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Voice, discourse prominence, and aspect: the niphal and passive qal of Yālad

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Where Is the Way
to the Dwelling of Light?

*Studies in Genesis, Job and Linguistics
in Honor of Ellen van Wolde*

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Voice, Discourse Prominence, and Aspect

The Niphal and Passive Qal of Yālad

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1   Introduction[1]

In the study of ancient languages in general and Biblical Hebrew in particular, there is a continuous tension between primarily synchronic and primarily diachronic explanations of the data. In the case of Biblical Hebrew, the small number of texts that can be dated precisely in combination with the possibilities for archaising style even in those texts makes historical arguments very powerful. We often simply do not have the data to be able to falsify a diachronic account, so many characteristics of the text can be explained by presupposing some diachronic development. Therefore one must be careful not to overlook synchronic explanations that can account for the data equally well or better.

In this paper I look at the distribution of the non-active stems of the root *yālad* 'to give birth, beget'. The niphal and passive qal are seemingly synonymous in the meaning 'to be born', but the niphal appears predominantly in later texts whereas the passive qal is more common in older texts.[2] This gives rise to the straightforward diachronic analysis that the niphal replaced the passive qal over time, a well-known process in Biblical Hebrew in general.[3] However, this does not acquit us from the obligation to look for possible differences in meaning for the time the two stems existed alongside each other. Such synchronic aspects may be combined with this rough diachronic approach to come to a more explanatory analysis. These semantic differences will furthermore

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1   It is my pleasure to offer this modest study in honour of Ellen van Wolde. Her courses, in particular a master seminar on the niphal stem, have been of formative influence, as her supervision continues to be. Instead of looking at the 'consequence for meaning' of her analysis of the niphal stem as a middle voice marker (van Wolde 2019), it will be my aim here to show that her analysis also has the power to answer some morphological questions. I am grateful to Holger Gzella, Johan Rooryck, and an anonymous reviewer for feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

2   Translations and dictionaries do not commonly distinguish the passive qal and niphal (Koehler and Baumgartner 1995, s.v. yld: 'to be born'; Gesenius 2013, s.v. yld: 'geboren werden').

3   Gzella (2009) is to my knowledge the most recent diachronic exposition of voice in Biblical Hebrew.

prove useful to explain some particularities of the paradigm, which cannot be accounted for by a purely diachronic explanation.

A first complication for a purely diachronic account is that the passive qal of *yālad* is not found in the prefix conjugation (p.c.).[4] This paradigmatic gap was already addressed by Joüon (1920, 359–360), who argued that the niphal p.c. was coined to disambiguate the passive qal suffix conjugation (s.c.) and p.c., which are morphologically identical for this root in the 3rd person masculine. In his view, the niphal s.c. is then formed on analogy with the p.c., and is therefore semantically equivalent to the s.c. of the passive qal. However, in my opinion it is unlikely that the niphal was needed for disambiguation, a point to which I shall return below.

The question should be asked whether the existence of both stems as well as the lack of passive qal p.c. forms can be explained by semantic and/or pragmatic factors. For example, Gzella (2009, 312–313) shows that the external agent (i.e., the mother) in *yālad* events is more often specified in the direct context of passive qal forms than in that of niphal forms, suggesting that the passive qal requires an (implicit) external agent while the niphal does not. Such a distinction is expected given the functions of the stems as a passive and a middle voice, respectively.[5] However, it is difficult to relate this particular semantic distinction to the lack of passive qal p.c. forms.

In this paper I therefore argue that a pragmatic factor plays a role as well, namely the discourse prominence of specific verbal arguments, i.e. whether they are topical or not. It seems that the passive qal tends to be used when the patient (i.e., the child that is born) plays a relatively more important role in the discourse, and is thus highly topical. Like the presence of an external agent,

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4   Abbreviations used in this paper: p.c. (prefix conjugation); s.c. (suffix conjugation).

5   I follow van Wolde (2019) in taking the niphal as a middle voice. Gzella (2009, 294) describes the niphal as 'medio-passive', implying 'that the focus always rests on the patient or the action rather than on the agent' and noting that the 'Semitic languages by and large lack a true middle marker' opposed to active and passive voice. Van Wolde (ibid., 465) is critical of this analysis because it lacks the aspect that the patient is somehow in control of the action (which she takes as central to the middle voice, following Kemmer 1993, 1–15). However, this aspect does not need to be present in all occurrences of a middle voice marker. In particular in the case of the verb *yālad*, it would be a stretch to say that in examples like *John got born* there is a conflation of the agent and patient roles in *John*. Alexiadou and Doron (2012, 5) show that there is a subcategory of middle voice, also called 'medio-passive' but distinct from Gzella's usage of the term, which is semantically like the passive but uses middle voice morphology. As I read it, Gzella (2009, 294) describes the niphal as a non-active voice encompassing both middle and passive semantics. Together with Alexiadou and Doron's (2012) description of the medio-passive, this is essentially the same as a middle voice, and therefore compatible with van Wolde (2019).

this can be explained by voice: the passive voice demotes the agent and fore-grounds the patient, whereas the middle voice can demote the agent without necessarily foregrounding the patient (Comrie 1981). It follows that as a middle voice, the niphal is therefore a priori well-suited for backgrounded events in which the patient is less discourse-prominent, i.e., less topical.[6]

Furthermore, a correlation with viewpoint aspect (Hopper 1979; Comrie 1981) may explain why no p.c. forms of the passive qal occur. Perfect aspect is not only used for completed situations with a lasting impact on the present, it also tends to be used for more topical situations. Other types of aspect, such as habitual and imperfective aspect, are more suited for background events (e.g. Hopper 1979, 216). As we can relate the s.c. to perfect aspect and the p.c. to those other types of aspect, this may explain the lack of passive qal p.c. forms: such a form would constitute a clash between high topicality (from the passive voice) and low topicality (from non-perfect aspect). We can thus identify three interrelated concepts that illuminate the semantic and pragmatic differences between the passive qal and niphal of *yālad*:[7]

Stem	Patient topicality	Voice	Aspect
Passive qal	High	Passive	Perfect
Niphal	(unmarked)	Middle	(no preference)

As I will explain below, this is a complementary explanation, compatible with the approaches of both Hendel (2000) and Gzella (2009).

