

The Historical Depth of the Tiberian Reading Tradition of Biblical Hebrew

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Cover image: T-S AS 8.129. A leaf from a Cairo Geniza biblical codex containing Gen. 30.17–20 and showcasing Moshe Mohe's non-standard Tiberian pointing of the standard Tiberian pronunciation of *Issachar* (see within, ch. 4), courtesy of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

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2. לִרְאוֹת אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה AND SIMILAR

Eleven times in the Tiberian biblical tradition readers encounter an expression composed of a form of the *nif'al* נִרְאָה and the phrase פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים/יְהוָה, with or without an intervening direct object marker or preposition. Standard renderings include ‘appear before the face of God/the LORD’ and ‘appear in God’s/the LORD’s presence’.

It has been claimed, however, that in all such cases the consonantal spelling was actually intended to represent a form of the *qal* verb רָאָה, with the meaning ‘see God’s/the LORD’s face’, and that the form was only secondarily interpreted as *nif'al* out of concerns for theological propriety (BDB 816b, 908a). Such changes were presumably made both in deference to a general aversion to anthropomorphising the Israelite deity and for the sake of theological harmony in adherence to the prohibition against seeing the divine visage, which employs *qal* רָאָה ‘see’, in (1).

- (1) וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא תִרְאֶה אֶת־פְּנֵי כִי לֹא־יִרְאֶנִי הָאָדָם וְחַיִּי.... וְהִסְרֹתִי אֶת־
כַּפִּי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת־אֲחֹרַי וּפְנֵי לֹא יִרְאוּ:

‘And he said, “You cannot **see my face**, because no mortal **will see me** and live.... And I will remove my hand, and you will see my back, **but my face will not be seen.**”’
(Exod. 33.20, 23).

By avoiding the *qal* form in other verses, readers might be helped to avoid the misconception that God’s face could be seen.

Instances where *qal* in רָאָה (אֶת־/אֶל־) פָּנֵי אֱלֹהִים/יְהוָה ‘see the God’s/the LORD’s face’ are thought to have been reinterpreted as *nif^cal* due to theological concern may be contrasted with cases in which רָאָה (אֶת־/אֶל־) פָּנֵי ‘see X’s face’ has no divine referent and was maintained.¹ There are even comparable cases in which *qal* רָאָה is preserved with the face of a divine referent as object.²

The current chapter examines cases of apparent substitution for *qal*, attempting to determine whether the hypothesis of secondary development is equally applicable to all of them. It then seeks to gauge the antiquity of the reinterpretation.

1.0. Unambiguous Cases of Dissonance

Evidence of morphological mismatch involving both orthography and vocalisation suggest that at least some cases of *nif^cal* רָאָה* (אֶת־/אֶל־) פָּנֵי אֱלֹהִים/יְהוָה are secondary reworkings of original formulations with *qal* רָאָה. The most conspicuous cases of mismatch between the written and reading components of the Tiberian biblical tradition are reproduced in examples (2)–(4).

- (2) וְלֹא־יַחְמֹד אִישׁ אֶת־אֶרְצְךָ בְּעֹלְתְּךָ לְרֹאוֹת אֶת־פָּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ...
שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה:

‘...and no one shall covet your land, when you go up **to appear before the face of the LORD your God** three times in the year.’ (Exod. 34.24; SP להראות *lerrā^cot*; Greek *ὁφθαλμοί*; Vulgate *et apparente*; TO לאתחזא; Syriac ܠܐܬܚܙܐ)

¹ Gen. 31.2, 5; 32.21; 43.3, 5; 44.23, 26; 46.30; 48.11; Exod. 10.28, 28; 34.35; 2 Sam. 3.13, 13; 14.24, 32; 2 Kgs 25.19 (|| Jer. 52.25); Jer. 52.25 || (2 Kgs 25.19); Est. 1.14; Dan. 1.10.

² Gen. 32.31; 33.10; Judg. 6.22; Jer. 18.17; Job 32.26.

