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More Than a Wish: Translating Old Testament Blessings as Multifunctional Speech Acts

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Abstract: Common renderings of Old Testament blessings, such as "The LORD bless you", risk reducing this speech act to a wish. This practical paper examines the grammatical, speech-act-theoretical, and translational evidence for the Hebrew jussive blessings of the Old Testament, taking the Priestly Blessing of Numbers 6 as its principal test case. Following an analysis of Septuagint renderings and a review of select literature, it is argued that biblical blessings function as multifunctional speech acts that simultaneously express a wish on the part of the speaker, an assurance to the addressee, and a request directed to God. On the basis of this characterization, translation suggestions are provided for bridging linguistic and cultural mismatches; for example, the *qal* passive participle construction בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה 'blessed [are] you' should not be rendered identically to the jussive יְבָרֶכְךָ 'he [may] bless you'. The conclusion raises questions for further study in the New Testament.
Keywords: blessing, jussive, speech act, Priestly Blessing

1 Introduction

Sentences like "The LORD bless you" (Num. 6:24, NIV) or "May the LORD bless you" (NLT) can wrongly suggest that the blessing is not more than a well-meaning wish.[1] This is not merely a question of grammar, but also of cultural understanding. The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines *blessing* as "a request by a priest for God to take care of a particular person …".[2] The *Oxford English Dictionary* goes

[1] In English, the subjunctive is largely restricted to formal style and fixed expressions (cf. Swan 2023:232). Where it is used in a blessing ("God protect you"), it expresses a possibility, but the degree of likelihood is undetermined.

[2] All underlining in quotations is added.

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beyond that when it defines *bless* as follows (*OED* III.): "To declare to be supernaturally favoured; to pronounce or make happy", and further (*OED* III.6.), "To pronounce words that confer (or are held to confer) supernatural favour and well-being."[3] In a blessing, do we utter a wish, or a request, or a declaration? **Exegetes and translators are challenged to gain more clarity about what a blessing really is, and how to best convey this in the receptor language.** I will argue that a blessing is a multifunctional speech act, merging a wish by the speaker, an assurance for the addressee, and a request made to God. This needs to be taken into regard in translation. The wording will influence how blessings are understood, and how benedictions are practiced in the church.[4]

This paper offers a translator-exegete's reflections on how Old Testament blessings should be rendered in translation. The primary aim is practical: to help translators recognize the distinctive character of biblical blessings and to weigh the options available for translating them. The survey of grammatical evidence (§2), LXX renderings (§3), and the scholarly literature on speech acts (§4) is offered in service of this practical aim. The characterization of blessings developed in §5 is meant to guide the translation proposals in §6, rather than to settle more theoretical questions. The proposals in §6 are offered as options for consideration rather than as prescriptions.

2 Grammatical bases

2.1 Definition of moods

A review of some terminology might be in order. For the purpose of this paper, I will go by the following definitions:

- **Optative**: "Optative mood is a volitive mood that signals wishing or hoping" (SIL Glossary). It is known especially from classical Greek, which has its own paradigm for it.
- **Subjunctive**: "Subjunctive mood is a mood that typically signals irrealis meanings, such as: potentiality, uncertainty, prediction, obligation, and desire" (SIL Glossary). French (*subjonctif*) and German (*Konjunktiv*) have

[3] However, *OED* is similar to the *Cambridge Dictionary* when it continues: "When said of persons [i.e., not God himself], the sense has passed into that of officially or paternally commending to divine protection and favour" (III.6.a.). The noun 'blessing' is defined by *OED* (2.a.) as follows: "*(a)* Authoritative declaration of divine favour and countenance, by God or one speaking in his name; benediction; passing into: *(b)* Invocation of divine favour by anyone. *(c)* The form of words used in this declaration or invocation."

[4] I am grateful for conversations with several colleagues and friends, and acknowledge their input on various aspects of this discussion.

their own paradigms for this. English uses the bare verbal stem (e.g., "So be it", contrast with "So is it"; "God forbid", contrast with "God forbids"; "God bless", contrast with "God will bless").

- **Jussive**: "Jussive mood is a directive mood that signals a speaker's command, permission, or agreement that the proposition expressed by his or her utterance be brought about" (SIL Glossary). The jussive can occur in the first (cohortative) and second person, but is found more typically in the third (cf. Glück and Schmöe 2005:303). Some languages have jussive paradigms that are formally distinct from the imperative (cf. Crystal 2008:259).

2.2 The jussive in Hebrew

The jussive is "an indirect command in the third (and sometimes the second) person" (JM § 46). Unfortunately, it is not always clear whether a certain verb is indeed a jussive. JM (§ 46) says:

> The jussive tends to take a form shorter than that of the indicative, but not always. Thus in the regular verb type, the Qal future יִקְטֹל cannot be shortened. ... A clearly marked jussive form can appear only in certain futures, and within these futures only in certain forms.[5]

For illustration, compare these three constructions which essentially all translate into "May God be with you":

Josh. 1:17 (people → Joshua):

יִהְיֶה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עִמָּךְ [*yiqtol* with jussive meaning]

"May the LORD your God be with you."

2 Sam. 14:17 (woman from Tekoa → David):

וַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ יְהִי עִמָּךְ [jussive form and meaning]

"And the LORD your God may be with you."

Exod. 18:19 (Jethro → Moses):

וְיִהְיֶ אֱלֹהִים עִמָּךְ [conjunctive *waw* + jussive form and meaning]

"and may God be with you."

[5] The jussive is clearly recognizable in the *hiphil* stem, and in the *qal* stem of II-*waw* / II-*yod* verbs, and in III-*he* verbs (see GKC § 48g; BHRG § 15.5).