In what follows, I will first lay out some morphological preliminaries (section 2) and discuss the previous work on the verb *yālad* (section 3). Section 4 presents my own analysis using minimal pairs and some rough statistics. Section 5 discusses the cross-linguistic evidence for correlations between topicality and voice, and section 6 relates these concepts to aspect as well.

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6 Although a backgrounded event does not require less discourse-prominent arguments or vice versa, the two are cognitively correlated.

7 The last three columns in this table are in no particular order. Given an event to describe, a speaker has to select the best form (passive qal or niphal) to match the event in terms of patient topicality, voice, and aspect. I do not wish to make a claim as to which of these three, if any, is primary, but merely to point out the correlation between the categories.

2   Morphology and Distribution

Before we can look at the distribution of the various verbal forms, a few preliminary remarks are in order. First, it is clear that *yullad* is indeed not a pual s.c. but a passive qal because its meaning does not relate to the piel, which means 'to act as a midwife'. The pointing of **yulad* as *yullad* may be a Masoretic reanalysis or, alternatively, reflect a sound change which caused the passive qal s.c. to overlap with that of the pual (as suggested by Joüon and Muraoka 2006, § 58a); this is not relevant for our present purposes.

Second, passive qal p.c. forms are generally pointed by the Masoretes as either hophal or niphal (Waltke and O'Connor 1990, § 22.6d). In our case we have no hophal forms,[8] so niphal p.c. forms may a priori be either niphals or reanalyzed passive qals. However, it seems most likely that the passive qal p.c. of *yālad* would have been pointed as a hophal. All roots that have their passive qal p.c. pointed as a niphal are relatively low-frequency (see the overview in Williams 1970, 49); higher-frequency lexemes like *lqḥ* and *ntn* all have their passive qal p.c. pointed as hophals. This seems to be related to the moment of reanalysis: the passive qal p.c., *yuqṭal*, is identical to that of the hophal, so a 'reanalysis' to hophal could easily occur at any point in time. But the niphal p.c. is decidedly distinct (*yiqqāṭēl*, or *yiwwālēd* for *yālad*); a reanalysis to a niphal form is only feasible in written language. Since the formations of frequent roots are remembered more easily than those of infrequent ones, a reanalysis to niphal is only likely in the case of roots so infrequent that the Masoretes were unsure of the correct recitation.[9] It would seem that the passive forms of *yālad*

8   Following Joüon (1920, 359–360), the 3rd person masculine p.c. forms of the hophal would be identical to those of the s.c., but in all instances it is clear from the context that a s.c. is intended.

9   I am grateful to Benjamin Suchard for discussing this with me. The only apparent exception to the situation as sketched here is the root *śrp* 'to burn'. This root is suppletive: its s.c. occurs only in the passive qal (once), but its p.c. occurs only in the niphal (fourteen times, of which one *wayyiqṭol*). The p.c. usually has a modal nuance and occurs frequently in Leviticus, which can explain the large preference for this conjugation. Given the large difference in number of attestations, the possibility exists that the passive qal p.c. is not attested due to historical accident, or that it occurred infrequently and was pointed as niphal due to confusion with true niphal forms.

   Yuditsky (2008, 239 n. 43) observes that the hophal p.c. of strong roots and III-*h* roots is rarer than expected when compared to their s.c. or the hophal p.c. of weak roots, and suggests that the original p.c. hophal forms of these roots have been repointed as niphal, qal, or another stem. My point remains, however, that a repointing to niphal is only feasible for low-frequency roots, since the reanalysis as niphal must occur in the written text rather than in spoken language, pointing, if you'll pardon the pun, to a certain unfamiliarity with the form.

occur frequently enough for a passive qal p.c. to be remembered in the form of a hophal.[10]

Finally, there are three hophal infinitives, all in the expression *yōm hūlledet* 'birthday'. Given the doubled second radical it is likely that these are passive qal forms, too. After all, the meaning also relates to the qal ('giving birth') rather than to the hiphil, which only occurs with masculine subjects and is therefore unlikely to relate to the moment of birth. The unexpected *h-* (one would expect **yūlledet*) can be explained as contamination with the niphal (cf. Joüon 1920, 360).

With these preliminaries out of the way, the distribution of *yālad* is as follows:

	s.c.	p.c.	*wayyiqṭol*	participle	infinitive	total
Passive qal[11]	26	0	1	6	3	36
Niphal[12]	9	11	7	7	3	37
Total	35	11	8	13	6	73

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10   This also seems to be the consensus in the other studies I consulted. Joüon (1920, 359): 'Le futur correspondant du passif du qal devrait avoir la forme **yullad*'; Gzella, though not particularly about this verb (2009, 312): 'the "imperfects" appear as Cp verbs, not to mention other errors of vocalization'.