- (3) בָּבוֹא כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְרֹאוֹת אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחָר...
 ‘When all Israel comes **to appear before the face of the Lord your God** at the place that he will choose,...’ (Deut. 31.11; SP להראות *lērrāʾot*; Greek *ὁφθῆναι*; Vulgate *ut appareant*; TO לאתחזאה; Syriac ܠܡܚܝܬܐ)
- (4) כִּי תָבֹאוּ לְרֹאוֹת פְּנֵי מִי־בִקֵּשׁ זֹאת מִיָּדְכֶם רַמָּס חֲצָרִי:
 ‘When you come **to appear before me**, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? (Isa. 1.12; 1QIsa^a לראות; Greek *ὁφθῆναι*; Vulgate *ante conspectum meum*; TJ לאתחזאה; Syriac ܠܡܚܝܬܐ)

In all of the above, an infinitive construct with transparently *qal* spelling (i.e., lacking the *heh* of the corresponding *nifʿal* infinitive) is realised as *nifʿal* in the pronunciation tradition. While syncope of *heh* is common in certain environments in ancient Hebrew, the *nifʿal* infinitive is not one of them. For example, unambiguous *nifʿal* infinitive construct forms of נָרָא come ten times in the Hebrew Bible, consistently with the expected *heh*, even following a cliticised preposition.³ The three exceptional cases in (2)–(4) above, where the infinitives are read as *nifʿal* despite apparent *qal* orthography, all make reference to the deity’s face/presence. The exclusive connection between the mixed *qal-nifʿal* form לְרֹאוֹת and contexts including reference to the divine face/presence is unlikely to be random.

In all instances, ancient versional evidence agrees with the Tiberian reading tradition on the meaning ‘appear’. This extends to the Samaritan written tradition, which has the unambiguous

³ Lev. 13.7, 14; Deut. 31.11; Judg. 13.21; 1 Sam. 3.21; 2 Sam. 17.17; 1 Kgs 18.2; Isa. 1.12; Ezek. 21.29; Mal. 3.2.

nif'al theological *lectio facilior* להראות in both of the Pentateuchal instances.

It is of interest that in the parallel to (4) in the Great Isaiah Scroll, the spelling לראות (1QIsa^a 1.14) is also most straightforwardly analysed as a *qal* infinitive. The form in the Peshiṭta is also a match for that represented by the Tiberian written tradition, while the Greek, Latin, and TJ reflect the same understanding as the Tiberian reading tradition.

Syntactically, it is worth pointing out that, in the case of a variety of verbs, אֶת־פָּנַי is synonymous with לְפָנַי, אֶל־פָּנַי, and עַם פָּנַי, meaning 'before, in the presence of'.⁴ The particle אֶת in such cases is most plausibly analysed as the comitative preposition אֶת 'with'. If so, in cases (2) and (3), the *nif'al* realisation in the Tiberian recitation tradition also involves the reinterpretation of the originally accusative/direct object particle אֶת as the homonymous preposition אֶת 'with'.

In (4), the presumed original syntax of *qal* infinitive לראות* followed by פָּנַי 'my face, presence' with no intervening preposition or particle is within the bounds of acceptable BH usage.⁵ The grammaticality of the same formulation with *nif'al* is more difficult to gauge. On the one hand, phrases with פָּנַי have two char-

⁴ Gen. 19.13, 27; 27.30; 33.18; 43.34; Exod. 10.11; 32.11 (?); Lev. 4.6, 17; 10.4; 1 Sam. 2.11, 17, 18; 22.4; 1 Kgs 12.6; 13.6 (2x?); 2 Kgs 13.4 (?); 16.14; Jer. 26.19 (?); Zech. 7.2 (?); 8.21, 22 (?); Ps. 16.11; 21.7; 140.14; Job 2.7; Prov. 17.24; Est. 1.10; Dan. 9.13 (?); 2 Chron. 33.12 (?).

