

New Perspectives in Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew

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NIF^ʿAL VERBS IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS AND THEIR CONTRIBUTION TO MEANING

Ellen van Wolde

The purpose of the study is to investigate the use and meaning of *nif^ʿal* based on the representative corpus of *nif^ʿal* verbs in Genesis.

1.0. Theoretical Background

1.1. A Syntactic Study of *nif^ʿal* as Non-active Voice and Non-passive Voice

The term ‘voice’ is used in at least two ways in the literature. First, voice denotes a particular alternation in a verb’s argument structure and is therefore considered a syntactic category, in which a verb’s arguments receive different prominence in the sentence through a variety of coding patterns. In the second approach, voice is considered a semantic category and voice alternations are typically considered to encode for semantic patterns based on the interaction between participants.

In a syntactic approach, the syntactic structure underlying the voice patterns is analysed in relation to verb types and their argument structure. For transitive verbs, or verbs involving at least two arguments, the arrangement is always asymmetrical,

with one argument being more prominent than the other. The active voice is the canonical unmarked voice pattern, where the agent is more prominent than the patient. Active voice contrasts with non-active voices, such as passive voice, reflexive voice, and middle voice, all of which have marked voice patterns.

Edit Doron (2003) and Artemis Alexiadou and Edit Doron (2012) published syntactic analyses of two non-active voices in Hebrew, Greek, and English that are the morphological realisation of the two distinct syntactic voice heads μ and π , which generate middle and passive clauses, respectively. They presented a theoretical characterisation of the middle voice as distinct from the passive voice. What distinguishes the passive voice from the middle voice is that it always requires the participation of an external argument, irrespective of the specification of the root. In Hebrew, the passive *binyanim* *pu'al* and *hof'al* are marked by a passive voice head and are used with an external argument. This contrasts with the active *binyanim* *qal*, *pi'el*, and *hif'il*, which are used on the clause or sentence level with two arguments, without an external argument. The middle *binyanim* *nif'al* and *hitpa'el* are characterised by middle voice heads and—unlike the active *binyanim*—have only one argument. They also differ from the passive *binyanim* in lacking an external argument. This, then, is the crucial difference between the passive voice and the middle voice: the presence or absence of an external argument. Instances of *nif'al* and *hitpa'el* verb forms indicate actions that (1) affect their subject without indicating the cause and (2) lack an external argument.

In this article, I will build on Doron's syntactic studies and consider the *nif'al binyan* as expressing the middle voice and not the passive voice.

1.2. A Semantic Study of the Middle Voice

In a semantic study of voice, clausal events are analysed in terms of participants (the referential entities involved in the event) and relations (the relationships linking the participants in a given event), the term 'event' serving as a cover term for actions, processes, circumstances, and states. On the semantic plane, the verbal phenomenon of voice is considered to express the type of action chains where participants interact with each other.

In 1993 Suzanne Kemmer published her book *The Middle Voice*, which has become the definitive typological-semantic study on the topic. Central to her analysis is the notion of transitivity. She defines transitive verbs as verbs that involve two participants: the agent or initiator/instigator, who acts volitionally on another participant, and the patient/endpoint that is directly and completely affected by that event. In contrast, intransitive verbs involve only one participant. Many languages also know a middle voice of transitive verbs that involve one participant that stands in an initiator/endpoint relation to itself. The main function of the middle voice of verbs is to encode the affectedness of an initiating agent.

Kemmer (1993, 243–47) summarises the main results of her study as follows. First, a number of languages give grammatical expression to an 'in-between' category, the middle, which in its most basic uses (body action middles, emotion/cognition

middles) has a single participant that is, however, seen as internally complex. Second, the reflexive is semantically intermediate between prototypical one-participant events and two-participant events in terms of the number of participants involved. The conceptual distinction between initiating agent and affected patient in a reflexive situation type, despite their co-reference, makes it so that some separation of the two participants is maintained. Third, the middle is a semantic area comprising events in which the initiating agent is also the affected patient, and the event is characterised by a low degree of elaboration. Semantically, the middle voice differs from the reflexive voice in terms of participant distinguishability: for the reflexive voice the event is characterised by a high degree of elaboration. The way the single configuration is expressed by middle voice verbs varies among languages. See below, §1.4, for further detail and Table 1 for English examples.

