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## ARTICLE VI.

THE SYNTAX OF **נָבָל**.

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SINCE the time of Jerome philologists have been working a puzzle on the etymology of this word and its equivalent *σπέρμα*, in view of the use made of the latter in Gal. iii. 16.

The etymology and the collective use of the word, both in Hebrew and Greek are sufficiently familiar; but the syntax has not been generally examined. In fact, I find but one writer, Windishmann, a Roman Catholic, as cited by Alford (*in loco*), who even hints at it, and neither of these have worked it out.

**נָבָל** is used very early in an individual sense, as in Gen. iv. 25, when Eve says of Seth “God has appointed me another seed (**נָבָל**) instead of Abel, whom Cain slew,” where the reference is evidently to the individuals. The Targum Onkelos, as well as those of Ben Uzziel and Jerusalem, here reads **נָבָל**. The LXX has *σπέρμα* (so also Aquila), and it is noticeable, in passing, that they also render **נָבָל** by *σπέρμα* in Deut. xxv. 5; here the sense might be in doubt between the individual and the collective sense, but Targum Onkelos has **נָבָל**, while the other Targums avoid the expression. Possibly the individual sense may have been in the apostle’s mind when, in 2 Cor. xi. 22, he says: “Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I.” However this may be, essentially the same argument as that of Gal. iii. 16 is used by Peter in Acts iii. 24–26, quoting Gen. xxii. 17, 18, to which reference is also made in Ps. lxxii. 17. There must then be some principle, well known at the time, which enabled these several Hebrews in certain cases to take **נָבָל** not in a collective, but in an individual sense. Of this usage other instances will be given farther on.

The word is of frequent occurrence and its construction with nouns, adjectives, and verbs shows nothing to our purpose. With the adjective it is seldom used except with the indeclinable **בַּשָּׂר**. Other adjectives always agree *in form* with **מִנְיָם**, even when the connection shows a plural idea, as Ezra ix. 2; Job v. 25; Isa. vi. 13. With verbs when used collectively, like other collective nouns, it takes either a singular (15 times), or a plural (11 times), or both in the same connection, as Gen. xv. 13; Ps. xxii. 30, 31; Isa. liv. 3.

The peculiarity in its syntax is in connection with the pronoun. In this is to be found a reliable guide to its meaning, of importance in connection with the apostolical argument. The Hebrew idiom requires that a plural pronoun should be used to represent **מִנְיָם** in its collective sense, and a singular pronoun for it in its individual sense.

This rule is absolute and uniform, and in marked distinction from the use of the noun, adjective, and verb. The pronoun must be plural to cover the collective sense; in the singular it shows absolutely that only one is intended. The same usage may be seen in our English word *sheep* and its pronouns in Isa. liii. 6, 7: "All we, like sheep, have gone astray," etc.; "As a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth."

It is scarcely necessary to give instances of the plural use. A single crucial instance may suffice. In Jer. xxx. 10 it is said, "Therefore, fear thou not, O my servant Jacob, saith the LORD, neither be dismayed, O Israel; for lo, I will save thee from afar, and thy seed from the land of their captivity." Here "seed" is made identical with "Jacob," "Israel," "servant," and the same things are predicated of them all. The synomyms, predicates, and pronouns (of which there are more than thirty in the entire connection), are all singular except the pronoun representing *seed* as distinguished from all its adjuncts, and this is plural. Jer. xlvi. 27 follows the same construction. Other instances of the plural pronoun with the collective **מִנְיָם** are Gen. xv. 13; xvii. 7-9; Ex. xxx. 21; Lev. xxi. 17; 2 Kings xvii. 20;

2 Chron. xx. 7, 9; Neh. ix. 2; Ps. cvi. 27; Isa lxi. 9; Jer. xxiii. 8; xxxiii. 26; Ezek. xx. 5-12. These passages embrace forty-eight pronouns in the plural representing *seed* in the sense of collective posterity. In four cases (Deut. i. 8; iv. 37; x. 15; and Isa. xli. 8) שׁבַּע is used collectively and the pronoun is in the singular; but they form no exception to the rule; since in these cases the "thee" does not refer to *seed* as its proper antecedent, but to the people then living, who are the subject of the address. These are all the cases in which שׁבַּע as a collective occurs with the pronoun.

Turning now to the use of שׁבַּע with the singular pronoun, the examples are less numerous, but equally decisive, and contain in all twenty-three pronouns. 1 Sam i. 11 (the prayer of Hannah), "If thou wilt give to thine handmaid a man child [marg. "a seed of men"] then I will give *him* to the LORD all the days of his life, and there shall no razor come on his head." Here שׁבַּע is evidently used in an individual sense, and all the pronouns relating to it are in the singular. So also in 2 Sam. vii. 12-15, "I will set up thy seed after thee, which shall proceed out of thy bowels, and I will establish his kingdom. *He* shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to *him* for a father, and *he* shall be to me for a son. In his iniquity I will chastise *him*, . . . . but my mercy shall not depart from *him* as I took it from Saul." In both these instances the LXX translate שׁבַּע by σπέρμα, and all the ancient versions use the singular pronoun throughout. The application of the latter passage typically to Christ in Heb. i. 5 does not interfere with the grammar; for Solomon was the type of his greater descendant, not in a collective capacity, but individually, personally, officially, royally. 1 Chron. xvii. 11-14 is another record of the same transaction, varied sufficiently in its diction to show another hand, yet it adheres throughout to the same syntax, which is followed by all the ancient versions; the LXX, as usual, rendering שׁבַּע by σπέρμα.

