relationship into focus.

---

<sup>68</sup> J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), vol. 1, 182.

<sup>69</sup> Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vol. 1, 182.



## ABSTRACT

In the blessings in the Hebrew Bible, especially those of God, the imperative form is employed not infrequently. Traditional interpretation follows standard Hebrew grammars in understanding such an imperative preceded by a direct volitive mood as denoting result, purpose or the speaker's intention. After a detailed examination of relevant passages, it is concluded that the traditional understanding is inadequate and that such an imperative is best understood as expressing a positive command.

But how then do we explain the blessing with a command in it? This research turns to ancient Near Eastern literature in which similar grammatical constructions are found. Insights from studying TT1, EA12 in Akkadian, KAR 139 in Neo-Assyrian, KTU 1.15 in Ugaritic and KAI 269 in Aramaic are drawn to shed new light on the biblical texts. Our study reaches two conclusions with regard to the use of the imperative in a blessing. First, the covenantal relationship between the speaker and the addressee is envisaged. The addressee is asked to participate in actualizing the blessing pronounced. Second, employing this grammatical construction, the speaker anchors the blessing in the here-and-now. What can only be expected in the future is now a reality, and a reality continuing into the future.

## 撮 要

舊約聖經中有許多祝福。在這些表達祝福的言詞中，有時會出現命令語氣。傳統的解釋認為這一命令語氣，或者表達結果、目的，或者傳達說話者的意圖。不過，檢視聖經中有此一現象的相關經文之後，我們發現這些詮釋都不理想。如此使用的命令語氣仍應視為表達命令，正如一般的命令語氣一樣。

在確定這樣的命令語氣仍應視作命令之後，討論的焦點轉向我們應如何理解這樣的祝福。針對這一問題，我們分析呈現相似文法結構的古代近東文獻，其中包含阿卡得文的 TT1、EA12，新亞述文的 KAR 139，烏加列文的 KTU 1.15，以及亞蘭文的 KAI 269。將由此而得的見解，與聖經經文的分析結合，我們得到兩點結論：第一，說話者透過這一語氣，表達他和被祝福者特別的關係，期望雙方在使祝福成就一事上，一起合作，被祝福者應承擔他所被命令的部分。第二，當在祝福中出現命令語氣時，原本關注在未來的祝福，與現在這一時刻產生關連，祝福不再是漂浮於未來，而是時間軸上從現在起的無限伸展。