Nevertheless, in practice, in many places, the existence of a blessing is obvious.[6]

For details on the morphology, syntax and usage of the jussive, see the grammars.[7]

In Hebrew, a blessing can take the form of a jussive clause (IBHS § 34.3c). JM (§ 114h) states:

> The jussive is used to express all the nuances of will: from a superior to an inferior—command, exhortation, advice, invitation, permission; from an inferior to a superior—wish, prayer, request for permission etc. … Examples: … Nu 6.24ff. *May Yahweh bless you and keep you*, etc. (sacerdotal blessing).

Similarly, GKC (§ 109b) says the jussive can "express a command, a wish (or a blessing), advice, or a request". Compare two of the examples given, "Let there be light!" (Gen. 1:3) and "I would it might be" (Gen. 30:34).

If we think of a scale ranging from *desire* to *command*, blessings raise the question of where on this scale we should place them. What are they, really?

The *qal* passive participle בָּרוּךְ is not discussed here in detail (but see the excursus in section 6.4). We may ask whether a speaker of Hebrew discerned a difference between the *qal* passive participle בָּרוּךְ 'blessed' (e.g., Gen. 14:19, Melchizedek → Abram) and the *piel yiqtol* יְבָרֶךְ 'he bless [you]' (e.g., Gen. 28:3, Isaac → Jacob): whether the first was "a reality" already, and the second "a possibility" in the future.[8]

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[6] Gesenius judges (GKC § 109k): "Since the jussive in numerous cases is not distinguished in form from the imperfect, it is frequently doubtful which of the two the writer intended." How to decide between them is not the subject of this paper. Furthermore, Shulman (EHLL s.v. Jussive) states: "Scholarly opinion is divided on the question of whether these different forms have different meanings in Biblical Hebrew; whether modal verbs are indeed used to express volition while the indicative forms are used in statements."

[7] The subject is dealt with, for instance, in the following places: GKC § 48 (morphology); § 109 (usage); EHLL s.v. Jussive; IBHS § 34.2.1 (background); § 34.3 (uses); JM § 46 (general); § 114g–l (usage); § 116d–e (syntax); BHRG § 15.5 (general); § 19.4 (short *yiqtōl*); § 19.5.1.3 (functions; wishes are mentioned, blessings are not); §§ 21.1 and 21.5 (verb chains and sequences); for the morphology, see the paradigms in §§ 16 and 18.

[8] The formula אַשְׁרֵי *ʾašrê* '[How] blessed/happy [is] …' is not addressed in this paper.

2.3 Example blessings and associated issues

2.3.1 The Priestly Blessing – Numbers 6:24–26

The prime example for blessings is the Priestly Blessing in Numbers 6. The text is reproduced in Table 1 below.

Table 1: The text of Numbers 6:22–27

Verbs in the blessing are underlaid with grey; the translation is taken from NRSV.

The LORD spoke to Moses, saying:	וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר	22
Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the Israelites: You shall say to them,	דַּבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבָרֲכוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמוֹר לָהֶם	23
The LORD bless you and keep you;	יְבָרֶכְךָ יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ	24
the LORD make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;	יָאֵר יְהוָה ׀ פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחֻנֶּךָּ	25
the LORD lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.	יִשָּׂא יְהוָה ׀ פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיָשֵׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם	26
So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.	וְשָׂמוּ אֶת־שְׁמִי עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַאֲנִי אֲבָרֲכֵם	27

It so happens that among the six verbs in this blessing, there are only two that show an unambiguous jussive form (*yā'ēr* and *wəyāśēm*) (cf. JM § 114g, note). If not for other reasons, these two forms lead us to read all six verbs as jussives in meaning. The verbs' analyses are shown in this table (all are third person masculine singular; suffixes are neglected here):

Table 2: Ambiguous and unambiguous verb forms in Numbers 6:24–26

			Long form, thus ambiguous: future or jussive	Short form, thus unambiguously jussive
24a	*yəbārekkā*	ברך *piel, yiqtol*	x	
24b	*wəyišmərekā*	שמר *qal, w + yiqtol*	x	
25a	*yā'ēr*	אור *hiphil, yiqtol*		x
25b	*wîḥunnekkā*	חנן *qal, w + yiqtol*	x	
26a	*yiśśā'*	נשׂא *qal, yiqtol*	x	
26b	*wəyāśēm*	שׂים *qal, w + yiqtol*		x

The parsing in *Paratext* assigns a "jussive meaning" to all six verbs. In the *Lexham Hebrew Bible (LHB)* (2012–2023) in *Logos*, all six propositions are labeled as "prayer". "Prayer" is explained in the *Glossary* as: "The speaker is petitioning God". This expresses one aspect of the utterance, but falls short of establishing a distinction between a blessing and a petition.

In Num. 6:23, the LORD himself commands the priests to bless the people, and according to v. 27, there is **a twofold effect: when the priests bless the people, (a) this means they will "put the Lord's name on them", and (b) the Lord promises that he will act by blessing them**. No matter how exactly one interprets the phrase "putting his name on them" (cf. Abernathy *et al.* 2018 *ad loc.*), in the speaking of the blessing, firstly something happens to the people, and secondly God will act. Even if one sees these two events as two sides of the same coin, pronouncing a blessing is more than asking God for something.

In the UBS *Handbook*, de Regt and Wendland (2016:143) raise another possibility regarding v. 24:

> All of the Hebrew verbs in these verses may be interpreted as jussives ..., so in this context they function as wishes, as prayers ..., or as divine oracles that actually perform each blessing as the priest utters it.