1.3. A Semantic Study of *nif'al* as Middle Voice:

A Survey of Recent Literature

Traditional Biblical Hebrew grammars published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Gesenius, Ewald, König, Bergsträsser, Bauer and Leander, Brockelmann, Joüon, Meyer, Lambdin, Joüon and Muraoka, Waltke and O'Connor, Van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze) often claim that the *nif'al* has a primarily reflexive or passive meaning. Modern scholars, by contrast, have

begun to doubt this claim and have started to explore the *nif^{al}* anew.¹

Based on an analysis of all occurrences of *nif^{al}* verbs in the Hebrew Bible, Steven Boyd (1993) demonstrated that almost all the *nif^{als}* thought to be reflexive are in fact agentless middles.² Subsequently, Holger Gzella (2009) tried to combine the works of Boyd and Kemmer in his study of voice in classical Hebrew and agreed that most *nif^{al}* forms do not express reflexive voice, but can be analysed as agentless middles. However, both Boyd and Gzella reduce the semantic role of the grammatical subject to that of patient, in contrast to Kemmer, who emphasises the conflated configuration of the agent and patient role in the subject.

In 2012, Ernst Jenni published a comprehensive analysis of the *nif^{al}* that takes Kemmer's study into account. He argues convincingly that the *nif^{al}* indicates that the subject is concerned with itself, though not reflexively as a differentiated object, but as an undifferentiated middle, in which the prefix *n-* acts as middle marker.

¹ For a survey of the *nif^{al}* studies in twentieth- and twenty-first-century scholarship, see van Wolde (2019).

² Out of the 4135 *nif^{al}* constructions, Boyd (1993) showed that there are only five semantic reflexive attestations (which amounts to a statistically insignificant 0.121 percent).

1.4. *Nif^cal* as Middle Voice and the Seven Types of Middle Events It Can Express

The present study of the *nif^cal* instances in the book of Genesis is based on Doron's distinction between the middle voice and the passive voice and on Kemmer's differentiation of the middle voice from the reflexive voice, as well as Kemmer's semantic-typological analysis of the middle Voice in thirty different languages. Recent discussions of the *nif^cal* in Hebrew scholarship are also taken into account. Based on these insights, I take the following characteristics of the *nif^cal* as points of departure.

The *nif^cal* in Biblical Hebrew systematically encodes two dimensions of transitive verbs: (a) simple agency and (b) middle voice. In terms of agency, the *qal* of transitive verbs expresses simple agency, in which the dual roles agent and patient are maintained, whereas the *nif^cal* of transitive verbs expresses simple agency in which the roles agent and patient are conflated in a single participant. As for the middle voice, the *nif^cal* expresses an event in which the subject is concerned with itself, not reflexively as a differentiated object, but as an undifferentiated middle.

In its function as a marker of middle voice, the *nif^cal* expresses how a subject is affected by an event, while focusing on either the active side of the event (prototypically, body actions or mental actions and an initiating subject-agent) or the stative side of the event (prototypically, a spontaneous or anticausative change of state or resultative state or disposition), but not on its cause, source, or external agents. In other words, the *nif^cal* expresses a transitive middle event that affects the subject without indicating its cause, source, or external agent, thereby

contrasting with the passive template, which requires an (implicit) external agent.

A distinction can be made among various types of middle events marked by *nif^{al}*:

- (1) body action middle events: Hebrew verbs that (semantically) designate body actions specify in *nif^{al}* an event in which the subject is affected by carrying out an action in or through the body;
- (2) mental action middle events: Hebrew verbs that (semantically) designate mental actions specify in *nif^{al}* an event in which the subject is affected by carrying out an action of mental rather than physical nature; this event can involve emotion, cognition, or perception; the subject is both initiator, in that the mental event originates within the mind of the experiencer, and endpoint, in that the experiencer is affected mentally;
- (3) collective motion middle events: Hebrew verbs used in the plural that (semantically) designate collective motions specify in *nif^{al}* how multiple subjects are affected by collectively carrying out a movement with or through the body; each participant plays the same roles of agent-mover and affected patient in the event;
- (4) reciprocal action middle events: Hebrew verbs that (semantically) designate interaction between participants specify in *nif^{al}* how multiple subjects interact with one another, while each of them plays their own roles of agent-experiencer and affected patient in the event;
- (5) spontaneous change of state or anticausative middle events: Hebrew verbs that (semantically) designate a spontaneous transformation specify in *nif^{al}* events in which the subject is affected by an action that happens on its own, without the subject's directly initiating or instigating the event;

