Qal versus Nif'al in Ezekiel 37:8

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The use of the qal form נְקֵפַרְתָּנָה in Ezek 37:8 has been regarded by scholars as problematic. Thus Zimmerli: “Since v. 6, the only place in which נְקֵפַרְתָּנָה otherwise occurs in OT, showed that the qal was transitive, nif'al should be read with most commentators.”¹ The same suggestion is found in the GB,² BDB, and KBL dictionaries, and in BHK and BHS. In his recently published commentary Greenberg writes: “That the qal of qrm should be both transitive and intransitive is unusual... the present qal intransitive vocalization (yiqram) may be late, having overridden an original nif'al formation - *yiqqarem ‘was formed into a cover’, the passive of an active, transitive Biblical Hebrew qrm....”³ In BHK, Bewer comments (my translation): “We must read with manuscripts of the Septuagint, with the Peshitta and with the Vulgate נְקֵפַרְתָּנָה”. In BHS, Elliger suggests (my translation): “We should probably read נְקֵפַרְתָּנָה, compare Septuagint, Peshitta and Vulgate.” Certain manuscripts of the Septuagint render the Hebrew verb by περιετάνη, Peshitta by 'iqram, Vulgate by extenta est. These translations were taken by scholars as corroborating the conjecture put forward on the basis of syntactic considerations.

In contrast, we try to show, that נְקֵפַרְתָּנָה in Ezek 37:8 is definitely not unusual, and that the Greek, Syriac and Latin translations can not be used to

¹ With much pleasure I acknowledge the most welcome help and generous advice received from Shemaryahu Talmon, Moshe Morgenstern and Noam Mizrahi of the Hebrew University in the preparation of this paper.


prove, that LXX, S and V read the consonants רקרך vocalized as if it were nif'al.

Let us start with a consideration of the Greek translation of Ezek 37:6, where we read, in the vision of the revival of the dead bones: נזתרו עליכם, νεκρά γεραμένα ἐν ἀνάξων ἑφ' ὑπάγεις και ἀνάξων ἑφ' ὑπάγεις σάρκας καὶ ἕκτενώ ἑφ' ὑπάγεις δέρμα, viz. "and I will give sinews upon you, and bring up flesh upon you, and stretch skin upon you." This old translation comes closer to the syntactical structure of MT than renditions such as "cover you with skin" (NEB) or "überziehe euch mit Haut" (Cornill). BDB ("spread skin over you") and Zimmerli ("ziehe Haut über euch") preserve the same structure as MT and LXX.

All translators have had to find an equivalent for the root קרס, which in MT turns up only twice: here and in v. 8. The idea of "stretching (human) skin over..." occurs only once more in the Hebrew Bible, Job 10:11 וברש שאר ונשדד, easily translated δέρμα καὶ κρέας με ἐνδυσάσθαι in LXX. In classical Greek only one example comes to the present writer’s mind: Plato, Symposium 190e. There, in the framework of a mock-mythological anthropo-pogony, the text reads: καὶ τὰλλα ἱασθαι... καὶ συνέλκον πανταχόθεν τὸ δέρμα ἐπὶ τὴν γαστέρα νῦν καλομένην, viz. "and to heal them up... and pulled their skin together from the edges over what is now called the belly.”

In our case, the Greek translator chose the verb "to stretch". This Greek verb is frequently used in LXX-Ezekiel, mainly in rendition of כṛז. In 10:7 we have καὶ ἔκτενεν τὴν χείρα αὐτοῦ for ירא ור...ישלח ור...; in 2:9 the passive of this expression, השרחה כּרָז, is translated by the participle perfect passive of transitive active ὑποστηρίζειν: χείρ ἐκτεταμένη.4

4 C. H. Cornill, Das Buch des Propheten Ezechiel (Leipzig, 1886)
The same verb occurs nine times in the writings of Hippocrates and his school of medicine in reference to human skin, six times in the same form as the above cited ἐκτεταμένη: δέρμα ἐκτεταμένου viz. “tight-stretched skin” (LSJ) as one of the symptoms in the case history of patients. Here ἐκτεταμένου has not the passive meaning, which ἐκτεταμένη has in the context of the “outstretched hand,” for the skin is not stretched by any agent; here it is an intransitive participle perfect, middle voice.7