At the same time, they state:

> Verse 27 makes the point that the LORD is the sole author of the entire blessing. He, not the priests, will realize these wishes and bring them to pass. No verbal magic is involved.

Thus, performing the act of blessing is distinguished from a magic ritual.[9]

2.3.2 Jacob's blessing for his sons – Genesis 49:1–28

In this passage, **the boundary between blessing and prediction is blurred**. While some versions speak of blessing in their headings (e.g., NET), NASB calls it a prophecy. According to Gen. 49:1, Jacob tells his sons "what shall happen [*yiqtol*] to you in days to come", and according to v. 28, the recorded words are "what their father said to them as he blessed them, blessing each with the blessing suitable to him" (ESV).

[9] In a historical review, Aitken (2007:9), talking about the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, remarks about the related field of curses: "A distinction was often drawn ... between biblical curses and 'magic', the latter term rarely being defined by those who used it. The distinction seems to be that if a curse is said to be the operation of God it is not deemed to be magical, but if it seems in some way to be self-operating and automatic, then it is magic."

Jussives are relatively rare in this passage, and are intermingled with *yiqtol*s that might not all have a jussive meaning, as the examples in the table below show.

Table 3: Examples of jussive and *yiqtol* in Genesis 49:1–28

v. 4a	Reuben	אַל־תּוֹתַר	jussive (second person)	you shall not excel
v. 6a	Simeon and Levi	אַל־תָּבֹא	*yiqtol*, jussive meaning	May [my soul] not enter
v. 8b	Judah	יִשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ	*yiqtol*	they will bow down
v. 25a	Joseph	וִיבָרֶכְךָ	*yiqtol*	he will bless you
v. 26b	Joseph	תִּהְיֶיןָ	*yiqtol*, jussive meaning	may they be

Overall, one gets the impression that Jacob's speech is closer to a prediction than to a blessing. This raises the question of the difference between a blessing and a prediction (cf. section 5.2).[10]

2.3.3 A blessing in a greeting – Ruth 2:4

The Hebrews used blessings when greeting each other. In Ruth 2:4, we read:

> Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the reapers, "May the LORD be with you." And they said to him, "May the LORD bless you [יְבָרֶכְךָ]." (NASB)

One may ask whether in this conventionalized practice, the blessing comes closer to a wish, even if uttered sincerely.

3 LXX translation: a checkered picture

How did the translators of the Septuagint (LXX) understand the Hebrew jussive? Their practice in translating it into Greek varies so much that we cannot expect much help from the LXX for arriving at a safe interpretation of certain verses.

About the optative, Turner says (1963:118):

> The mood was declining during the last three centuries B.C. It is still used fairly widely to indicate a wish in the papyri, LXX and NT, in spite

[10] Consider Gen. 27:39–40 as well: There, Isaac cannot bless Esau anymore in the same way he blessed Jacob. His speech over Esau uses *yiqtol*s (e.g., תַּעֲבֹד 'you will serve') and *weqatal*s (e.g., וּפָרַקְתָּ 'you will break [his yoke]'). Thus, it sounds more like a prediction.

> of the popularity of the imperative, in curses as well as requests. [With literature.]

Perkins (2015:72) writes (referring to Walters [1973]):

> Walters notes one peculiarity of Greek syntax in Deut. 28.7–36 (Walters, *Text*, pp. 237–41). In the Septuagint the optative, imperative and future indicative 'were used indiscriminately and freely interchanged, all three equally expressing a benediction or curse' (*Text*, p. 237). A remarkable pattern is seen in Deut. 28.7–36. When God is the subject of the Hebrew jussive, the Greek used the aorist optative, but when people are the subject, the future indicative is used.

Butel analyzed the LXX's translation of certain verb forms in Deut. 5, 28, and 32. For the Hebrew jussive, he finds the following distribution (Butel 2022:79; cf. 66, 80): indicative imperfect two times, indicative aorist one time, indicative future eight times, and optative aorist five times. The system behind these choices was not always apparent.

My own analysis of sentences that would translate into English as "May the LORD be ..." confirms this picture: The LXX translates the jussive יְהִי / וַיְהִי using the optative, imperative, or indicative aorist, present, or future, or without any verb, and this happens inconsistently in identical clauses (and even in parallels).[11] Whether these were conscious choices made by the translators according to context, or whether they reflect some uncertainty on their part, at least this shows that the jussive is subject to interpretation. While one might classify most cases as wishes, what is pertinent for our question about blessings is that 1 Chr. 22:11 and 16 show once an indicative, once a verbless clause.

Regarding the verbless sentence ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ μεθ' ὑμῶν, 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Ø with you' in 1 Cor. 16:23, Schnabel (2006) says:[12]

> As a predicate, one can fill in the optative ... or the indicative ... In the OT statements about Yahweh being with his people, all tenses are found; the future statements are predominantly not worded as wishes, but as declarations [referring to van Unnik].

[11] For example, we find γένοιτο in 1 Ki. 8:57 [LXX 3 Kingdoms]; Ἔστω in Jer. 42:5 [LXX 49:5]; ἔσται in 1 Sam. 20:13 [LXX 1 Kingdoms]; and a verbless clause in 1 Chr. 22:16 [LXX Paralipomena 1].

[12] Author's translation. Original: "Als Prädikat kann man den Optativ ... oder den Indikativ ... ergänzen. In den atl. Aussagen über das Mitsein Jahwes mit seinem Volk finden sich alle Tempora; die futurischen Aussagen sind überwiegend nicht als Wunsch formuliert, sondern als Deklaration."