- (6) resultative state middle events: Hebrew verbs that (semantically) designate states specify in *nif'al* that the event is the consequent state of a previous non-profiled action affecting the subject;
- (7) dispositional middle events: Hebrew verbs that (semantically) designate an action and are (often) combined with adverbial or modal elements specify in *nif'al* the subject's disposition, circumstance, or quality. See Table 1.

Table 1: English examples of middle voice event types

Transitive active	Active events
‘He opened the door’	Transitive actions
‘He wrote the letter’	
Transitive reflexive	Reflexive events
‘I saw myself’	Transitive-reflexive actions
‘They blamed themselves’	
Transitive middles	Middle events
‘He went away’	Body actions
‘He shaved’	
‘You are afraid’	Mental actions
‘She will realise’	
‘They united against the enemy’	Collective motions
‘We went abroad’	
‘They argued’	Reciprocal actions
‘Mary and Mabel kissed’	
‘The door opened (by itself)’	Spontaneous changes of state
‘The ship broke up’	
‘The earth was filled with evil’	Resultative states
‘The door opened easily’	Dispositions
‘The book is badly written’	
Transitive passive	Passive events
‘The door was opened by her’	Transitive actions by external agent
Intransitive	Intransitive events
‘He is good-looking’	States
‘They are lacking energy’	

2.0. Attestations of *nif^{al}* Verbs in the Book of Genesis

The book of Genesis contains 203 *nif^{al}* verbal forms;³ for a list of the semantic classes of *nif^{al}* verbs in Genesis and their frequency, see Table 2. For common finite *nif^{al}* forms that occur three or more times in Genesis (twenty out of the eighty *nif^{al}* verbs cited in Genesis) and the semantic classes they represent, see Table 3.

Table 2: Frequency of semantic classes of *nif^{al}* verbs in Genesis

Semantic class	Frequency
Body action	78
Mental action	45
Collective motion	22
Reciprocal action	5
Spontaneous action	5
Resultative	26
Dispositional	22
Total	203

³ In addition, Genesis contains *nif^{al}* participles that function as nouns in the absolute state, e.g., וְהַנִּשְׁאָרִים ‘and the rest’ (Gen. 14.10), הַנִּצְעָבִים ‘the attendants’ (Gen. 45.1), and as adjectives, e.g., נְחֻמָּד ‘desirable’ (Gen. 2.9), הַנִּרְאָה ‘the visible’ (Gen. 35.1). The present study focuses on finite verb forms.

Table 3: Finite *nif'al* forms in Genesis and their semantic classes

Verb	Freq.	Semantic class
נִמּוּל 'be circumcised'	15	Body action: circumcision
נִשְׁבַּע 'swear'	14	Mental action: cognition
נִרְאָה 'appear'	14	Body action: appearance
נִאָּסַף 'be gathered, gather (intr.)'	10	Body action: translational motion
נִמְצָא 'be found'	10	Resultative
נִוָּלַד 'be born'	7	Body action: begetting/acquiring
נִפְרָד 'divide (intr.)'	7	Body action: translational motion
נִקְרָא 'be called'	6	Dispositional
נִמָּלֵט 'flee'	5	Body action: translational motion
נִצָּב 'stand, be positioned'	5	Body action: non-translational
נִחַם 'regret, be comforted'	4	Mental action: emotion
נִקְבַּר 'be buried'	3	Body action: non-translational
נִשָּׂאֵר 'be left, remain'	3	Body action: non-translational
נִשְׁמַר 'be careful'	3	Mental action: cognition
נִאֲזַת 'consent, agree'	3	Mental action: cognition
נִחָזַז 'be caught, possess'	3	Body action: holding property
נִאָּמַר 'be said'	3	Dispositional
נִבְרָךְ 'consider oneself blessed'	3	Mental action
נִכְרַת 'be cut off'	3	Body action: translational
נִעָּשָׂה 'be done'	3	Dispositional