11   Suffix conjugation: Gen 4:26; 6:1; 10:21, 25; 24:15; 35:26; 36:5; 41:50; 46:22, 27; 50:23; Judg 18:29; 2 Sam 3:5; 21:20, 22; Isa 9:5; Jer 20:14, 15; 22:26; Psa 87:4, 5, 6; 90:2; Job 5:7; Ruth 4:17; 1 Chr 1:19. *Wayyiqṭol*: 2 Sam 3:2 (*qerē* niphal). Infinitives: Gen 40:20; Ezek 16:4, 5. The participle has two forms: *yullād* (Judg 13:8) and *yillōd* (Exod 1:22; Josh 5:5; 2 Sam 5:14; 12:14; Jer 16:3). Although not mentioned by all grammars, the participial origins of *yillōd* are quite well-established through lengthening of the final vowel (*yullōd*) and subsequent dissimilation (Joüon 1920, 360; Barth 1894, 41–42). Alternatively, Khan (2020, 1:80–81) suggests that the difference may have been introduced deliberately in the reading tradition to disambiguate between nominal uses of the participle (*yullād*) and verbal ones (*yillōd*). In any event, in the quantitative analysis below, *yillōd* forms are more niphal-like than passive qal-like. Therefore the inclusion of these forms does not have an impact on the analysis below; the difference between the two stems would only be larger if forms of *yillōd* had been excluded.

12   Suffix conjugation: Eccl 4:14; 1 Chr 2:3, 9; 3:1, 4, 5; 20:6, 8; 26:6. Prefix conjugation: Gen 17:17; Lev 22:27; Deut 15:19; 23:9; Isa 66:8; Psa 78:6; Job 3:3; 11:12; 15:7; 38:21; Prov 17:17. *Wayyiqṭol*: Gen 4:18; 10:1; 46:20; Num 26:60; 2 Sam 5:13; 14:27; Job 1:2. Participles: Gen 21:3; 48:5; 1 Kgs 13:2; Psa 22:32; Ezra 10:3; 1 Chr 7:21; 22:9. Infinitives: Gen 21:5; Hos 2:5; Eccl 7:1.

Since I argue that passive qal forms cannot have been pointed as niphals in the case of this relatively high-frequency lexeme, the lack of p.c. forms and the low number of *wayyiqṭol* forms in the passive qal must be accounted for. Despite the morphological similarity between these two forms, we must keep them strictly separate. I will focus primarily on the p.c., and return to the *wayyiqṭol* in section 6.

3   Previous Work

Let us now look in closer detail at the arguments found in previous studies. Hendel (2000, 42–45) argues that the distribution of the passive qal and the niphal "reflects" a diachronic development: at some point, **yulad* was reanalyzed as a pual (*yullad*) and **yūlad* as a niphal (*yiwwālēd*). In the s.c. forms, Hendel sees a shift from the passive qal in earlier sources to the niphal in later sources. The participle is supposed to have undergone a similar transition, from (either form of) the passive qal to the niphal. However, this development must have taken place at an earlier stage, since the niphal participle is already found in textual fragments attributed to the primary composition of the Priestly source. Hendel makes no claim about the p.c. forms, for which 'it is difficult to disentangle the qal passive from the niphal, because the consonantal forms are the same […] and all are pointed as niphal' (ibid., 43–44). In any case, on this analysis the niphal gradually encroached upon passive qal territory: at some point, the passive qal p.c., like the other forms, dropped out of use and was replaced by the niphal; the Masoretes, unaware of the passive qal, then pointed all p.c. forms as niphals.

The main problem with this analysis is that, as I have argued above, it is unlikely that passive qal p.c. forms of this root were reanalyzed as niphals (either before the demise of Hebrew as a spoken language or thereafter). The niphal forms built on the p.c. (i.e., including *wayyiqṭol* and the infinitive) are 22 in total; given the ratio between the number of occurrences of the s.c. of the passive qal and the niphal we would expect a fair amount of p.c. forms in the passive qal as well. Therefore, a reanalysis as a niphal is unlikely in the case of *yālad*.

Of course, most of Hendel's analysis is compatible with the idea that there are no passive qal p.c. forms, even if it cannot explain it. For an explanation for this distributional pattern we must turn to other scholars. The pattern was already discussed by Joüon (1920, 359–360), who suggested that the niphal p.c. was coined to disambiguate the form *yullad*. This form could otherwise be both a s.c. and a p.c. of the passive qal. The other forms of the niphal were

then formed by analogy to the p.c. (thus also explaining why these forms are generally found in later texts). In my opinion it is dubious, however, that disambiguation was needed for *yullad*, because in most cases it would be quite clear whether a s.c. or a p.c. is intended. First of all, the ambiguity exists only in the 3rd person masculine singular and plural—which, admittedly, covers almost all of the cases in the biblical corpus, but presumably a smaller part of the cases in spoken language, due to the uneven ratio of male vs. female characters in the Hebrew Bible in general. Second, the usage of the p.c. would be quite restricted because birth is more commonly talked about in the past than in the non-past.[13] From context it should, in those few cases, almost always be clear whether the baby in question has already been born or not, so there is no need for disambiguation.

Other scholars have tried to find semantic differences between the passive qal and the niphal. Such a difference, if it can be demonstrated, would be somewhat hard to integrate in Joüon's (1920) analysis, but is readily compatible with that of Hendel (2000), the only remaining question being whether the primary distinction is diachronic or semantic.[14]

It is important to note that we are not looking for a semantic difference only because other explanations are not sufficiently satisfactory. There are in fact a couple of positive indications that subtle differences in meaning exist. Thus Hughes (1994, 71–76), in his comparison of the passive qal and niphal stems, found a semantic difference for the verbs *lāqaḥ* and *nātan*: the niphal forms are 'especially common in references to the capture of a person or place or object' (ibid., 74). Hughes concludes that the internal passives (passive qal, pual, and hophal) are syntactic passives, while the niphal may express either 'semantic' or syntactic passivity. Clearly, this analysis would have to be updated to the current state of research (see notes 3 and 5), but the point remains that there are some subtle semantic differences, which have become obscured when the passive qal eventually dropped out of use.

Furthermore, with *yālad* in particular we find one or two (depending on a *ketib/qerē*) minimal pairs where the same event is described, first in the niphal, and then in the passive qal:

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13 As a very rough indicator, observe that the literal string *was born* occurs about ten times more often than *be born* (for various non-past forms: *will be born*, *is to be born*, etc.) in the COCA corpus (Davies 2008–).

