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Priestly Blessing

by Tim Kelley

One of the traditions of our fellowship is to recite the Priestly Blessing - - sometimes called the Aaronic Blessing or the Aaronic Benediction. Though I was somewhat aware of the blessing beforehand, the importance of this particular blessing really began to hit home when, back in 2001, we attended the feast of Tabernacles with the Omega Praise Fellowship, a small messianic group in Fir Point, Oregon. At the conclusion of the festival, on the last day of services, all the people gathered under a number of large tallits and recited the blessing in the responsive fashion we've used here for a number of years. This was a turning point for me because it was the first time I had seen value in responsive liturgy.

Since that time, we here have learned to recite the blessing in Hebrew (even if we still have to read the transliteration), and many of us have memorized it. But one thing we've not done, at least as far as I remember, is to study this particular blessing. So that's what this study is about. We're going to analyze the content of the blessing along with its structure and the meaning of some of the key words, but before we do, let's read the blessing including its introduction and conclusion.

Numbers 6:22-27 ²² And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ²³ "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, 'This is the way you shall bless the children of Israel. Say to them: ²⁴ "The LORD bless you and keep you; ²⁵ The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; ²⁶ The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace." ' ²⁷ "So they shall put My name on the children of Israel, and I will bless them."

Verse 22 and 23 are the introduction to the blessing. It is here that God gives instructions pertaining to the invocation of the blessing itself. In the introduction, we first notice that the Blessing is in some way tied to the previous passage – the discussion of the Nazarite Vow. The introduction starts with the Hebrew letter *vav* (ו) which is translated "and" in most Bibles. In Hebrew the *vav* is often used to connect similar thoughts or thoughts that have a bearing on one-another. We see this all over the Bible. One suggestion as to why the Blessing is connected to the Nazarite Vow is this: some believe that the Nazarite Vow is a way for a non-priestly Israelite to be able to serve as a priest for a specific duration. Thus, since it was the responsibility of the priests to invoke this Blessing, and since a Nazarite could serve as a priest; and so could a Nazarite invoke the Blessing. 'Not sure what to make of that, but if true, it could have bearing on the followers of Messiah Yeshua.

Next we see that God spoke to Moses the exact words he was to tell Aaron and his sons. He left Aaron with little leeway in regards to what was to be spoken. The Hebrew word from which we get *way* is *koh* (כה). It's used in various ways, but in most cases it speaks of doing or saying something somewhat specific – not a generalization or an approximation. In effect, God is saying "this is what I want you to say". This is quite understandable when you consider that *this is God's blessing on the people*, not Aaron's blessing. Aaron's role is to speak for God, not replace Him or offer something else as a blessing

The final point in the introduction is that *the blessing is a corporate blessing* – a blessing for Israel as a nation, not as individuals. God deals with Israel on a corporate basis. When individuals are mentioned in the scripture, it is usually because they either rose above the norm – such as in the case of Joshua and Caleb – or were way below (as in the case of Jezebel). Even though Joshua and Caleb rose above the average Israelite of their day, they still had to endure the 40 years in the wilderness along with their Israelite brothers. When sin was found in the camp of Israel, the transgressor was put out of the camp

for the benefit of the nation as a whole. We see many other examples of God dealing with Israel as a group. Is this to say that the Blessing cannot be spoken over an individual? I don't think that's the case. I would assume that since all Israel has never been brought together as one people since the time of Joshua, it would be appropriate to invoke the blessing on a smaller group of Israelites. Maybe we could use this as a guideline . . .

^{NKJ} Matthew 18:20 "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

One last thing in regards to the introduction - - God gave this blessing to the priests during the construction of the Tabernacle. Israel was still at Mount Sinai – they had yet to set out for the Promised Land, thus they had not yet rejected YHVH and their inheritance. Because they were actively involved in the construction of the Tabernacle, it's probably safe to assume they were acting like Israelites. Since God told Aaron to bless the *children of Israel* and not the children of Canaan, it would probably be wise to reserve this blessing for those who are walking in the ways of YHVH.

Let's now investigate the heart of the blessing.

In the Hebrew text, the blessing is made up of three lines with a pair of verbs that are connected by the Hebrew *vav* (ו). Each line also includes the Devine Name "YHVH" which in each case is the second word in each line.

²⁴ "The LORD bless you and keep you;

²⁵ The LORD make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you;

²⁶ The LORD lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace."

There is a question as to whether the blessing contains six actions – 1) bless, 2) keep, 3)face shine, 4) gracious, 5)lift up, and 6) peace - or just three 1) bless by keeping, 2) His face shining as an outpouring of His graciousness, and 3) lifting up his face by which His peace or completeness would be known.

This all depends on how a person interprets the use of the *vav*. Is it simply a conjunction, joining two dissimilar thoughts together or is it continuative, joining a more general term to a more specific. Most agree that the second is the preferred option. Tim Hegg, in an article labeled "The Priestly Blessing" makes this statement:

*"This single Hebrew letter often indicates the simple conjunction "and," but it can also be understood in a continuative sense, meaning "that is," making the second clause of a two-clause line function as a further explanation or amplification of the initial clause."*¹

Mr. Hegg's offers this expanded paraphrase the blessing:

The LORD bless you, that is, may He and keep you;

The LORD make His face shine upon you, that is, may He demonstrate His grace to you;

The LORD lift up His face upon you, that is, may He give you true peace."