The event most often expressed by verbs set in middle voice belong to the body action domain and comprise situations in which the subject is affected by performing an action in or through their own body. I will focus here on this group of middle body actions. In Biblical Hebrew, body actions are commonly expressed by *qal* (simple agency) or *pi'el* (intensive agency) verbs. For example, the *qal* verbs הָלַךְ 'go, walk' and בּוֹא 'come, arrive, enter' designate spatial movements that differ from those of the *nif'al* verbs נִתְּחַבֵּא 'hide (intr.)' and נִשָּׂאֵר 'remain, be left', in that the *nif'al* marks

the event in such a way that the experiencing subject is comparatively more affected by the body action. A distinction can be made between various body action middles, namely, (1) verbs of translational motion, which mark the movement of the subject from one location to another along a path; (2) verbs of non-translational motion and change in body posture; (3) verbs of body care; (4) verbs of begetting or acquiring; (5) verbs of holding; (6) verbs of becoming perceptible (for numbers and verbs, see Table 4).

Table 4: Body action middles in Genesis and their semantic sub-classes

Semantic sub-class	Root (frequency)	Meaning
Translational motion (18)	נָאָסַף (5), נָגַשׁ (1), נָמַלֵּט (5)	move away/towards
	נִסְתָּר (1), נִחְבֵּא (2)	hide
	נִפְרֵד (3)	split
	נִשְׁפָּךְ (1)	pour
Non-translational motion (15)	נִשְׁאָר (3), נִוָּתֵר (2), נִאָּסֵר (1), נִחָלֵל (1), נִכְלָא (1)	remain (behind)
	נִקְבֵּר (3)	stay (in resting place)
	נִצֵּב (4)	stand (upright)
Body care (17)	נִמּוּל (15)	become circumcised
	נִגְמַל (2)	become weaned
Begetting (9)	נִוָּלֵד (7)	be born, acquired
	נִבְנֶה (2)	become built
Holding (4)	נִאָּחֵז (3)	become possessed
	נִוָּרֵשׁ (1)	become poor
Perceiving (15)	נִרְאָה (14)	become perceptible
	נִגְלָה (1)	become visible

3.0. *Nif'al* as Body Action Middle

3.1. Instances of *nif'al* Verbs of Translational Motion

The following *nif'al* verbs in Genesis specify an event in which the subject is affected by initiating translational motion: (1) moving away from/towards: נָמַלַח (19.17, 17, 19, 20, 22); נָגַשׁ (33.7); נָאֶסְסָה (25.8, 17; 35.29; 49.29, 33); (2) hiding: נָחַבָּא (3.10; 31.27); נָסְתָר (4.14); (3) splitting: נָפַרַד (2.10; 13.9, 14); (4) flowing: נָשַׁפָּךְ (9.6).

The verbs in the first group of translational motion middles express movements away from or towards a place or person. In Gen. 19, the deity's messengers exhort Lot to flee Sodom. The five cases of נָמַלַח designate Lot's motion away from Sodom in a way that shows that Lot is very much affected by it: the *nif'al* expresses both Lot's act of fleeing and the impact it has on him. As both experiencing agent and affected patient, Lot is construed in a single bodily configuration as someone forced to flee for his life.

The *nif'al* verb נָחַבָּא belongs to the second group of translational motion, namely, hiding: וְנָחַבָּא ... וְנָחַבָּא 'I heard the sound of you in the garden... and I hid' (Gen. 3.10). The *nif'al* is not a reflexive voice, as in French *se cacher*, but a middle voice as in English 'hide': it sketches the subject's concealing in a single configuration, and depicts the man as both agent-mover and affected patient. At the same time, the description is not of the entire process of going from the open into a hidden spot to prevent easy visibility or discovery, but the end stage only. This stands in contrast to use of the cognate *hitpa'el* two verses earlier, where

the temporal process itself is described: וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת-קוֹל יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים: ... 'They heard the sound of YHWH God (...) and the man and his wife hid from the face of YHWH God among the trees in the garden' (Gen. 3.8). The *hitpa'el* marks the temporal process of the act of hiding from beginning to end, not just the end result. This is, at least in this text, the main difference between *nif'al* נִפְרָד and *hitpa'el* הִתְחַבֵּא.