In the Greek language, middle voice and passive voice always have the same forms in the present and in the perfect tense-systems, and oftentimes already in classical Greek, in the aorist tense-system and the future tense-system derived from it as well.8 The immense increase of “middle passive forms”9 in Koine-Greek in general and biblical Greek in particular was already fully discussed by Thackeray and Moulton.10 Whether to understand forms like that as passive voice or as intransitive middle voice,11 is not a question of morphology, but of semantics. As Moulton puts it: “It is in fact more for the exegete than for the grammarian to decide.”

Ezek 37:8: יְתֵה יָרֵעֶר לְבָשָׂר לֶעָל יָפָךְ יְתֵה וּרְמֵה לֶמֶשֶׁל is translated in most manuscripts of the Septuagint: ἐπὶ αὐτὰ νεῦρα καὶ σάρκες ἐφύσοντο, καὶ ἀνέβαινεν ἐπὶ αὐτὰ δέρμα ἐπάνω viz. “upon them sinews and flesh were growing up, and skin was waxing on them on the upper side.”12

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7 The same middle voice occurs in a different context, Xenophon, Anabasis 5.1.2, with the corresponding participle aorist ἔκταθὲς viz. “(reclining) outstretched (in sleep)” (LSJ). The intransitive indicative present middle δέρμα(τα) περιτείνεται is found three times in G. Maloney, W. Frohn, and P. Potter (eds.), Concordantia in corpus Hippocrateum (Hildesheim, 1986) (=CCH).

8 Smyth and Messing, Greek Grammar, § 368

9 Ibid., § 814


11 Sometimes reflexive only in the translation into some target languages, but not in Greek.

12 In order to emphasize the Greek imperfect, I used the expanded tense in my
In classical Greek the intransitive middle verb (ἀνάφυσθαι) defines the growing, shooting up, or sprouting of plants (Herodotus, Plato), just as in LXX-Exod 10:5 (הָעָנָב), Prov 26:9 (עַלְעָנָב); the intransitive active verb ἀνοβάσαίνειν also occurs in this sense, especially in connection with climbing plants (Xenophon, Theophrastus), as in Ezek 47:12 (הָעָנָב). Both verbs are combined in one context in reference to “ears of grain” Gen 41:5,6 (22,23) (עָנָב ...עַלְעָנָב). They also pertain to the growing of hair (Pindarus, Herodotus, Xenophon), and of horns (Homer), as LXX-Dan 8:9 (עָנָב). So LXX-Ezekiel could use them in respect to growing of flesh and skin.

It appears that another Greek translation of the Hebrew passage was also known: καὶ ἐπεγένετο αὐτοῖς νεῦρα καὶ σάρκες, καὶ περιτέινη αὐτοῖς δέρμα ἐπάνωθεν, viz. “and sinews and flesh became added to them, and skin became stretched around them from the upper side.” This second Greek translation of Ezek 37:8 is conflated with the first in all twelve Lucianic manuscripts.13

This translation exhibits some strange features. It renders the two Hebrew verbs by two hapax legomena in Septuagint, ἐπιγιγνύεσθαι (here aorist middle ἐπεγένετο) and περιτείνειν (here aorist middle περιετόθη), the latter also a compound verb of τείνειν, like ἕκτεινε, which translated בָּדַר in v. 6.14 In the writings of the Hippocratic school we saw δέρμα ἐκτεταμένον “tight-stretched skin”; the same perfect middle of περιτείνειν is found in Aristoteles, Historia animalium 548b 32 in reference to the skin of sponges: περιτέταται δ' ἡσπερ ὑμῖν περὶ τὰ κάτω, “There is a sort of membrane stretched over their underparts.”15 The other verb ἐπιγιγνύεσθαι is an

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amazing choice: it is a technical term used by Greek physicians and found in the corpus of the Hippocratic writers no less than 292 times (CCH) meaning “to supervene” (LSJ) of additional symptoms. In Aristotle (e.g., De caelo 297a 32–33) it means simply “to be added”: εἰ... βάρος ἐπιγένετο “if... a weight... were added.”