With Mr. Hegg's paraphrase in mind, let's discuss each of the three blessings, the first being to *Bless by Keeping*. The Hebrew word for *bless* is *barach* (ברך) which according to Gesenius' Hebrew Lexicon

¹ <http://www.torahresource.com/EnglishArticles/Aaronic%20Ben.pdf>

literally means “to bend the knee”. We can understand this concept by considering the protocol when approaching a king. It is customary to bow or even kneel before a king to honor him and to imply that you are “at his service”. This is often the concept we have in mind when we pray. But in the case of this blessing, God is blessing His people. Thus, it could be assumed that He is saying the He is at Israel’s service. As we understand the covenant relationship YHVH desires to have with His people, we see that just as any man would want to serve and honor his wife, YHVH desires to do the same with His bride.

One way YHVH serves His people is by guarding them. The Hebrew word for *keep* is *shamar* (שמר) which means to guard and protect. God tells us to guard His commandments by not adding to them or taking from them². In this way, we are protecting God’s word. God guards us by putting a hedge around us³, by providing for our needs⁴, and by fighting our battles. The Psalmist says:

^{NKJ} Psalm 5:12 For You, O LORD, will bless the righteous; With favor You will surround him as with a shield.

Left to ourselves, we would not be able to protect ourselves from the attacks of the adversary, but with YHVH’s protection, we can have security.

The second blessing is for God’s face to shine upon us, by which we can understand His grace. The term *be gracious* comes from the Hebrew word *chanan* (חנן) which means *to show favour*. God favours His people above all people on earth. His desire is to them because they are His bride. How do we know He has shown us favour? Because His face shines upon us; but what does that mean? The phrase “shine His face” is an idiomatic expression that might be best understood by considering the opposite – hiding His face.

In the “blessing and curses” passages in Deuteronomy, YHVH tells what will happen if Israel forsakes YHVH and fails to abide by the terms of the covenant. He says:

^{ESV} Deuteronomy 31:17 Then my anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide my face from them, and they will be devoured. And many evils and troubles will come upon them, so that they will say in that day, 'Have not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?'

When God hides His face from His people, it is as if He has abandoned them. They no longer have His help, His protection, and most importantly, they no longer have friendship with Him. We know we have favour with God when His face shines on us. To have God’s face shine upon us implies His desire to have face-to-face contact with us, just as He did with Adam and Eve before the fall.

^{ESV} Genesis 3:8 And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence (*face*⁵) of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.

² Deuteronomy 4:2

³ Job 1:10

⁴ Hosea 2:7

⁵ paniym (פנים) - face

When we speak to our mates, and even to our friends, we usually speak face-to-face, but if there's conflict between us and our mates, it's sometimes hard to look them in the eye. This is the state Israel has been in for nearly 2700 years. Israel has lost that contact, but as the remnant returns to His way, the contact begins to increase to where we can hopefully become like Moses.

^{NKJ} Exodus 33:11 So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.

When God is gracious to us, it is because He favours us, and we know He favours us when His face shines on us. As King David said:

Psalm 31:14-16 ¹⁴ . . . I trust in you, O LORD; I say, "You are my God." ¹⁵ My times are in your hand; rescue me from the hand of my enemies and from my persecutors! ¹⁶ Make your face shine on your servant; save me in your steadfast love!

The final blessing - *lift up His face upon you, that is, may He give you true peace* - is also twofold. Just as in the previous blessing, we can best understand what it means "to lift up His face" by seeing the opposite. After Cain offered an improper offering, God was not pleased with him. Thus, it says that Cain's countenance (face) had fallen.

^{ESV} Genesis 4:6 The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen?"

For your "face to fall" means that you are angry with someone⁶. The opposite – to lift up your face – means you are happy or pleased with someone⁷, and when you are pleased with someone, especially your children or your mate, you smile at them. Thus, the third blessing shows that God smiles on His people as we please Him; and when He is pleased with us, we can have an inner peace knowing that all is well between us, for God does not carry a grudge, is not two-faced, and is always ready to forgive us. When God is pleased with us and we approach His presence in prayer, there is peace in His house – shalom in the home!

The Aaronic Blessing concludes with this instruction to Aaron –

^{ESV} Numbers 6:27 "So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them."

This is not an instruction to speak the Sacred Name, nor does it imply that by having this blessing spoken, a person can somehow claim a special blessing from God. The priests were not magicians, nor were they gifted with unique insight into the exact pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton. The priests were just as human as the rest of Israel, but they had a specific role. While speaking of the tribe of Levi and the priests, Moses said:

^{ESV} Deuteronomy 33:10 They shall teach Jacob your rules and Israel your law (*Torah*); they shall put incense before you and whole burnt offerings on your altar.

It was the responsibility of the priests to teach Torah to Israel, and in so doing, Israel could walk in the ways of YHVH. As we have often discussed, when Israel (or any individual for that matter) walks in God's way, he has the opportunity to enter into covenant with God, and in so doing, take on the name of God (as in a marriage). If the priests are effective in their job, Israel will become more in tune with

⁶ See Jeremiah 3:12

⁷ See Job 42:8-9; 1 Samuel 25:35 in the YLT

His Torah which will in turn, cause us to be more like God. As we begin to display the attributes contained in His Name, He becomes blessed by us and likewise bestows His blessings of protection, holiness, and peace upon us.

The final blessing of the Amidah, the Eighteen Benedictions, is to praise YHVH for letting His light shine on us and give us peace. In a way, when you pray this prayer, you are reciting the Priestly Blessing on a daily basis –

Grant peace, welfare, blessing, grace, loving kindness and mercy to us and to all Israel your people. Bless us, O our Father, one and all, with the light of your countenance; for by the light of your countenance you have given us, O Lord our God, a Torah of life, loving kindness and salvation, blessing, mercy, life and peace. May it please you to bless your people Israel at all times and in every hour with your peace. Blessed are you, O Lord, who blesses his people Israel with peace.

So as we rehearse the blessing this afternoon, I hope we see a greater significance in the Priestly Blessing.

Shalom Alecheim!