The third group of *nif'al* verbs of translational motion is represented by נִפְרָד, used three times in Gen. 13.9–14. The first time is a singular imperative used by Abram and addressed to Lot: הֲלֹא כָל-הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֶיךָ הַפָּרֶד נָא מֵעָלַי אִם-הִשְׁמָאֵל וְאִמְנָה... 'Is not the whole land before you? Please depart/separate from me. If you go north, I will go south...' (Gen. 13.9). The idea expressed here is that of Lot being offered the possibility of leaving Abram. He is the person who may perform the action of parting, though the action will also affect him. The NJPS translates: "Let us separate." In that case the verb should have been set in the plural, in which case the action would have been reciprocal and both would have carried out the leave taking. But this is not the way Abram presents it. Rather Lot is presented as agent-subject and affected patient, although the action itself, pointing towards a future situation, is yet to be executed. Indeed, v. 11 tells us that Lot makes up his mind and chooses to journey eastward. But then, later in the same verse, again נִפְרָד is used, but this time in the plural, וַיִּפְרְדּוּ אִישׁ מֵעַל אָחִיו 'thus they parted' (Gen. 13.11b), expressing a collective action, performed by Abram and Lot together. The third time, the same verb's infinitive construct is used, providing a résumé of the event: וַיְהִיָּה אָמַר אֶל-אַבְרָם אַחֲרֵי הַפָּרֶד-לוֹט מֵעָמּוֹ 'And

YHWH said to Abram after Lot had parted from him...' (Gen. 13.14). Here, again, the parting event is described not in terms of a mutual and collective action, but as one performed by Lot alone. So it refers back to v. 9, not to v. 11. Yet, the *nif'al* describes it as a resultative state, that is, in reference to an event that happened before.

And finally, the last group of translational motion is represented by *nif'al* נִפְּלָה. In Gen. 9.6, the cognate *qal* participle in the phrase שֹׁפֵךְ דָּם אָדָם, commonly translated 'whoever sheds the blood of man', is followed by the *nif'al* *yiqtol* in v. 6b in בְּאִדָּם יִפְּלוּ, commonly translated as passive 'by man shall his blood be shed'. The reason why the preposition -ב cannot indicate a passive construction with an external agent is given by JM (§132c),⁴ who conclude the following for an instrumental meaning 'by' ('by means of'):

In Gen. 9.6 ב is used and not מ because man is here the instrument of justice (...): *He who sheds a man's blood, by (means of) a man shall his blood be shed*. On the other hand, examples of ב with the meaning of the Latin *ab* are

⁴ JM §132c:

Some prepositions may be used with a passive verb to indicate the author of the action. As a rule a proper passive form can be used only if the author of the action (the agent) is not named. Thus a sentence like *the innocent blood shed by Joab* must usually become in Hebrew *the innocent blood which Joab shed*.

Cf. Gen. 21.3; 1 Kgs 2.31; Est. 2.6.

doubtful: in נושע ביהוה *to be saved by Y.* (Dt 33.29; Is 45.17)
 the meaning is rather *per* (Germ. *durch*) 'through'. (JM
 §132e)⁵

However, this understanding of -ב in Gen. 9.6 is unique, and, in my view, led more by textual interpretation than by syntax. If however, the *nif'al* is understood as signalling middle voice, this verse would not be syntactically unusual or irregular, but indicates that the blood is both the subject of the movement of flowing as well the affected patient. Then the verse can be rendered as 'whoever sheds the blood of man—in that man his blood will pour', which means that the murderer's own blood will gush out of his own body (in an act of retribution).

In all instances of translational body motion middle verbs in Genesis, the *nif'al* designates an event in which the subject is both involved in and affected by the consequences of self-performed movements. In these cases, the *nif'al* rarely reflects the entire temporal process from beginning to end, but more often the end stage, the result, or the impact of such a process.

⁵ JM (§132e) continue with: "Text-critically doubtful cases: Nu 36.2; Ho 14.4." For those who do not share their text-critical view, it should be noted that in כָּפַר בְּחַם 'with which atonement was made' (Exod. 29.33) and צִוָּה בַּיהוָה '(my lord) was commanded by YHWH' (Num. 36.2) the *pu'al* (not the *nif'al*) is used; in other words, the passive is not expressed by -ב + noun, but by the *pu'al* + -ב + noun construction.