In Num. 6:24–26, the Septuagint uses aorist active optative forms.[13] For example, the first sentence reads:

> Εὐλογήσαι σε κύριος καὶ φυλάξαι σε.
> May the Lord bless you and keep you. (NETS)

If we take the LXX in this key verse as a model, then translating the blessing with "May …" is justified. Still, the question remains whether in doing so we communicate successfully what a blessing is or does. In turn, when the LXX uses a future, that does not rule out an imperative (demand) meaning for the jussive.

4 Literature review

In our search for a better understanding of what blessings are and how they should be translated, we turn to surveying some of the pertinent literature. The citations are organized by sub-topics.

4.1 The character of blessings

Mowvley (1965:75) says:

> Our 'God bless' means, for many, little more than 'good luck' except that it has an aura of religiosity. … In the Old Testament, on the other hand, the blessing is a solemn, deliberate act through which specific and concrete advantages are conveyed.

With this appraisal, Mowvley highlights that blessings are not mere words, but words that bring about change.

4.2 Blessings as speech acts

One might expect that Austin's foundational work *How to Do Things with Words* considers blessings as well, but it does not yield much for our question. The author includes as one "class of utterance" the so-called behabitives (Austin 1975:160):

> Behabitives include the notion of reaction to other people's behaviour and fortunes and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone else's past conduct or imminent conduct.

[13] The same form is found in the New Testament, e.g., Rom. 15:13: ὁ δὲ θεὸς τῆς ἐλπίδος πληρώσαι ὑμᾶς πάσης χαρᾶς καὶ εἰρήνης. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace."

Here he lists as an example:

> For wishes we have 'bless', 'curse', 'toast', 'drink to', and 'wish'.

Thus, the verb *bless* is mentioned, but the above description does not take us far in defining biblical blessings. Although someone might receive a blessing because of a certain behavior, and although a positive attitude will accompany the words of a blessing, neither the behavior of the person to be blessed nor the attitude of the speaker of the blessing are at the core of what a blessing by God, or requested from God, means. As OTLES puts it on Num. 6:22–27 (Abernathy *et al*. 2018):

> The Aaronic blessing described in this passage shows that God himself was eager to bless people apart from any merit, and that he was the one who took the initiative to see that it came about.

Searle (1969) built on Austin's work, but does not discuss blessings in particular either.

Thiselton (1992:296) quotes Wunderlich saying, "There is no clear classification of speech acts. Neither Austin's nor Searle's nor anybody else's attempts are really convincing". However, he acknowledges that "the value of the categories is operational and pragmatic in relation to given arguments and purposes". In discussing types of potential illocutionary acts, **Thiselton** – more or less leaning on Searle's terminology – **classifies the verb *bless* under "exercitives or directives" and also under "commissives"** (299). Further, he says:

> Contrary to assertions, promises and commands have the function "to get the world to match the words". (294) "*Assertives* fit reality in a *words-to-world* direction. *Directives* and *commissives* (which include commands and promises) fit reality in the opposite direction of *world-to-words*. *What is spoken shapes what will be*" (296).

Thus Thiselton, like Mowvley, sees a blessing "doing" something. While a blessing spoken by God can be classified as a *commissive* (God is committing himself to bring about something), a blessing spoken by a human being may be better understood as a kind of pronouncement or declaration.

The difficulty of classifying the blessing as a speech act is further exemplified by what we find in the *Lexham Discourse Hebrew Bible (LDHB)* (Runge *et al*. 2012–2014):

- The sentences in Num. 6:24–26 are categorized as "prayers". The *Glossary* explains that "The speaker is petitioning God". The translation uses "shall" ("Yahweh shall bless you", etc.).

- Jacob's blessing for Joseph in Gen. 49:26d is rendered "they may be …", and is categorized as a "wish (pos.)", which is explained with "The speaker is expressing a desire or inclination that the speaker would like to be realized".[14]
- In Ruth 4:14c–15a (which technically might not be a blessing but rather a congratulation), we find the translation "may it [i.e., his name] be renowned" in the first sentence, and – interestingly – two options in the next sentence: "he shall be / may he be for you a restorer". The first sentence is labeled a "prayer", the second a "prediction", which is explained with: "The speaker is making an assertion about what will happen in the future".

The above categorizations are all justifiable, but they show that one label does not capture all aspects that are present in a blessing.

LDHB's *Glossary* also lists "pronouncement", explained with: "The speaker is making an authoritative declaration". **This is a category that should be further considered with regard to blessings.**

4.3 Blessings as declarations

In her discussion of one of the antonyms of בָּרַךְ 'bless', namely אָרַר 'curse', Garber Kompaoré (2023, § 7, footnote) says:

> There are two ways to express a curse in Hebrew: the declarative form using the verb אָרַר and the jussive construction which expresses a wish. God never pronounces a curse using the jussive construction.

Whether *wish* is the best designation for the jussive is questionable, but we take note of her statement about אָרוּר, that "the grammar of the curse formula indicates a form of declaration" (§ 7). If this is true for curses, a case can be made for understanding and translating blessings as declarations as well. This holds true at least for divine blessings. As for human blessings pronounced in the jussive, we face the ambiguity that the grammatical form falls under the directive mood, but at the same time is used for an authoritative statement.

Aitken (2007:116), in his conclusion regarding בָּרוּךְ, says:

> When בָּרוּךְ has God as the subject it denotes the declaring (and thereby making) the object as specially favoured and prosperous.
> When בָּרוּךְ has both a human subject and a human object, it denotes the expressing of the favor conferred on the person by God.

