

The Ancient Hebrew Understanding of Blessing

A Reflection by David Keller

What did it mean to bless or be blessed?

The Hebrews believed that the human soul was saturated with power. This power is present within a person as well as on the surface of her or his life, i.e. words, actions, influence, etc. No person can live without this power. The Israelites called this life-giving power *berakha*, *blessing*. If the power of blessing is present within a person its presence will be manifested outwardly. You cannot have blessing without its outward manifestations. Blessing is the inward strength of the soul that becomes a source of vitality and happiness for others.

All life forms have blessing: "Thus says the Lord; As the wine is found in the cluster, and they say, 'Do not destroy it, for there is a blessing in it,' so will I do for my servant's sake, and not destroy them all." Is. 65:8. It is the blessing of the grape to have juice and the potential of wine.

This understanding of blessing is far different from the modern sense that a blessing is "approval" or "protection". It is, rather an investment with sacred power for the life of the world.

The Israelites believed that a person's psychic identity influenced his or her surroundings. A strong soul supports the person's environment of other persons and society. This "influence" was called a person's *counsel*. If a person was to have strong counsel, she or he must have appropriate blessing to make that possible. A person with strong counsel seeks the assistance of others. Israelite kings were seen as good when their power/counsel brought blessing to their people. Isaiah speaks of a coming perfect king as "Wonderful-Counselor". This does not mean that the perfect king offers advice. It means that the king brings good counsel to the people, i.e. blessing through life-giving power.

When God blesses a person, God transmits sacred power. It is a sharing of the life-givingness of the Creator and Sustainer. Thus, Abraham is the steward of God's power to bless "all nations". When Abraham blesses Isaac, the counsel (ability to act according to the nature of the power that has been given) is transmitted from one leader of the clan to the next. The next leader derives his soul from the former. When Jacob wrestles all night with the mysterious person who dominates him he asks for a blessing, i.e. a portion of the mystery he has wrestled with and has left him lame. Jacob becomes Israel; he wrestled with God who prevailed and, through the blessing, imparted his power to Jacob.

This understanding of blessing may help us see the image of Jacob and the ladder as a mirror for our personal movement toward the mysterious power and presence of God in our lives and our plans for the future.