14 Joüon (1920, 359–360) seems to rule out any semantic distinction when he writes: 'sur ce futur nifal on forma un parfait *nōlad*, lequel fait double emploi avec le parfait *yullad*'. On the other hand, Hendel allows for a semantic difference, but remarks that it would be difficult to demonstrate (2000, 45 n. 32).

וַיִּוָּלֵד לְיוֹסֵף … אֶת־מְנַשֶּׁה וְאֶת־אֶפְרָיִם … אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי רָחֵל אֲשֶׁר יֻלַּד לְיַעֲקֹב

And Manasseh and Ephraim[15] came forth (niphal) to Joseph … (Also the sons of Benjamin are listed.) These are the sons of Rachel that were born (passive qal[16]) to Jacob.

> Gen 46:20, 22

וַיֵּלְדוּ לְדָוִד בָּנִים בְּחֶבְרוֹן … אֵלֶּה יֻלְּדוּ לְדָוִד בְּחֶבְרוֹן

And sons were born/came forth[17] (*qerē* niphal; *ketib* passive qal) to David in Hebron. (A list of names is given.) These were born (passive qal) to David in Hebron.

> 2 Sam 3:2, 5

We should avoid explaining this away as mere stylistic variation. Even if stylistic variation is part of the reason two different forms are used, the fact that the niphal is mentioned first in both cases, and the passive qal second, suggests a subtle difference that led to this order. Jenni (2012, 280), discussing only the second example, gives one possibility: he argues that the difference is that in v. 5 the events are 'definitiv abgeschlossen', for which the passive qal is preferred.[18] While this is definitely a possibility, it is hard to test the hypothesis because for many events it cannot be determined objectively whether they have definitively ended or not. This analysis must be made more precise using

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15   On the use of *ʔēt* on the subject of a niphal clause, see van Loon (2012, esp. 97, 104) and the references therein. We find *ʔēt* with both the niphal and the passive qal of *yld* (e.g. Gen 21:5 and 4:26); the function of this particle in relation to the difference between these two stems is therefore not clear.

16   The verb is singular and therefore cannot refer back to *ʔēleh* 'these'. The Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia suggests, based on other manuscripts and translations, *yoldā*, a feminine qal s.c. with the subject Rachel: 'these are the sons of Rachel which she bore to Jacob'. But in v. 27 we find the same problematic singular form, and here the form suggested by BHS is *yulləduʔ*, a plural passive qal s.c. (again supported by other manuscripts and translations, as well as the similar case in Gen 35:26). Therefore this minimal pair may still be considered here.

17   I will use English *come forth* (*into the world*) to translate the niphal of *yālad* to emphasize the middle voice and set it off against the passive *be born*. The verb should be understood with a Theme subject, that is, the subject does not cause the movement. Unlike the passive, *come forth* leaves the mother and the event of birth in the background.

18   Jenni backs this up by the minimal pair with *lāqaḥ* in 2 Kgs 2:9–10. He writes: 'Der Unterschied könnte auf der Ebene der Faktizität gesucht werden: Das passive Qal steht jeweils nur bei definitiv abgeschlossenen Ereignissen' (2012, 280).

modern linguistic terminology and theory, in this case that of aspect. Insofar as Jenni's understanding of 'definitiv abgeschlossenen Ereignissen' relates to perfect aspect, I will return to this in section 6.

A different explanation, which is easier to verify in a rigorous way, is offered by Gzella (2009, 311–313). He shows that when the passive qal is used, a (possibly implicit) agent is present in the background, while this is not the case when the niphal is used. This feature would not be particular to this verb: it can be supported by recent studies on the niphal stem, which have argued for it to be analyzed as a middle voice rather than a passive. In that case the agent would indeed be non-obligatory in the underlying structure of niphal clauses.[19] The key example here is the distinction between Job 3:3 and Jer 20:14:

יֹאבַד יוֹם אִוָּלֶד בּוֹ

Let perish the day on which I had to come forth into the world (niphal[20])!
　　Job 3:3

אָרוּר הַיּוֹם אֲשֶׁר יֻלַּדְתִּי בּוֹ יוֹם אֲשֶׁר־יְלָדַתְנִי אִמִּי אַל־יְהִי בָרוּךְ

Cursed be the day on which I was born (passive qal)! The day on which my mother bore (qal) me, let it not be blessed!
　　Jer 20:14

The second half of this last example provides the agent for the passive qal in the first half, whereas the agent is indeed completely out of view in the event described with a niphal in Job 3:3. In many cases the external agent that is presupposed with passive qal forms is mentioned explicitly in the context. This is not the case with the niphal forms, especially the ones found in early texts (since we must not overlook the fact that, whatever the original difference between the stems, the niphal eventually took over all semantic territory of the passive qal—therefore counterexamples in later texts are of little weight).

What is still missing is an explanation why the passive qal p.c. is lacking. In personal communication, Gzella suggested that influence from Aramaic may have been a factor: in Aramaic, throughout the verbal system, the passive p.c. already dropped out of use around 400 BCE, but the s.c. (and the participle)

19　See van Wolde (2019) for the most recent overview of this debate. She is critical of Gzella (2009), but I believe the two can be reconciled; cf. note 5.