[14] In the same speech, Jacob's blessing for Judah in Gen. 49:8b, where we have a *yiqtol*, is rendered "they shall bow down", and is categorized as a "prediction".

I agree with the first statement. If I understand the second one correctly, it misses, in my view, the fact that humans can also bless "effectively", not only state that someone has been blessed by God.

4.4 The authority behind a blessing

Aitken (2007:14), in his work on blessing and cursing, offers a historical review. He says that according to Austin,

> for a Speech-Act to be effective it must be uttered by the appropriate person (*i.e.*, with the correct authority), in an appropriate situation and with the appropriate intent by the person.

In terms of the Bible, according to Thiselton (1974), the appropriate person

> is the man of God and a person in authority, whose power in blessing and cursing comes from God.

According to Atluri and Garber Kompaoré (2023, Summary), ברך and בְּרָכָה refer to:

> speech which uses spiritual power in order to do or wish something good to a person, an animal, or another part of creation.

4.5 God addressed indirectly in blessings

IBHS says (§ 34.3a):

> A jussive directed to the divine realm (explicitly or implicitly) may be a benediction or a malediction.

Warren (1998:196), discussing foremost the psalmist's *enemy*, observes:

> Any force *inherent* in the imprecation or curse (that is, and performative function) is based upon a common assumption that God will in fact hear and act (the same is, of course, true for blessings *etc*. [*Footnote:* See Bruder 1998]).

Further, he explains (1998:149–150):

> In the case of request-cohortatives and 3rd-person jussives, however, there is no reference to the Addressee in the surface structure of the text. We know that אל־אבושה [from Ps. 25:2 etc.] and יגל לבי [from Ps. 13:6] are addressed to God, and in fact, that he is expected to act to ensure that these things happen, but there is no explicit reference to him. We may therefore say that the Addressee in such cases has a *pragmatically-determined* thematic role.

Rather than calling God the addressee, I would prefer to speak of the person to be blessed as the "(primary/direct) addressee", and God as the "secondary/indirect addressee", or "assumed listener".

4.6 Blessings, third-person imperatives, and wishes

Levinsohn *et al.* (2024, § 10.1.3) do not discuss blessings specifically, but their discussion of exhortations highlights two issues that we have raised: (1) In translation, the strength of the mood must match the original. Taking the Lord's Prayer as an example, Levinsohn says that a translation like "may your Kingdom come" (Matt. 6:10) signals a wish, and that this is quite weak for the Greek third-person imperative. (2) A blessing is indirectly addressed to God, and prayers need to be worded respectfully. In their preceding section 10.1.2, the authors discussed the difference in mood between an English *must* (expressing necessity) and *should* (subjunctive), recommending the stronger *must* for rendering the Greek third-person imperative. But because God is the person of highest status, the wording has to reflect that too. The course book's instructions for the exercise about the exhortations in Matt. 6:9–10 say: "You need to express them in an appropriate way AND make sure that they are more than just wishes!" The task is the same for OT blessings.

5 What kind of a speech act is a blessing?

When God speaks a blessing, these are not "just words". What he says will come true. When humans speak a blessing, these are not just words either. I put forward these theses:

5.1 A blessing is more than a wish

The speaker does not just express their hope or desire that something may happen. Their speech goes beyond merely encouraging the person addressed. There is no doubt that the ancient Israelites considered God's blessings to be effective, and assumed that certain people, as well, had the authority to pronounce blessings. Outstanding in this regard are Isaac blessing Jacob rather than Esau (Gen. 27) and the Balaam episode (Num. 22–24).

5.2 A blessing is not a prediction

Although the two can be interlocked (see Gen. 49), it is not the primary purpose of a blessing to foretell the future. The purpose is to convey a personal **assurance**, often at a critical point of time (e.g., Abram's victory over Chedorlaomer, Jacob's death, Boaz and Ruth's wedding). Further, if prediction

were the speaker's main intent, the *yiqtol*, or prefix conjugation ("future") would be the obvious choice.

5.3 A blessing is a kind of promise

What distinguishes it from a regular promise is that the speaker of a blessing cannot rely on their own ability to make the promise come true. They ultimately rely on a higher authority. At the same time, because God has commanded the priests to bless the people, he has invested them with the necessary authority.[15] Therefore, a blessing brings with it a certain **expectation**. Whether there are conditions for the promise to come true is a separate issue.

5.4 A blessing is not the same as a prayer or request

One difference lies in the twofold addressee: 1) the person to be blessed is addressed directly, and 2) God is addressed implicitly. Another difference is that a blessing **effectively invokes favor and goodness** upon someone. In a prayer (petition), the speaker knows that the outcome depends on God's decision, whereas in a blessing, the speaker utters a request and at the same time he speaks – explicitly or implicitly – in the name of God; thus, God's approval is assumed.

5.5 A blessing is a performative

In defining it more precisely, we have to think of this speech act as **both illocutionary and perlocutionary**: The blessing happens with the utterance, and the speech also has an effect on the listener.

5.6 A blessing is a kind of announcement or proclamation

Although people can bless others in their private prayers, the notion of **publicity** is also to be considered in characterizing a typical blessing. A blessing is a kind of announcement or **proclamation**.

5.7 Summary characterization

Taking the above points together, I offer the following working characterization:

A **blessing** is a performative speech act uttered publicly by a person with authority at a special occasion of transition, expressing simultaneously 1) a wish

[15] For a possibly analogous case, cf. Matthew 16:19 (NASB: "Whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven"), and the discussion in Carson 2010:421–426.

on the part of the speaker, 2) an assurance for the person who is addressed, and 3) a request directed to God.