Thus, in this version the two Hebrew verbs נָלַג and בָּקָר are translated by four Greek verbs, resulting in a completely different sentence structure: καὶ ἐπεγένετο αὐτοῖς νεῦρα, καὶ σάρκες ἀνεφύοντο καὶ ἀνεβαίνουν ἐπὶ αὐτά, καὶ περιεφάθη αὐτοῖς δέρμα ἐπάνωθεν viz. “and sinews became added to them, and flesh was growing and waxing upon them, and skin became stretched around them from the upper side.”

We shall now consider in detail the technique that the Greek translators applied in the verse under review and adduce some parallels to the expression רָע ...בָּקָר, which describes a physiological process by a verb in qal. In biblical Hebrew most such processes that affect parts of the human body are expressed by intransitive qal forms. In twenty-six such cases LXX translates qal by intransitive middle voice; thirteen times 3sg, indicative aorist middle (like περιεφάθη), five times 3pl of the same, five times different modes of aorist middle (four times imperative, once optative), three times future middle, once perfect middle. Of these, one finds twenty-four forms in -θη-, twice forms in -η-: ἐπάγη, δείπραγμα (second or strong aorist).

16 For the full reference, see n. 7 above.
18 In this English translation I meant to highlight the difference between the imperfect and aorist tenses, and to avoid any rendition which could be misunderstood as passive instead of intransitive middle; cf. the dubious NEB translation “and they were overlaid with skin,” apparently a translation of Cornill: “und mit Haut wurden sie überzogen.” Much closer are Zimmerli: “und Haut zog sich über sie” and Greenberg: “and skin formed into a cover” Those translations retain the parallelism to בָּקָר עַל הָעֵין.
19 Smyth and Messing, Greek Grammar, §§ 590, 594, 595, 815, 819. In our cases the difference between first and second aorist is only morphological, not semantic.
Thus in reference to the following organs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>organ</th>
<th>verses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| bones | Ps 32:3  
Job 19:20  
Ps 102:6 |
| ears | Mic 7:16  
Ps 69:24 |
| eyes | Gen 27:1  
Neh 9:21 |
| feet | Ps 109:24  
Jer 6:24  
Jer 50:43  
Neh 6:9  
Zeph 3:16  
2 Chr 15:7  
2 Sam 4:1  
Ezek 7:17  
2 Sam 2:7 |
| flesh | Jer: 6:24  
Jer 50:43  
Neh 6:9  
2 Chr 15:7  
2 Sam 4:1  
Ezek 7:17  
2 Sam 2:7 |
| hand | Exod 7:22, 8:15, 9:35  
2 Kgs 22:19  
Ps 39:4  
Ps 102:5  
Exod 9:7  
Lam 4:8 |
| heart | Exod 7:22, 8:15, 9:35  
2 Kgs 22:19  
Ps 39:4  
Ps 102:5  
Exod 9:7  
Lam 4:8 |
| tongue | Ps 137:6  
Lam 4:4 |

In this context nif'al is not as frequent as qal; in the few occurrences of nif'al, LXX uses the same translation technique as in qal:

- eyes  Zech 14:12  
  - κατάδικαι  φυσισουσαντα
- heart  Jer 23:9  
  - ἀποκαταστατούσαν  συνετρίβη

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20 Ibid., §§ 594, 806.