Let us now look at Gen. iii. 15: "Thy seed and her

seed. *He* shall bruise thy head, and *thou* shalt bruise his heel." Here the LXX again have *σπέρμα*, and all the ancient versions, including the Samaritan, have singular pronouns, except the Targums of Ben Uzziel and Jerusalem. These interpret **seed** collectively, although referring the promise to "the days of the king Messiah." Here it does not matter how multitudinous are the serpent's [spiritual] seed, nor how countless the posterity of Eve; the pronoun selects One as the efficient power in procuring the triumph. Eve herself evidently so understood it, as appears from Gen. iv. 1, though mistaken in its application; while we, by later revelation (as in 1 John iii. 8; Rom. xvi. 20) are abundantly assured of the individuality of the conqueror here foretold.

Ezek. xvii. 13 is not strictly to be cited as an instance, since the phrase there is "of the king's seed" (*lit.* "of the seed of the kingdom"), instead of simply "seed." Nevertheless, the reference is to the individual Zedekiah, son of Jehoiachim, and the pronouns in the Hebrew, as in the ancient versions, are in the singular. This instance may go for what it is worth.

Before passing to the promise made to Abraham, it may be well to ask if there are no exceptions to this rule. Only one can be alleged, Isa. xlviii. 19: "Thy seed also had been as the sand, and the offspring of thy bowels like the gravel thereof; *his* name should not have been cut off nor destroyed from before me." But the text here may fairly be considered doubtful. The Vulgate and Syriac have translated as the Authorized Version; but the LXX change the pronoun to "thy," thus introducing a different antecedent, and making the whole passage more homogeneous: "thy peace . . . thy righteousness . . . thy offspring . . . thy name." Similarly the Targum Jonathan has "the name of Israel shall not cease," etc. If the original text was that which is represented in the LXX and the Targum the exception vanishes; if, however, they found the text as we have it now, they avoided the grammatical anomaly by modifying the expression. But even as the text stands, and without resorting to

the explanation of an anomaly allowed to the necessities of the poetic rhythm, the pronoun may well go back for its antecedent to ver. 15, and thus have no reference at all to **וְ**. This apparent exception, therefore, is not sustained, both on account of a doubt concerning the text, and, if this be correct, on account of a doubt as to the real antecedent of the pronoun.

We may now go back to take up the two remaining passages; the first of which is immediately involved in the apostolic argument, and the second of which is dependent upon the first. Gen. xxii. 17: "In blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand upon the sea-shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of *his* enemies." Here is first, a promise covering all the multitudinous posterity of Abraham, and then, by the construction, a selection of One who "shall bring forth judgment unto victory," and in whom "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." The reference of **וְ** here to an individual, in accordance with the singular pronoun, is in agreement with the primeval promise of Gen. iii. 15, which it would seem that Abraham must have understood as here renewed to his own descendant. The ancient versions appear not to have recognized the prophecy here; the LXX and the Samaritan omit the pronoun altogether, the various Targums substitute the plural "thy sons" (**תִּשְׁנַׁה**) for **וְ**, and all seem to have understood the word collectively. Yet in the application made of the passage in Ps. lxxii. 17 (where **וְ** does not occur) all the versions understand it individually, and it is unquestionably so interpreted by Peter in Acts iii. 25, 26. On the general fact, that the expectation of the Jews, as well as of all other nations, was of deliverance through a *personal* Redeemer, it is impossible here to enter; but this fact, once admitted, helps us to appreciate how Abraham must have understood this promise. For our present purpose we rely only on the syntax in the construction with the singular pronoun.

The remaining passage, as already said, is dependent upon  
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this. It is Gen. xxiv. 60, the blessing given to Rebecca by her Aramite friends: "Let thy seed possess the gate of them that hate *him*." Here almost all translators, ancient or modern, except Luther, have either omitted the pronoun altogether or else have substituted, like the Authorized Version, the plural for the singular, "hate them," and have thus altogether missed the Messianic sense of the passage. But in the original the singular pronoun is clear, and is doubtless, in the mouths of these relatives of Abraham, a reminiscence of the promise made to him, and a prayer that it may be fulfilled through the wife of his son.

Thus every case of **וְיַהֲיֶה** construed with the singular pronoun (with the very doubtful exception of Isa. xlvi. 19) is seen to have an individual reference, and Paul in Gal. iii. 16, in quoting the promise to Abraham with its singular pronoun, was abundantly justified in giving it an individual application: δε εστι Χριστός. The grammatical sense, even independent of theological tradition, afforded a sound basis for his argument.

In regard to the LXX usage, it will be observed that they do not always give the pronoun, as in the last two cases cited, not being able to recognize the meaning of the construction, and therefore here, as so often elsewhere, avoiding the difficulty altogether. But whenever they do give the pronoun at all they render the singular by the singular, as *aὐτός* in Gen. iii. 15, and other cases already cited. Greek usage indeed, even Hellenistic, does not require a plural pronoun for the collective *σπέρμα*; it might have been *aὐτό*, but could not have been *aὐτός*. The LXX translators therefore were aware of, and have everywhere recognized the rule, that *the pronoun always determines the value of וְיַהֲיֶה whether of many or of one*.