⁵ See, e.g., Gen. 32.21; 33.10, 10; 43.3, 5; 44.23, 26; 48.11; Exod. 10.28, 29; 2 Sam. 14.32; Job 33.26, all with *qal* רָאָה 'see' preceding פָּנַי 'face' with no intervening particle.

acteristics common for so-called accusatives of place, in that (a) they begin construct phrases and (b) they begin with a bilabial (GKC §118g). Also, in some LBH texts, פָּנִים functions as a locative adverbial in the sense ‘before, toward, in front, eastward’ (see BDB 815, §6). For example, consider (5).

- (5) וּמִצְאֲתֶם אֹתָם בְּסוֹף הַנֶּחֱל פָּנֵי מִדְבַּר יְרוּעַל: ...
 ‘...You will find them at the end of the valley, east of/in
 front of the wilderness of Jeruel.’ (2 Chron. 2.16)

The syntax of *qal* נִרְאָה פָּנֵי is clearly acceptable, that of *nif'al* נִרְאָה פָּנֵי questionable.⁶ Since the orthography in (4) is transparently *qal*, syntactic considerations there only confirm the secondary status of the *nif'al* recasting. But questionable syntax may be a more decisive factor in the assessment of ambiguous cases.

Before proceeding to more ambiguous cases of possible *qal* > *nif'al* shift, it is worth examining potentially related cases involving *qal* and *hif'il*. Example (6) presents an apparent instance of the shift *qal* > *hif'il*.

- (6) הֵלֵךְ לִפְנֵיכֶם בְּדֶרֶךְ לְתוֹר לָכֶם מְקוֹם לַחֲנֻתְכֶם בָּאֵשׁ | לַיְלָה לִרְאֹתְכֶם
 בְּדֶרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר תִּלְכוּ־בָּהּ
 ‘...who went before you in the way to seek you out a place
 to pitch your tents, in fire by night and in the cloud by day,
to show you by what way you should go.’ (Deut. 1.33; SP
 להראותכם; 4Q35 f2–4.26: להראות; Greek δεικνύων ὑμῖν; Vulgate
ostendens vobis; TO לאחזויתכון; Syriac ܐܡܪܝܢܝܢ)

⁶ All four instances in which *nif'al* נִרְאָה precedes פָּנִים with no intervening particle are among those identified as potential cases of revocalised *qal* forms: Exod. 25.15; 34.20; Isa. 1.12; Ps. 42.3. All are discussed in the present study.

According to the *hif'il* realisation in the Tiberian reading tradition, explicit in the orthography of SP and 4Q35, the Tiberian written component's לראתכם is to be understood as the causative 'make you (MPL) see, show you (MPL)', which interpretation is supported by the versions. The ostensible *qal* לראתכם* 'for your (MPL) seeing, for you (MPL) to see' would presumably have referred to the purpose of providing light on the road at night. If this is indeed a case of recasting, the motivation would seem to be to forestall misunderstanding, lest readers conclude that God could be seen.

Example (7) exhibits a potential *hif'il* > *qal* shift.

- (7) פְּרוּח־קָדִים אֲפִיעֶם לִפְנֵי אוֹיֵב עֶרְף וְלֹא-פָנִים אֶרְאֶם בְּיוֹם אִידִם:
 'I will scatter them before their enemies like dust blowing
 in front of a burning east wind. (My) back and not (my)
 face **I will show them** on the day of disaster.' (Jer. 18.17;
 Greek δειξω αυτοις; Vulgate *ostendam eis*; TJ ואחזינון; Syriac
 ܐܚܝܢܐܢܐܝܢܐ)

Here, were it not for the vocalisation, the most straightforward reading would arguably be as *hif'il* אֶרְאֶם*. This not only fits the ellipses 'knap and not face I will show them', but has the support of the versions and modern translations. The Tiberian reading tradition's *qal* may betray aversion to the notion that God might actually show his face. But the resulting phraseology, presumably entailing adverbial accusatives, gives the awkward '(with) knape and not (with) face I will see them'.