20　The p.c. is taken with a modal nuance (Gzella 2009, 312, n. 51); we may ignore it for our purposes.

persisted, at least in the peal, for some 400 years longer (Beyer 1984, 152). While it is clearly likely that this is a contributing factor to the lack of passive qal p.c. forms in Hebrew, this only shifts the problem: the question now becomes why the p.c. disappeared earlier in Aramaic. I will not discuss the Aramaic data here, but the reason I will propose below for the lack of p.c. forms in Hebrew may also explain the earlier disappearance of the p.c. in Aramaic.[21]

4   A New Factor in the Analysis: Topicality of the Child

My analysis is similar to Gzella's (2009, 311–313) in that I do not treat the distribution of *yld* as a purely morphological matter. However, in addition to his argument based on the semantic factor of the presence of an external agent (the mother), I will argue that the key factor determining the choice for passive qal or niphal is pragmatic, namely, the topicality of the patient (the child).

Overall, it seems that the passive qal is used when the focus is on the event of being born and the person who is being born, i.e., the patient is foregrounded and thus topicalized. Not only is the mother often mentioned in the direct context (as observed by Gzella), the name of the person being born is also more frequently mentioned than with the niphal, and this person often plays a more salient role in the story. On the other hand, with the niphal the focus is frequently on the dynasty, the community, or the wider context someone is born into. It is for example used for descendants who are mentioned to demonstrate a genealogical succession, but who have not accomplished much of note themselves. More often than with the passive qal, the family into which someone is born is mentioned, thus shifting focus from the child to the father. Some examples will serve to illustrate these differences, after which they will be tested quantitatively below.

First, we can see that children whose birth is described with a passive qal are more salient in the story:

וּלְשֵׁת גַּם־הוּא יֻלַּד־בֵּן וַיִּקְרָא אֶת־שְׁמוֹ אֱנוֹשׁ אָז הוּחַל לִקְרֹא בְּשֵׁם יְהוָה

And to Seth a son was born (passive qal) as well, and he called him Enosh. Then people began to profane (or: call upon) the name of ʏʜᴡʜ.
Gen 4:26

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21   In section 6 a cross-linguistic correlation between passive voice and perfect aspect will be discussed. One wonders whether such a correlation may also explain why the internal

וַיִּוָּלֵד לַחֲנוֹךְ אֶת־עִירָד וְעִירָד יָלַד אֶת־מְחוּיָאֵל

And to Hanok came forth (niphal) Irad, and Irad fathered (qal) Mehuyael.

Gen 4:18

The birth of Enosh in Gen 4:26 marks an important moment in the history of mankind: the beginning of idolatry (or the service of Yahweh, depending on the interpretation). On the other hand, Irad in Gen 4:18 is but a link in a larger genealogy, which extends far beyond the text quoted here.

An apparent counterexample to my claim that children whose birth is described with a niphal are less important in the story is found in the following words of a Judean prophet:

מִזְבֵּחַ מִזְבֵּחַ כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה הִנֵּה־בֵן נוֹלָד לְבֵית־דָּוִד יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ שְׁמוֹ וְזָבַח עָלֶיךָ אֶת־כֹּהֲנֵי הַבָּמוֹת הַמַּקְטִרִים עָלֶיךָ וְעַצְמוֹת אָדָם יִשְׂרְפוּ עָלֶיךָ

O altar, altar—thus says YHWH: look, a son is about to come forth (niphal) to the house of David, Josiah is his name. And he will offer on you the priests of the high places who offer sacrifices on you: human bones will be burned on you.

1 Kgs 13:2

Even though Josiah plays a seemingly large role here, his figure is not of prime importance. What is important is *the fact that* the unlawful priests are killed—not *by whom*. This can be seen in the fact that Josiah is referred to only once in what follows; by the end of the verse, the author has switched voice ("human bones will be burned on you," not: "he will burn human bones on you"), de-emphasising the role of Josiah and instead focusing on the effect on the altar. Gen 4:26 is different: it appears to be Enosh' fault that through his volitional actions people began to perform idolatry (taking the traditional Jewish interpretation). Otherwise, why would the text relate these two events? On the other hand, Josiah is not held responsible for his actions, as he only acts out a prophecy. Therefore, Enosh is presented with more independent agency and saliency.

Second, the niphal is used when the patient is generic, as in Deut 15:19 below. This passage concerns any firstborn male that might come forth into the world.

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passive p.c. disappears earlier than its s.c. in Aramaic, but this will be addressed elsewhere.

The subject is non-specific and not topical. By contrast, when the text concerns a specific child that will be born, a passive qal is used, as in Judg 13:8 (in this case Samson, who will play the main role in the following chapters):

כָּל־הַבְּכוֹר אֲשֶׁר יִוָּלֵד בִּבְקָרְךָ וּבְצֹאנְךָ הַזָּכָר תַּקְדִּישׁ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

Every firstborn that comes forth (niphal) into your herds and flocks, the male you shall set apart for YHWH your god.

> Deut 15:19

בִּי אֲדוֹנִי אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַחְתָּ יָבוֹא־נָא עוֹד אֵלֵינוּ וְיוֹרֵנוּ מַה־נַּעֲשֶׂה לַנַּעַר הַיּוּלָּד

Please, my lord, let the man of God whom you have sent come once more to us and teach us how to deal with the boy that is to be born (passive qal).

> Judg 13:8

To test my hypothesis in a more objective manner, I will use two quantitative measures, proposed by Givón (1994), who measures topicality with *referential distance* and *topic persistence*.[22] Referential distance looks at the last occurrence of an entity in the preceding text. When a reference to the entity was made in the previous clause, the distance is 1; when a reference is found in the second or third clause from the present occurrence, the value is 2/3;[23] in all other cases, including when no reference is made at all, the value is >3. Topic persistence, on the other hand, is a measure for the importance of the entity in the following text: it is the number of times the referent occurs in the next ten clauses. When an entity plays a large role in the story, we expect it to be mentioned more often in the surrounding context. Therefore, we expect that patients of events described with a passive qal score higher on both measures than patients of events described with a niphal form.