3.2. Instances of *nif'al* Verbs of Non-translational Motion

Genesis contains the following *nif'al* verbs of non-translational motion: (1) remain (behind): נָשָׂאֵר (7.23; 42.38; 47.18); נֹתָר (32.25; 44.20); נָאָסֵר (42.19); נִכְלָא (8.2), נֹחַל (8.12); (2) stay/lie down (in resting place): נִקְבֵּר (15.15; 35.8, 19); (3) stand (upright): נָצַב (24.13, 43; 28.13; 37.7).

The first group of non-translational middles express the event of ‘remaining (behind), staying (imprisoned), waiting’, not in the sense of being left behind, but as a description of the resulting state. After the Flood has destroyed all living beings, the *nif'al* in בְּתִבְהָא וַיִּשָּׂאֵר אֲדֹנָיִךְ וְאִשְׁרָא אִתּוֹ בְּתִבְהָא ‘and only Noah and those with him in the ark were left’ (Gen. 7.23) describes Noah’s state. There is no implied agent leaving him behind. The same applies to the *nif'al* participle נָשָׂאֵר ‘is left (ms)’ (Gen. 42.38), where Benjamin is Jacob’s only remaining son, and for the *nif'al qatal* in לֹא נִשְׂאֵר לִפְנֵי אֲדֹנָיִךְ בְּלִתִּי אִסְגֻּנִיתָנוּ וְאִדְמָתָנוּ ‘nothing has been left before my lord but our bodies and our land’ (Gen. 47.18), when Joseph’s brothers refer to the final stage of the remaining process, which may be rendered more idiomatically as ‘there’s nothing left’.

In Gen. 32.25 and 44.20, the verb *nif'al* נֹתָר describes other situations in which individuals remains behind. In Gen. 32.25, Jacob sends his wives and children over the river, and in the following clause וַיִּנָּתָר יַעֲקֹב לְבִדּוֹ, the *nif'al* marks not the passive voice event ‘Jacob was left behind alone [by his wives and children]’, but the middle voice ‘Jacob stayed behind alone’. In Gen. 44.20, the very same phrase is used, this time to indicate that Benjamin is the only remaining son of his father and mother, since his

brother Joseph has died. On both occasions, the *nif'al* marks the event as one that affects the remaining character.

In these and other cases of *nif'al* verbs that express non-translational body actions, the *nif'al* depicts the event of remaining (in a certain place), waiting (in the ark), resting (in the grave), or standing (in an upright position) as designating the consequent state in which the subject's body finds itself with regard to a location. In all of these cases, the subject is both involved in and affected by the event and at the same time performing the action. Furthermore, these verbs describe not the entire temporal process from beginning to end, but only the final stage of this process or the resultative state of the body with respect to a given location.

3.3. Instances of *nif'al* Verbs of Body Care

The term 'body care' refers to actions that one performs on oneself. In the Hebrew Bible various verbs designate such actions: *pi'el* כָּבַס 'wash' (44x), *qal* רָחַץ 'wash' (69x) or 'wash oneself' (3x), *hitpa'el* הִתְרַחֵץ 'wash oneself' (1x); *qal* לָבַשׁ 'wear, clothe oneself, dress (intr.)' (61x), *hif'il* הִלְבִּישׁ 'clothe, dress (tr.)' (32x), *pi'el* כָּסָה 'clothe, cover' (132x), נָכַסָה 'be covered' (2x: Jer. 51.42; Ezek. 24.8), הִתְכַּסָּה 'cover oneself' (9x); *qal* אָזַר 'gird oneself, bind (of garment)' (6x), *pi'el* אָזַר 'gird another' (6x), *nif'al* נֶאֱזַר 'be girded' (1x: Ps. 65.7), *hitpa'el* הִתְאָזַר 'gird oneself' (3x); *pi'el* גָּלַח 'shave (tr.)' (18x), *hitpa'el* הִתְגַּלַּח 'shave oneself' (2x), *hitpa'el* הִתְגַּרְדַּר 'scrape oneself' (1x). As these examples show, verbs of body care rarely occur in *nif'al* in Biblical Hebrew. When used transitively, the verbs are expressed in *qal*, *pi'el*, or *hif'il*. When used