Comments:

- Blessings can, but do not have to, be accompanied by a symbolic gesture like lifting up the hands or placing the hands on the head of the person receiving the blessing.
- The patriarchal and priestly blessings suggest that blessings are typically spoken by "a person with authority". However, the Old Testament also contains cases where equals bless each other (e.g., 2 Ki. 4:29), or where the inferior blesses the superior (see Hamilton 1995:610–611). This applies in particular to greetings and farewells. In these situations, the "wish", the "assurance", and the "request" spoken of in the definition above could be perceived as not more than conventional talk. However, the definition still applies. Meeting and parting are moments of transition, even if they occur so frequently in everyday life that we do not think of them as "special occasions" in the full sense.

6 Translating blessings: examining options

6.1 Preliminaries

Blessing is practiced in various forms in different cultures. Expatriate and local translators need to consider these forms and check whether their translation of biblical blessings will be understood correctly in the receptor language and culture.

6.2 Vocabulary

The UBS *Handbook* says (referring to Num. 6:24):

> In some languages (for example, Chewa and Tonga) there are specific verbs to express such a "blessing," where God alone must be the expressed or implied agent.

In this context, Garber Kompaoré's observation (2023, Summary) is of interest that the verb ארר (*'rr*) is especially used when God or a person with authority curses, whereas the verb קלל (*qll*) is used more often for cursing by a person who does not have authority over others. We should be prepared to find languages which, analogously to the above, distinguish between blessing with authority/capacity and without authority/capacity, and to use distinct verbs for them, be it in the speech orienter, or in the benediction itself.

6.3 Verb form

We need to reckon with mismatches between the source language and the receptor language. Translators, whether mother tongue speakers or foreign language learners, need to be aware of the language's inventory for expressing the subjunctive and other moods. Languages may express them verbally with a special conjugation or a certain auxiliary, syntactically with a *that* sentence, or lexically with adverbs or nouns.[16]

In some languages, the verb form used for blessings is ambiguous in that it can be used for both hypothetical mood and indicative future. A blessing is a borderline case: it causes a state (afterwards the person "is blessed"), but its realization happens over time.

Translators need to determine what each jussive that they encounter expresses. It could be a wish, or a prediction, or an intercession, or a proper blessing.

For blessings, I will now discuss some possibilities – keeping in mind our examination of the jussive above, and our definition of *blessing* as a multifunctional speech act.

- In English, closest to the Hebrew jussive is a sentence like "The LORD *bless* you" or, for the third person, "The LORD *bless* Abram". This subjunctive is formal, or formulaic, and might not convey well what the text means. The variant "*Blessed be* Abram" is not of much help, as it could sound too poetic.
- An alternative is a construction with *may*. But this auxiliary is ambiguous. *May* (apart from expressing POSSIBILITY and PERMISSION) is "used to introduce a wish or a hope" (Cambridge Dictionary). One possibility to clarify the meaning is to explicate it in the speech orienter (speech margin). The speech could be introduced, for example, by starting with "He blessed him, saying: '*May* God …'." This excludes a too "soft" interpretation of *may* as a mere wish.
    - An additional problem with *may* is that it might still sound too formal. This problem is mitigated by the fact that blessings tend to be given in solemn settings.

[16] For example, in some Caucasian languages, there is a marked split between "performative" and "desiderative" optatives. "Unlike the imperative, the strong optative launches an appeal not to the addressee but to superficial powers (with a blessing or curse). … The weak optative denotes a wish about a hypothetical or counterfactual situation which is favorable or desirable for the speaker or the speaker's dream, and is not used to bless or curse or in other kinds of ritual formulae" (Nikolaeva 2016:78, referring to Dobrushina).

- "The Lord *will* bless you" might sound too much like a prediction. While a blessing has the character of a promise, it might not be appropriate for humans to express themselves with too much presumption.
- Less adequate is a wording like "I desire that Yahweh will bless you" (Num. 6:24 T4T). While it expresses rightly the intention on the speaker's part, it lacks both the assurance to the listener, and the request through prayer.
- Better is "I pray that the LORD will bless you" (Num. 6:24 CEV, EASY) or "[I pray] that Yahweh will do good to you(plur)" in *Translator's Notes Display* (Billingsley and D'Souza 2020, *ad loc.*). But this is still a problematic explication. It is true that the priest will expect the blessing to come from God, but what this rendering lacks is the confidence that he may have in speaking this "prayer". The priest's prayer builds on God's own command. Therefore, he may and should pass on to the hearer some assurance about the request being heard. "I pray" is assuring the hearer of the speaker's intercession, but not of God's beneficence – unless the reader assumes this, given the role of the priest (or parent, or king ...).
- The innovative and controversial German *Volxbibel*, in Num. 6:23, explicates the phrase *bless the Israelites* with this wording:

  > für die Israeliten krass beten und ihnen das Beste von mir zusprechen
  > (approximately*:* strongly pray for the Israelites and grant/ascribe them the best from me.)

  That is, they use two verbs to express *bless*, *(strongly) pray* and *grant*. Then, the blessing formula follows with *soll:*

  > [24] Gott soll mit dir sein, er soll auf dich aufpassen. [25] Gott soll ...
  > *English:* ([24] God shall be with you, he shall watch over you. [25] God shall ...)