We find the following distribution of the referential distance of the patient of *yālad* (i.e., the child that is born).[24] Although the difference is relatively small,

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22 Givón (1994) compares active constructions to passives, inverted passives, and antipassives, but does not consider middle voice. Nevertheless we may use the same measures to determine topicality in middle voice clauses as well.

23 A distinction between the values 2 and 3 is considered to be too fine-grained, so there is one value '2/3'.

24 I have excluded Isa 66:8; Psa 87:4, 5, 6; 90:2; Job 11:12; Prov 17:7; and Eccl 7:1 from the analysis, because they are idiomatic, proverbial, or otherwise generalising statements. In 2 Sam 3:2 I follow the *ketib*. When the subject is plural (e.g., "even more sons and daughters were born

in events described with a niphal form, a larger number of patients have not been mentioned in the immediately preceding context (the >3 group), indicating lower topicality:[25]

Referential distance of the patient	Passive qal	Niphal
1	13	12
2/3	3	0
>3	15	21

Performing the same analysis to determine the referential distance of the external agent (i.e., the mother), we find a less clear difference between the passive qal and the niphal. This suggests that the difference between the two stems lies primarily in the topicality of the child rather than that of the mother, as I have argued above:

Referential distance of the agent	Passive qal	Niphal
1	5	6
2/3	3	1
>3	23	26

Turning to topic persistence, the situation is less clear-cut. On average, the topic persistence of the child is 3.33 for the passive qal and 3.35 for the niphal; for

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to David" in 2 Sam 5:13) I have counted subsequent name lists (in this example in vv. 14–16) as only one further occurrence for topic persistence. Finally, I have performed the following analysis both on all niphals and on only the niphal s.c. forms and participles, to make sure that incorrectly pointed p.c. forms are not muddling the data. The numbers found for these two groups of niphal forms did not differ significantly—as expected if there are no passive qal p.c. forms masquerading as niphals. For brevity I present only the aggregate numbers here.

25   Also for the passive a surprisingly high number of cases fall in the >3 group, compared to the examples in Givón (1994). This can be explained text-pragmatically: in many cases, someone's birth is their introduction in the story and therefore they have not been mentioned yet. It is the difference between the two columns which is vital here, however.

the mother these numbers are 0.73 and 0.94, respectively. The fact that we cannot see a clear difference between the two stems here may be caused by the diachronic process through which the niphal gradually replaces the passive qal. A number of niphal forms with high topic persistence appear in Chronicles (1 Chr 3:1; 22:9; 26:6), a book in which we find only one passive qal (out of 122 forms of *yālad* in this book in total).

Not all cases can be explained by a distinction in topicality of the child, however. In particular in the case of metaphorical usage, Gzella's (2009) explanation based on the existence of an external agent seems to be a more important factor. In metaphors, *yālad* is generally found in the niphal, where it can be translated with 'come into being':

הֲיוּחַל אֶרֶץ בְּיוֹם אֶחָד אִם־יִוָּלֵד גּוֹי פַּעַם אֶחָת

Can a country be brought forth in a single day? Can a nation come into being (niphal) in a single moment?

Isa 66:8

הֲרִאישׁוֹן אָדָם תִּוָּלֵד

Did you come into being (niphal) as the first human?

Job 15:7

In the latter case, an external agent is even logically impossible. Such an event can only be described by a middle voice, even if it is medio-passive, since the middle voice does not require an external agent in the underlying structure of the sentence (Alexiadou and Doron, 2012).

In only two places is a passive qal used to describe a metaphorical birth:

וּמוֹלְדוֹתַיִךְ בְּיוֹם הוּלֶּדֶת אֹתָךְ לֹא־כָרַּת שָׁרֵּךְ וּבְמַיִם לֹא־רֻחַצְתְּ לְמִשְׁעִי וְהָמְלֵחַ לֹא הֻמְלַחַתְּ
וְהָחְתֵּל לֹא חֻתָּלְתְּ לֹא־חָסָה עָלַיִךְ עַיִן לַעֲשׂוֹת לָךְ אַחַת מֵאֵלֶּה לְחֻמְלָה עָלָיִךְ וַתֻּשְׁלְכִי
אֶל־פְּנֵי הַשָּׂדֶה בְּגֹעַל נַפְשֵׁךְ בְּיוֹם הֻלֶּדֶת אֹתָךְ

As for your birth, on the day of your (Jerusalem's) being-born (passive qal) your umbilical cord was not cut, in water you were not washed to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor wrapped in cloth. No eye has looked with pity on you to do any of these things for you out of compassion for you, but you were thrown onto the open field out of aversion from your very being on the day of your being-born (passive qal).

Ezek 16:4–5

בְּטֶרֶם הָרִים יֻלָּדוּ וַתְּחוֹלֵל אֶרֶץ וְתֵבֵל וּמֵעוֹלָם עַד־עוֹלָם אַתָּה אֵל

> Even before the mountains were born (passive qal) or you brought the world into being, you were the eternal God.
>
> Psa 90:2

Note the very explicitly physical vocabulary in Ezekiel: although the people of Jerusalem have of course not been born as a group, the text presents it as if such a birth event has occurred by making explicit reference to physical acts surrounding birth, like the cutting of the umbilical cord. While such lexical items are absent in Psa 90:2, it is clear from the b-part of the verse that God is the implicit agent who 'gives birth to' the mountains.

Thus, we need both the topicality of the child and the existence of an external agent to explain the difference between the passive qal and the niphal. The two explanations are not incompatible; on the contrary, they reinforce each other: when the child is high in topicality, it is more likely that the event is indispensable for the chronological sequence of the narrative (Hopper 1979, 216). The event is therefore relatively foregrounded and the mother is more likely to be mentioned as well. In metaphorical descriptions, the (non-)existence of an external agent can be seen most easily, while in literal usages topicality seems to be the more prominent factor.