intransitively, reflexively, or in middle voice they are set in *hitpa'el*. From the absence of *nif'al* instances we must deduce that ancient Israelites did not conceive of these kinds of events as middle actions, that is to say, as actions in which (part of) the body is both agent-experiencer and affected patient. This is true for the book of Genesis as well. Only two *nif'al* verbs for body care appear in Genesis, namely the verb *נִמּוּל*, used 15 times in *nif'al* with the meanings 'circumcise the foreskin, be circumcised', and the verb *נִגְמַל*, used twice for the weaning of a baby. Instances of *nif'al* *נִמּוּל* are concentrated in two chapters in Genesis, namely chs. 17 (10x) and 34 (5x). I will focus on the occurrences in Gen. 17, which are the following:

- (1) הַמּוּל לָכֶם כָּל־זָכָר
'every male among you shall become circumcised' (Gen. 17.10)
- (2) וְנִמְלֹתֶם אֶת בְּשַׁר עֲרֻלְתְּכֶם
'you shall come in the state of being circumcised' (Gen. 17.11)
- (3) וּבֶן־שְׁמֹנֶת יָמִים יִמּוּל לָכֶם כָּל־זָכָר
'every male among you shall become circumcised at the age of eight days' (Gen. 17.12)
- (4) הַמּוּל יִמּוּל יֶלֶד בֵּיתָךְ
'let every homeborn male become circumcised' (Gen. 17.13)
- (5) וְעֵרֶל זָכָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִמּוּל אֶת־בְּשַׁר עֲרֻלְתּוֹ
'and any male whose foreskin is not circumcised' (Gen. 17.14)
- (6) וַיִּמַּל אֶת־בְּשַׁר עֲרֻלְתּוֹ

‘he circumcised the flesh of their foreskin’ (Gen. 17.23 *qal*)

(7) בְּהִמְלֹךְ בָּשָׂר עָרְלָתוֹ

‘when he became circumcised’ (Gen. 17.24)

(8) בְּהִמְלֹךְ אֶת בָּשָׂר עָרְלָתוֹ

‘when he became circumcised’ (Gen. 17.25)

(9) נִמּוּל אַבְרָהָם וְיִשְׁמָעֵאל

‘Abraham and Ishmael became circumcised’ (Gen. 17.26)

(10) וְכָל-אֲנָשֵׁי בֵיתוֹ... נִמְּלוּ אִתּוֹ

‘all men of his house...became circumcised together with him’ (Gen. 17.27)

In the ten instances of *nif'al* נִמּוּל in Gen. 17, two grammatical patterns are discernible: (a) in vv. 10, 12, 27 the subject is a generic masculine plural ‘all male/all men’ and there is no direct object, while an indirect object is included (לָכֶם ‘among you [mpl]’ and אִתּוֹ ‘with him’); (b) in vv. 11, 13, 14, 23, 24, 25, 26 the subject is an individual person (Abraham or Ishmael) with ‘the flesh of the foreskin’ as direct object, and no indirect object is mentioned.

In the first pattern, the agent-subjects are כָּל-זָכָר ‘every male’ and כָּל-אֲנָשֵׁי בֵיתוֹ ‘all the men of his house’ and the *nif'al* shows that all these men experience the event of circumcision, are affected by it, as well as collectively involved, לָכֶם ‘among you’. In v. 10 the imperative (or infinitive absolute) הִמְּלוּ addressed to Abraham characterises circumcision as an obligatory part of God’s covenant of with Abraham and his offspring. This is the group the term לָכֶם refers to. In v. 12, the *yiqtol* יִמּוּל expresses a general rule or obligation and once again the collective nature of the covenant is signalled via the prepositional phrase

לָכֶם: every boy will become part of the community through circumcision. And finally, in v. 27, the *qatal* נִמְלִי describes the result of the previous actions, again in relation to Abraham's family, this time marked by the prepositional phrase אִתּוֹ 'with him'. On all of these occasions, an external agent goes unmentioned. Instead, the *nif'al* middle expresses the general rule or obligation, as well as the resultative state of circumcision. Yet these verses do not focus on the acts performed on one's body, although every subject is also experiencer and patient, but on the future (or, in v. 27, past) state of being circumcised and on its consequence for someone's belonging to the community. The prepositional phrases לָכֶם and אִתּוֹ indicate the beneficiary of this new state, namely, the community which these men join through the experience of circumcision. Thus, the *nif'al* middle voice denotes the obligation of achieving the communal state of being circumcised, and can be translated into English as 'to become circumcised'.