2.0. Ambiguous Cases

Whereas cases (2)–(4) above present unequivocal cases of dissonance between a written *qal* and a *nif'al* in the pronunciation tradition, other cases of mismatch are not so readily apparent.

Consider (8).

- (8) צִמָּאָה נַפְשִׁי | לֵאלֹהִים לֵאמֹר חַי מִתִּי אֲבוֹא וְאֶרְאֶה פָנַי אֱלֹהִים:
 ‘My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come **that I might appear before God?**’ (Ps. 42.3; Greek *ὁφθῆσομαι*; Vulgate *et parebo*; Targum וואחמי זיו שכינתא דיהוה
 Syriac ܐܚܡܝ ܕܝܗܘܐ)

The lack of a preposition or particle after the verb makes it possible that consonantal וּרְאֶה represents an original *qal*, וְרְאֶה* ‘that I may see’. Additionally, while the Greek and Latin show theological concern like that ostensibly behind the Tiberian vocalisation, the Targum and Syriac support a *qal* ‘see’ reading (though the Targum mitigates by replacing ‘face’ with ‘glory of the presence of the LORD’).

Other ambiguous cases include (9) and (10).

- (9) אֶת־חֶג הַמִּצּוֹת תִּשְׁמֹר שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל מִצּוֹת כֶּאֱשֶׁר צִוִּיתִךָ לְמוֹעֵד חֹדֶשׁ
 הָאֲבִיב כִּי־בֹ יֵצְאָתָּ מִמִּצְרָיִם וְלֹא־יֵרָאוּ פָנַי רִיקָם:
 ‘You shall keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread. As I commanded you, you shall eat unleavened bread for seven days at the appointed time in the month of Abib, for in it you came out of Egypt. **None shall appear before me** empty-handed.’ (Exod. 23.15; SP יראו *yirra’u*; Greek *ὁφθῆσῃς*; Vulgate *apparebis*; TO יתחזון; Syriac ܐܘܪܐܝܬܝܢ)

- (10) וּפְטֹר חֲמוֹל תַּפְדָּה בְּשֵׁה וְאִם־לֹא תַפְדָּה וְעִרְפָתוֹ כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּנֵיךָ תַפְדָּה וְלֹא־
יֵרָאוּ פָנַי רִיקִים:

‘The firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. **And none shall appear before me empty-handed.**’ (Exod. 34.20; SP יראו *yirra’u*; Greek *ὀφθῆναι*; Vulgate *apparebis*; TO יתחזון; Syriac (ܐܘܪܝܬܐ))

In both, the verb can easily be read as a *qal*. The lack of any particle or preposition between the verb and פָּנַי ‘my face, presence’ makes a *nifʿal* reading in the sense ‘will (not) appear’ questionable. Also, the shift in referent from 2nd- to 3rd-person is jarring. Why not continue each verse with תִּרְאֶה *וְלֹא תִרְאֶה ‘and you will not be seen, appear’, if that is the intended meaning? The ancient versions universally translate ‘appear before’, as if פָּנַי were equivalent to לִפְנֵי and אֶת-פָּנַי or פָּנַי were an accusative of place (see above). Some modern translations deftly sidestep part of the problem via impersonal rendering, e.g., ‘And none shall appear before me empty-handed’. Yet, this does not resolve the problem of the lack of a preposition or particle. In both cases it seems more likely that the verbs are either impersonal *qal* forms, יֵרָאוּ ‘(none) will see’, or *nifʿal* forms with פָּנַי ‘my face’ as subject, i.e., ‘my face will not be seen in vain’. Cf. the clear instance where פָּנִים ‘face’ serves as subject of *nifʿal* נִרְאֶה in example (11) (though, in that instance, too, a *qal* reading is possible).