5   Topicality and Voice

Like Gzella's (2009) distinction between the presence or absence of an agent, high topicality of the patient in the passive qal can be explained by a difference in voice. As Comrie (1981, 70) notes, sentence structures in which the patient is emphasized are cross-linguistically highly marked. This can be seen in the statistical preference for active voice over passive voice (or accusative over ergative syntax in languages with such alignment). A medio-passive middle voice like that of *yālad*, like the passive voice, offers a way to demote the agent, but, unlike the passive voice, can do so without marking the patient for topicality.

Intuitively this makes sense: in absolute terms, the passive voice provides more information than a medio-passive, since it signals that an external agent is involved. The passive is therefore only used when the patient is sufficiently topical for this extra information to be relevant in the discourse. This can for example be seen in the opposition between Gen 4:26 and 4:18 above: the moment that extra information about the patient is provided, a passive qal is used.

The same opposition can be illustrated in our own languages.[26] Consider first the difference between Dutch *geboren zijn* ('be born', passive) and *geboren worden* ('become born', middle). We find that the passive is nearly incompatible with temporal *toen*, which serves a backgrounding function. Thus here too the passive seems to foreground the patient:

??*Toen Marie geboren is, hadden we weinig geld.*
  when Mary born was had we little money

Toen Marie geboren werd, hadden we weinig geld.
  when Mary born became had we little money

"When Mary was born/came into the world, we had little money."

In English, *get born* can be used in some registers, although it is much rarer than *was born* by about 1,000 times (in the COCA corpus, Davies 2008–). Not too much weight should be given to these examples, since more factors may play a role besides voice and register. Nevertheless, in some backgrounded events it seems that a passive voice is dispreferred. This is the case in the following description of the landscape of popular music in the year 1999, where the stars that 'got born' are only mentioned in passing:

Nobody realized Napster was about to change everything. Carson Daly hosted *Total Request Live* on MTV every afternoon, where a new breed of stars got born: Britney, Xtina, Ricky, NSync, the Backstreet Boys. A previously unknown producer named Max Martin presided over the Orlandinavian connection that invaded the radio, in a strange alliance between the Swedes and the Mousketeers. Woodstock '99 went down in flames. There was so much to hear, even great music could get lost in the rush …
        Rolling Stone 2019[27]

Likewise, in the following example, the fact that someone 'got born' is presented as a kind of by-product. Again, the child plays no role in the larger context:

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26   I am grateful to Johan Rooryck for the following examples in Dutch. Several of the English
     examples were found through the COCA corpus (Davies 2008–).
27   https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/99-best-songs-1999-rob-sheffield
     -835473, retrieved 11 November 2020.

> Long ago, Zoe and Alba and I were young and foolish and fooling around, the three of us together one summer, and that's how Astrid got born, but nothing makes any sense now. Zoe and Scott and Fletcher came over every so often, each alone, to take me for a walk.
>
>   MIRABELLI 2016, 19

In contrast, in biographies one can hardly imagine finding anything else than a passive, not only for the central character but also for their children. Although they are not always mentioned frequently in the context, they do mark important moments in the life of the main character:

> Wren was born in East Knoyle in Wiltshire, … It was while they were living at East Knoyle that all their children were born; Mary, Catherine and Susan were all born by 1628 but then several children were born who died within a few weeks of their birth. Their son Christopher was born in 1632 then, two years later, another daughter named Elizabeth was born.[28]

Taking together the work of Comrie (1981) and the examples from Hebrew, Dutch, and English in this contribution, there is ample support for a relationship between topicality and voice. The hypothesis is then that the middle voice niphal of *yālad* can be used when the subject is not, or not particularly, important in the context. It is an unmarked form, while the passive qal is marked for the subject's topicality.

6   Voice and Aspect

Voice and topicality also relate to a third concept: that of verbal aspect, that is, 'ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation' (Comrie 1976, 3). For our present purposes, three aspects are relevant: perfective, imperfective, and perfect. Perfective aspect looks at a situation 'as a single whole', whereas the imperfective looks at its 'internal structure' (ibid., 16). This distinction can be shown in French, with the perfective *il régna trente ans* and the imperfective *il régnait trente ans* 'he reigned for thirty years': the first 'gathers the whole period of thirty years into a single complete whole […] while the second says rather that at any point during those thirty years he was indeed reigning, i.e. is connected more with the internal structuring of the reign'

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28   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Wren, retrieved 11 November 2020.

(ibid., 17). Perfect aspect is positioned on a different dimension than the perfective/imperfective opposition. Instead of being a certain way of viewing a situation, it relates two events to each other: it expresses that an earlier situation has continued effect on a later one (ibid., 52). Perfect aspect can be seen in the Hebrew s.c. in verbs like *yādaʕ*, where the s.c.(!) has the meaning 'he knows' (< 'he has come to know').

Crucially, perfect aspect shows a correlation with passive voice in various languages. As mentioned above, Comrie (1981, 70) observed that languages tend to have a preference to, by default, emphasize the agent rather than the patient of an event; structures oriented toward the patient are generally less frequent and therefore marked. Like the passive voice, perfect aspect is such a patient-oriented structure. For example, the sentence *John has broken the cup*, with perfect aspect, relates a previous event (that John broke the cup) to the present state of the patient (that the cup is broken). Compare this with the inverse, prospective aspect (*John is going to break the cup*): this relates the present state of the agent (John's state of mind) to the future event (that he will break the cup). Thus we find that both perfect aspect and the passive voice foreground the patient of the event. This correlation is reflected in several languages, such as Russian, where overt expression of perfect aspect is only possible in the passive voice (Comrie 1976: 84; for more examples see Comrie 1981). The Dutch distinction between a middle voice *geboren worden* 'become born' and a passive voice *geboren zijn* 'be born' also reflects this correlation: the middle voice already displays a correlation with imperfective aspect through the auxiliary *worden* 'become', while the passive shows affinity with perfect/perfective aspect with the auxiliary *zijn* 'be'.