In the second pattern, the *nif'al* נִמּוּל describes the action of circumcision and takes 'the flesh of the foreskin' as its direct object. At first sight, this usage seems similar to active voice, but on further reflection, it, too, appears to express the middle voice. In v. 11, the *nif'al* וְנִמְלְתֶם indicates that Abraham and his offspring were collectively responsible to have the act performed on their own bodies in order to come into the state of being circumcised. In v. 13, the infinitive construct + *yiqtol* construction יִמּוּל | יִמּוּל stresses this same obligation: 'let every homeborn male become circumcised'. In v. 14, the relative clause אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִמּוּל 'whose foreskin is not circumcised' describes what happens when a man has not become circumcised: וְנִכְרְתָה הַנֶּפֶשׁ הַהִוא מֵעַמִּי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי הַפֶּר:

‘that person removes himself from his people and breaks my covenant’. In other words, in vv. 11–14 *nif'al* נִמּוֹל expresses the condition in which a subject must act as agent, focusing on the consequent state in which he will find himself. The men’s future state will be characterised by circumcision and they are defined as persons who have been circumcised. This new state, then, is the sign of the covenant. Then, in v. 23, the actual practice circumcision is described using the *qal* וַיִּמָּל ‘and he circumcised’.

In the final section, vv. 24–26, two *nif'al infinitivi constructi* וַיִּמָּלְךָ point back to this event. V. 24 refers to the age when Abraham became circumcised and v. 25 to the age when Ishmael became circumcised. Thus, the events are summarised so that Abraham and Ishmael are depicted as having initiated the action of circumcision and as having been affected by it at the same time.

Based on this analysis of the usages of the *nif'al* נִמּוֹל in Gen. 17 a twofold conclusion can be drawn. (1) *Nif'al* נִמּוֹל describes the event of becoming or having become circumcised as a rite of passage signalling entry into a covenant community. From this, it becomes clear why Biblical Hebrew verbs for washing, dressing, covering, and laundering are not expressed in *nif'al*—for these actions require less personal involvement than circumcision, which is a permanent and intentional body modification. The *nif'al* נִמּוֹל expresses exactly this: that one is completely involved and moves from one state into another state of being. The *qal* מוֹל, by contrast, does not express the subject’s affectedness. (2) *Nif'al* נִמּוֹל belongs to two semantic domains: that of body action or care and that of community. In sum, the middle voice of the verb נִמּוֹל adds two important shades of meaning to the *qal*

meaning ‘circumcise’, namely that of affectedness and of group identity.

3.4. Conclusion: *Nif'al* as Body Action Middle

In the 78 instances in Genesis of *nif'al* verbs that designate body actions, the verb describes an event in which the subject is affected by carrying out an action in or through its body. The *nif'al* rarely reflects the entire temporal process from beginning to end; it more often marks the conclusive, final, or resultative stage of such a process, including the impact of the process on the subject. This is true for translational and non-translational body actions, where the *nif'al* expresses the result of the movement or the event of remaining, as well as for attestations of *nif'al* גָּמַל ‘become circumcised’ in Genesis. It also appears that the middle voice can add shades of meaning to the verbal root: the five instances of *nif'al* of נָקַל do not belong to the semantic domain of ‘movement’ alone, but also to the domain of ‘emotion’, while *nif'al* גָּמַל belongs not only to the domain of ‘body care’, but also to the semantic domain of ‘community’ or ‘people’. This may reflect the fact that these verbs do not express a self-contained event, but rather the resultative state in which someone finds themselves (or comes to find themselves), often in relation to the collective other.

In sum, *nif'al* verbs of body action in the book of Genesis conceive of the event from a final, conclusive, or resultative point of view. Expressed in middle voice, the events are not construed as unfolding over time, but as having been achieved, that is, as achievements that affect or have an impact on the initiating

subject, who is at the same time the affected patient. In these middle constructions, the verbal root takes on new shades of meaning.

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