- (11) וְהִסַּרְתִּי אֶת-כַּפִּי וְרָאִיתָ אֶת-אַחֲרִי וּפָנַי לֹא יֵרָאוּ:

“And I will remove my hand, and you will see my back, **but my face will not be seen.**” (Exod. 33.23)

Now, consider (12)–(14).

- (12) שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה יֵרָאֶה כָּל־זָכוֹרְךָ אֶת־פְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

‘Three times in the year **will all your males appear before the Lord**, the LORD God of Israel.’ (Exod. 34.23; SP יראה *yirra’i*; Greek *ὁφθήσεται*; Vulgate *apparebit*; TO יתחזון; Syriac ܐܘܠܡܐܢܐ)

- (13) שְׁלֹשׁ פְּעָמִים | בַּשָּׁנָה יֵרָאֶה כָּל־זָכוֹרְךָ אֶת־פְּנֵי | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחָר בְּחַג בָּחַג הַמַּצּוֹת וּבְחַג הַשִּׁבְעוֹת וּבְחַג הַסֻּּפּוֹת...

‘Three times a year **will all your males appear before the LORD your God** at the place that he will choose: at the Feast of Unleavened Bread, at the Feast of Weeks, and at the Feast of Booths...’ (Deut 16.16a; SP יראה *yirra’i*; Greek *ὁφθήσεται*; Vulgate *apparebit*; TO יתחזון; Syriac ܐܘܠܡܐܢܐ)

- (14) ...וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה רֵיקָם:
‘...and **they shall not appear before the LORD** empty-handed.’ (Deut. 16.16b; SP יראו *yirra’u*; Greek *ὁφθήσῃ*; Vulgate *apparebit*; TO יתחזון; Syriac ܐܘܠܡܐܢܐ)

In cases (12)–(14), the fact that the sequence אֶת־פְּנֵי can be taken as a prepositional phrase in the sense of ‘before, in the presence of’ legitimises the *nif'al* reading of the verbal form יֵרָאֶה in the meaning ‘will appear’. This is the understanding in the versions. Admittedly, however, the *nif'al* reading is no more grammatically felicitous than *qal* יֵרָאֶה* ‘will see’ would be, in which case the ensuing אֶת would be construed as the marker of the definite accusative/direct object.

Another equivocal case is presented in (15).

- (15) וַיֹּחֲזֵק לֹא עֲלֶתָהּ כִּי־אָמְרָה לְאִשָּׁה עַד יִגְמַל הַנָּעַר וְהִבְאֵתוּ וַיִּרְאֶה אֶת־
פָּנֵי יְהוָה וַיֵּשֶׁב שָׁם עַד־עוֹלָם:

'But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, **so that he may appear in the presence of the LORD** and dwell there forever." (1 Sam. 1.22; Greek *ὁφθίησεται*; Vulgate *appareat*; TJ ויִתְחַזֵּי; Syriac ܐܘܬܒܬܐ)

Here, the graphic unit וּנִרְאֶה has three contextually defensible analyses: (1) 3MS *nif'al weqatal* וּנִרְאֶה ‘and he will appear’, as in the Tiberian reading tradition; (2) 1CPL *nif'al we-yiqtol* וְנִרְאֶה* ‘that we may appear’; (3) 1CPL *qal we-yiqtol* וְנִרְאֶה* ‘that we may see’.⁷ Thus, while the possibility that an original *qal* was recast as a *nif'al* exists here, the 3rd-person *nif'al* option is at least as fitting as the two 1st-person plural options, one of which is, in any case, also *nif'al*. Unsurprisingly, the ancient versions agree with the Tiberian reading tradition on the meaning ‘appear’.