Because the three concepts of voice, aspect, and topicality are interrelated, it can be difficult to say what precisely makes a particular sentence ungrammatical. Consider a birth card as an example. In Dutch, it will never say *Marie werd geboren* (middle), always *Marie is geboren* (passive). A middle voice would constitute a clash in both topicality (on a birth card high topicality is expected) and aspect (the birth is viewed as a single, finished event).

In Hebrew, the s.c. and p.c. in indicative/realis mood by and large relate to perfect/perfective and imperfective aspect respectively (Cook 2012, 199–223).[29]

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29   There is much disagreement concerning the Biblical Hebrew verbal system, and this is not
      the place to make a contribution. For this reason I will rely quite directly on Cook (2012),
      who claims that the distinction between s.c. and p.c. is the primary opposition in Biblical
      Hebrew, and that this is an opposition of verbal aspect. This position can be supported by
      both internal and external data, and is typologically plausible, but has nevertheless been
      met with some opposition, in part relevant to the present argument; see in particular the

Furthermore, the s.c. probably developed from a resultative gram, through a perfect aspect, into a perfective aspect in Biblical Hebrew, and by Rabbinic Hebrew into a past tense (ibid., 203–207). The original perfect aspect continues to be relevant for the s.c. by the time of Biblical Hebrew, as can be seen in verbs like *yādaʕ*, discussed above. Thus, Cook argues that perfect aspect is 'a meaning that persists from the earlier stage when it was [the s.c.'s] primary meaning' (ibid., 207).

If, as suggested above, the niphal is unmarked for topicality of the patient while the passive qal is marked (i.e., used for patients of high topicality), we should expect a correlation between the passive qal and a verbal conjugation that supports or amplifies this high topicality. Since perfect aspect focuses on the effect on the patient, the suffix conjugation would then be naturally associated with passive voice. On the other hand, the prefix conjugation as an imperfective gram does not co-occur with passive voice; this would constitute a clash between low/unmarked and high saliency.

We still have to explain the low number of passive qal *wayyiqṭol* forms. The same explanation as for the prefix conjugation cannot be used here: this form originated as a simple preterite tense and is not a marker of imperfective aspect, despite its morphological similarity to the prefix conjugation. However, the primary use of *wayyiqṭol* for sequential events to develop a narrative seems to largely preclude its use with true passive voice in the case of this root. An important example here is Gen 46:20, 22, where a list of sons that were born is given with a niphal *wayyiqṭol*, and a passive qal s.c. form provides a summary:

וַיִּוָּלֵד לְיוֹסֵף ... אֶת־מְנַשֶּׁה וְאֶת־אֶפְרָיִם ... אֵלֶּה בְּנֵי רָחֵל אֲשֶׁר יֻלַּד לְיַעֲקֹב

And Manasseh and Ephraim came forth (niphal) to Joseph ... (Also the sons of Benjamin are listed.) These are the sons of Rachel that were born (passive qal[30]) to Jacob.

> Gen 46:20, 22

This example reflects that a form with perfect aspect can be used to summarize a sequence of events, but cannot easily be integrated into such a sequence. On

review by Robar (2014), the reply by Cook (2016), and most recently Gzella (2020, 342–343). Other analyses will differ in the verbal forms involved in the primary opposition and/or their identification as aspectual, temporal, or modal grams, but these analyses will by and large still agree that the s.c. and p.c. show affinity with perfect/perfective and imperfective aspect, respectively, even if it is not their primary function.

30   See the discussion above, note 16, on this form.

the other hand, the two are not entirely incompatible (as can be seen in the one occurrence, in the *ketib* in 2 Sam 3:2), but only unlikely to co-occur.

7   Final Remarks

In this paper I have dealt with the question why two seemingly synonymous non-active stems might exist alongside each other in the case of the root *yālad*, and how we can explain some gaps in the paradigm of the passive qal. In my view, we can answer both questions by correlations between the concepts of voice, topicality, and aspect.

Of course, diachronic patterns remain part of the story as well. There are clear examples of linguistic updating, such as the passive qal forms in 2 Sam 21:20, 22 which have been updated to niphal forms in the parallel passage in 1 Chr 20:6, 8. There is no doubt that the niphal eventually absorbed the function of the passive qal of *yālad*. Because of this development, and the small size of the data set to begin with, we cannot take the numbers in the statistical analysis above as hard facts; they must be seen as rough indications. Nevertheless, the indications they do give, in combination with a closer, if inherently subjective, reading of the texts on the one hand, and some theoretical and typological support on the other, are not only able to confirm a distinction between the passive qal and niphal, but also to explain the peculiar distribution of the various verbal conjugations found in these stems.

That the passive qal is primarily used for highly topical, foregrounded patients can be explained by a difference in voice. The niphal is, especially in earlier stages of the language, a middle voice which, like the passive, demotes the agent, but, unlike the passive, does not necessarily foreground the patient. For this reason, it is used when neither the mother nor the child are of particular importance in the context.

Furthermore, topicality and voice are also related to aspect. In particular, both passive voice and perfect aspect foreground the patient of an event. This is schematized in the following figure, reproduced from the introduction:

Stem	Patient topicality	Voice	Aspect
Passive qal	High	Passive	Perfect
Niphal	(unmarked)	Middle	(no preference)

These correlations may explain the lack of p.c. forms and the low occurrence of *wayyiqṭol* in the passive qal of *yālad*. Because the passive voice foregrounds the patient, it is associated with a s.c. form which supports or amplifies this foregrounding. We thus see that, with modern linguistic tools, a look beyond the diachronic explanation for the existence of two seemingly synonymous non-active stems allows for the discovery of various semantic and discursive differences that facilitate a more precise reading of the text.

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