  While the modal auxiliary *soll* is an equivalent for English *shall*, it functions differently here. It does not sound formal. Foremost, it expresses a strong desire, although there is an overtone of obligation for God, in the sense of "I think it would be right for God to be with you (etc.), and I pray he will".
  Although the desire and request dominate in this formula, taken together with the verb "zusprechen" in the introductory v. 23, this wording reflects well the three aspects that a blessing contains.
- Instead of the third-person construction "The **LORD** bless you", a second-person construction might be more fitting, that is, a translation with

"Be blessed!"[17] This gives the speech a certain emphasis or force. (It would not work in situations where the person to be blessed is absent.)
It might come as a surprise that the imperative should be used for an action that the addressed person cannot make happen. But such usage is not uncommon. Consider sentences like "Stay healthy!" or "Get home safely". Whether these wishes become true is only partially under the control of the addressee.[18]
As for how close in meaning third-person and second-person constructions can be, compare the third-person construction יְחִי הַמֶּלֶךְ **'May the king live** / Let the king live / Long live the king' (with unambiguous jussive), as we find it in 1 Sam. 10:24 and a few other times, with the second-person construction לְעָלְמִין חֱיִי מַלְכָּא **'King, live forever!'** (with imperative), as we find it a few times in the Aramaic section of Daniel (2:4 etc.).
Note also how both verbal forms occur in parallelism in Ps. 128:5 (NASB):

> The LORD bless you [third person *yiqtol*] from Zion,
> And may you see [second person imperative] the prosperity of Jerusalem.[19]

A passive imperative like "Be blessed!" does not occur in the OT.[20]
Because "Be blessed" is a passive construction, this suggestion will not work in all languages.

- There is another possibility, which is to begin the benediction in the first person, thus **"I bless you"**. The rest of the benediction would probably still have to come in the third person, but the onset makes clear that the speaker *gives* something, and the addressee *receives* something. This seems an attractive option. (In contrast to the above suggestion, it also

[17] In German "Sei (*plural*: Seid) gesegnet!" This wording has gained some popularity.

[18] Compare further the wording תֶּחֱזַקְנָה יְדֵיכֶם, *yiqtol* with jussive meaning, 'Let your hands be strong' in the sense of "Be encouraged" (Zech. 8:13), which commands an attitude.

[19] Hossfeld and Zenger translate "so that you may see", arguing that the imperative after the jussive has a final or consecutive meaning (Hossfeld and Zenger 2011, *ad loc.*). By contrast, NIV renders both cola the same way: "May the LORD bless ...; / may you see ...", which follows LXX. The German Elberfelder renders the imperative literally ("Schaue").

[20] The *niphal* of ברך appears only three times (Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 28:14). It always occurs with the LORD as speaker, stating the fact that the nations will be blessed through Abraham or Jacob respectively – certainly in the second and the third occurrence, and probably in the first as well. That is to say, the *niphal* is not used for a typical benediction like "Blessed be".

works when the blessing's recipient is not present, if worded for the third person: "I bless X".)

This could be quite easily applied in Gen. 48:15–16 (Jacob → Ephraim and Manasseh): In NASB, this reads:

> The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, …
> bless the boys.
> And may my name live on in them, …;
> And may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.

Following the above suggestion, this would sound as follows:

> *I bless you [pl.] in the name of the God* before whom my fathers
> Abraham and Isaac walked, … .
> May my name live on in them, …;
> And may they grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.

Although the blessing itself is kept in the traditional wording, the introductory sentence clarifies that it is more than a wish.

An attempt at Num. 6:24–26 (based on NRSV) comes out as follows:

> *I bless you in the name of the* LORD*!* The LORD 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.

The phrase "in the name of [the LORD]" is added, but one could argue that it indicates why the speaker is confident that the blessing will happen, which is implied in the immediate context. Unfortunately, in this case the rhythmic composition suffers, because the first colon is broken up.

- The above could be adapted to the following:

  > *I bless you with* protection / grace / peace.[21]

  Using such noun forms may be too restrictive for translating the content of certain verses. But the onset with "I bless you with …" signals that the speaker takes up a place of authority and expresses confidence that "something is happening here", something is passed on or transmitted.

  Isaac's blessing for Jacob in Gen. 27:28 ("May God give you of the dew of heaven", NRSV) would then sound like this:

  > In the name of God, I bless you with the dew of heaven.

- Another idea is to include the word *hereby*, as in "I hereby bless you …". The problem with becoming that explicit is that the speaker's authority to bless is always a derived, or received, authority. He or she still depends on God. Therefore the above sentence could sound too presumptuous. There is also the danger that the effectiveness of a

[21] I heard this construction being used for a blessing in a special celebration.

blessing is seen as dependent on the right words, as if it were a magic act, which in the Bible it is not.

- A yet freer form would be to paraphrase the speech orienter like "This blessing is for you / applies to you / holds good for you: The Lord give you …".

These suggestions are not meant to be exhaustive. Readers are invited to explore other possibilities.

6.4 Excursus: The mood of the formula בָּרוּךְ *bārûk*

The *qal* passive participle בָּרוּךְ *bārûk* serves as a blessing formula. Where it is preceded by a jussive verb, a translation with "Blessed be …" or with "May … be blessed" is justified, e.g., in 1 Ki. 10:9 יְהִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בָּרוּךְ 'Blessed be the LORD your God!'[22]

In other verses, it is less obvious that such a translation is appropriate. We find it, for example, in Gen. 14:19, where Melchizedek blesses Abram. It is perhaps without much reflection that almost all English (and German) versions render *bārûk* 'blessed' with a subjunctive ("Blessed be …"), the exception being CEV with "I bless you in the name of God Most High". A subjunctive is not the normal meaning of a passive participle![23] Considering the context, it would be consequential to say, "Abram is blessed". Melchizedek's utterance is likely a confirmation that Abram acted rightly and may *expect* the LORD's blessing.