3.0. The Antiquity of the Interpretation

Having identified cases in which developments in the Tiberian pronunciation tradition either likely or possibly constitute secondary shifts to avoid a theological difficulty, the most relevant question for this study is: when did the purported *qal* > *nif^cal* (or *qal* > *hif^cil*) recasting take place? Its secondary nature in some of the aforecited cases seems beyond question. Yet, what should be emphasised is that, even where secondary, the *nif^cal* reinterpret-

⁷ The ensuing spelling וישב is also contextually ambiguous: *weqatal* וישב ‘and he will dwell’ or *we-yiqtol* וישב ‘that he might dwell’. See below, ch. 18.

tation cannot be explained as Byzantine- or medieval-period intervention. Rather, it is firmly rooted in the Second Temple Period—when Hebrew was, crucially, still a living vernacular. That this is so is evidenced by the widespread agreement among the ancient translations and the consistent Samaritan *nif^ʿal* reading—to the point that the latter has unambiguous consonantal *nif^ʿal* infinitives (with *heh*) in Exod. 34.24 and Deut. 31.11, i.e., examples (2) and (3), respectively, above. The agreement between the Tiberian and Samaritan traditions on this point likely dates to a period before the two respective proto-traditions had diverged, i.e., no later than the second century BCE, and probably earlier. The DSS support for the Tiberian reading tradition's *hif^ʿil* form at Deut. 1.33 in example (6) also comes as evidence of the antiquity of discomfort with *qal* readings potentially understandable as indications that God could be seen.

What is more, from the perspective of the Tiberian *consonantal* tradition, in several cases, a *nif^{al}* reading must be considered at least as felicitous as a *qal* reading, if not more so. This applies to the case of 1 Sam. 1.22 in example (15) above. It is also true of example (16).

שֶׁלֶשׁ פַּעַמִּים בַּשָּׁנָה יִרְאֶה בְּלִזְבוּרָה אֶל־פְּנֵי הָאָרֶץ | יְהוָה: (16)

“Three times in the year **will** all your males **appear** to the **Lord, the LORD.**’ (Exod. 23:17; SP יראה *yirra’i*; Greek ὁφθήσεται; Vulgate *apparebit*; TO תחזון; Syriac ܐܬܝܬܐܝܬܐ)

Unless the preposition 𐎧 here is due to corruption,⁸ it would seem to furnish consonantal support for an original *nif^{ca}l* reading,

⁸ The collocation אָרָאָהּ is uncommon, occurring only in Ezek. 43.3, where אָרָאָהּ < אָרָאָהּ (?). In the MT the construction אָרָאָהּ-אָרָאָהּ often involves a

since the ostensible *qal* יֵרָאֶה אֶל-פָּנַי*, while perhaps not impossible, is far less expected than יֵרָאֶה אֶל-פָּנַי ‘appear to/before the face/in the presence of’.

4.0. Conclusion

In sum, in the case of the expressions in question, the Tiberian biblical tradition presents several cases of probable mismatch between its written and reading components. In these cases, the vocalisation in the reading component almost certainly reflects the theologically motivated replacement of *qal* ‘seeing God’s face’ with *nif^{al}* ‘appearing before God’. A few other morphological shifts may also be part of the same strategy. Though secondary, the ancient Hebrew and translational evidence substantiates the profound historical depth of the *nif^{al}* interpretive tradition for ‘appearing before God’. This interpretation dates back to at least the Second Temple Period, as is clear from the unequivocal *hif^{il}* spelling in a DSS version of Deut. 1.33 shown above in example (6). In other cases, the consonantal form is ambiguous. In any of them, the form may well represent an original *qal*; however, the apparently genuine *nif^{al}* in Exod. 23.17 means that several may alternatively constitute genuine *nif^{als}*.

motion verb, e.g., Lev. 9.5; 14.53; 16.2; 17.8; Ezek. 44.4; Neh. 2.13; 2 Chron. 19.2. More comparable to the case in Exod. 23.17 are Lev. 6.7; Num. 20.10; Ezek. 41.4, 12, 15, 25; 42.2, 3, 7, 10, 10, 13; 45.7, 7; 48.21; Job 2.5; 13.15. The occurrence of נָס in SP Exod. 23.17 is unsurprising given that version’s harmonistic tendencies in the case of both content and grammar.