The situation is different in Ruth 2:19. The verse has a jussive verb. NIV has Naomi say, "Blessed be the man who took notice of you!", and almost all versions are similar. But we may ask whether T4T does not capture the meaning at least equally well when it says, "*God will* surely bless the man who was kind to you." Another example is 1 Sam. 26:25. In NRSV, it reads:

> Saul said to David, "Blessed be you |בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה|, my son David! You will do many things and will succeed in them."

While most versions are similar to NRSV with its subjunctive, here NASB says: "Blessed are you, my son David". In light of what follows ("You will do many things"), that makes good sense.[24]

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[22] A closer examination of the expression of praise בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה / Εὐλογητὸς κύριος 'Blessed be the LORD', and how it is best translated, is not addressed in this paper.

[23] See IBHS § 37.4c. See Lettinga and von Siebenthal 2016, § 707, pp. 289–290. JM (§ 121q) state that "The Qal passive participle mostly denotes a completed action or a state", but assert an "optative meaning" for Gen. 14:19, Ruth 2:20 etc. and translate with *May …* (§ 132f).

[24] Compare further "A blessing on you!" / "Blessings on you." (REB89 / NLT).

Yet another case is Jer. 17:7, where many versions say, "Blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD".

These examples show that a translator-exegete has to assess what *bārûk* means in each context.

Atluri and Garber Kompaoré (2023, § 5.2.2) observe that some translate blessing statements as a wish, some as a declaration. Their examples from Gen. 14:19, where Melchizedek blesses Abram (and where the passive participle *bārûk* is used), include:

Translated as a declaration:

CEV: I bless you in the name of God Most High

CSB: Abram is blessed by God Most High

GMTelSB [Telugu, a Dravidian language of India]: The omnipresent God who created heavens and earth will bless Abram.

Translated as a wish or as a prayer:

NLT: Blessed be Abram by God Most High

GNTD: May the Most High God ... bless Abram

T4T: I ask the Supreme God ... to bless you

Again, given the Hebrew verb form, the upper group is to be preferred in my view.

Garber Kompaoré (2023, § 7) also discusses the difference between wish and declaration with regard to curses. She presents two ways of translating the curse formula אָרוּר *ārûr* (when people are cursing):

> Cursed be you – as an expression of a wish, which can also be translated 'May you be cursed', or 'May God curse you'.

She comments:

> This latter translation is based on the interpretation that the speaker depends on God to activate the curse, and thus a human speaking a curse is only expressing a wish. However, in Hebrew, the curse formula is worded in exactly the same way for God as it is for humans. The grammar of the curse formula indicates a form of declaration.

Where passive constructions like "Cursed are you" need to be avoided, she compares the options "May God curse you" and "I curse you", and concludes: "The second option may be preferred, in order to avoid the sense of a wish." Another possibility is, for instance, "A curse on Canaan!" (Gen 9:25 GNTD)

Applying this to blessings, what follows is that a wish form may not fully convey the authority that stands behind it.

6.5 Punctuation

Depending on the language's rules, an exclamation mark may be fitting at the end of a blessing.

6.6 Glossary entry

Since the subjunctive "God bless you" might not convey well what a blessing is, but viable alternatives are difficult to come up with, translators might decide to use the subjunctive, but to add a glossary entry on "blessing".

7 Excursus: New Testament questions for further study[25]

The question that I have discussed in this paper arises in the New Testament as well. How blessings should be translated is not immediately evident: with an optative or indicative? With present or future tense? As a wish or a prayer, an assurance or a promise? The following cases show the problem.

Rom. 1:7 contains the greeting blessing χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη. **The clause is verbless.** In English, this can be reproduced as 'Grace to you and peace', as several versions have it.[26] But for languages where this is not possible, the question arises as to **what kind of a verb to fill in**.[27]

John, in his greeting blessing in 2 Jn. 1:3, says: 'Grace, mercy, and peace will be [ἔσται] with us'. **The verb is indicative future.**

But **a blessing can also come with an explicit optative**. 2 Thess. 3:16 reads: 'Now may the Lord of peace himself give [δώῃ] you peace' (NRSV).

These examples show that verbless blessings require interpretation, and a range of options might be justified, or necessary, for translating them adequately.

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[25] I am thankful to Ronald Gebauer for his observations on NT verses (see Gebauer 2015).

[26] In order to make the sentence sound less foreign, one could also say 'Grace and peace be to you'. But to those who are used to the formulaic wording, this change does not necessarily make the sentence more natural. In German, "Gott möge mit dir sein" (corresponding to "may") can come across as stilted. That is not so much the case with "Gott sei mit dir" (*Konjunktiv*). More casual would be the verbless "Gott mit dir" ≈ "God with you".

[27] Berger and Nord (1999) translate "Ich überbringe euch Gnade und Heil" [word order adapted] – 'I deliver/convey/transmit to you grace and salvation'.

8 Conclusion

In a blessing, the speaker expresses simultaneously 1) a wish on their part, 2) an assurance addressed to the person they are talking to, and 3) a request directed to God. For expressing all this, the standard renderings "The LORD bless you" and "May the LORD bless you" are imperfect, because they are ambiguous constructions.

Even if it is not possible to explicate the above three elements in every sentence that contains a blessing, translators will need to check whether readers share the right assumptions about blessings and make the appropriate inferences.

To continue the above considerations, it would be worthwhile to pursue the question of what the appropriate reaction on the part of the recipient of a blessing is. On the one hand, blessings do not seem to be dependent on preconditions being fulfilled; on the other hand, it seems that a blessing can be forfeited if one does not adhere to it. Suffice it to say that the appropriate response to receiving a blessing is to believe in it.

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