21 Ibid., §§ 595, 808.
Ezek 21:12 ἡ χάρα καὶ θραυσθῆσεται
Lam 5:10 ἡ δέρμα LXXmass συνεσπάσθησαν

These examples prove that the Greek middle translates both Hebrew intransitive qal and nif'al. In none of the twenty-six cases cited was it suggested by BHS that LXX's use of forms with -(θ)η- indicates that it read the Hebrew qal forms as nif'al. The only exception is our περιετάθη.22

Here a glance at the Vulgate is in order. Latin has a great number of intransitive active verbs. Therefore only thirteen out of our twenty-six cases have intransitive middle of transitive active verbs:23 Ezek 7:17 dissolventur; Zeph 3:16, 2 Ch 15:7 dissolvantur; 2 Sam 2:1 confortentur; Ps 69:24 contenebuntur; Exod 9:7 ingravatunque est; 2 Sam 4:1, Jer 6:24; 50:43 dissolutae sunt; Ezek 7:22 duratum est; 2 Kgs 22:19 perterritum est; Ps 105:5 arefactum est; Neh 9:21 sunt attriti. Ezek 37:6 V has: et supertendam... cutem, and v. 8: et extenta est... cutis.24 Of the above cited four examples of nif'al only two are translated by Latin intransitive middle: Jer 23:9 contritum est; Lam 5:10 exusta est. The remaining two are rendered by intransitive progressive active verbs:25 Ezek 21:12 tabescet; Zech 14:12 contabescent. No scholar has suggested in these instances changing nif'al into qal.26 We can see that V uses more middle in rendering intransitive qal than it uses for nif'al, yet only in Ezek 37:8 modern scholars presume a different Hebrew Vorlage.

22 In cases in which nif'al has a passive sense, a Greek form such as περιετάθη must be understood logically as passive. Compare transitive qal Lam 2:8 ἡ χάρα... “τί (KJV “the Lord... has stretched out a line”) κύριος... ἔζεισεν μέτρον, with Zech 1:16 κύριος (KJV “and a line shall be stretched forth”) καὶ μέτρον ἐκτοσθῆσαι. Naturally, a measuring-line does not “stretch itself out”, as skin does, but “is stretched out” by an agent.


24 Note that V uses the same Indo-European root ten = “to stretch” as does LXX.

25 Gildersleeve, §§ 133 V; 191, 2.

26 In the verses pertaining to “the measuring-line” V has transitive active in Lam 2:8: Dominus...tetendit funiculum, and in Zech 1:16 passive: et perpendiculum extendetur.
The Syriac translation of Ezek 37:8 has the form ‘tirn for סמרפ. Cornill in his usual apodictic manner writes: “Das Wort ist unbedingt mit S als Niphal zu punktieren,” in my free translation: “According to Peshitta the punctuation of the word as nif‘al is an absolute must.” One gets the impression, that Syriac ‘tirn is the strongest proof, much stronger than LXX περιέχομεν and V extenta est, for reading nif‘al instead of qal. But it seems that Cornill did not know all the facts.

As it was to be expected, the Syriac conjugation found in Ezek 37:8 renders intransitive nif‘al in the four cases cited above: Jer 23:9; Ezek 21:12; Zech 14:12; Lam 5:10.27 But the same conjugation also renders qal forms in 14 of the 26 cases in our list: 2 Sam 2:7; 4:1; 2 Kgs 22:19; Jer 6:24; 50:43; Ezek 7:17, 22; 8:15; 9:5, 7; Mic 7:16; Zeph 3:16; Neh 6:9; 9:21.28 In summary we may conclude that it is impossible to claim, that Ezek 37:8 necessarily has to be read סמרפ.

Let us now consider Greenberg’s comment: “That the qal of qrm should be both transitive and intransitive is unusual.” Nothing can be said about the usual syntactical behaviour of the verb סמרפ, which is found only in our two verses. But there are very common verbs in biblical Hebrew, whose qal is sometimes transitive and sometimes intransitive, e.g., נשא and נ💤. There are 107 cases of נשא qal; 70 are transitive, 37 are intransitive. Of 55 cases of נשא qal, 43 are transitive, 12 are intransitive. In several cases, transitive and intransitive forms of qal belonging to the same verb occur in the same book and in the same chapter, e.g., Ps 119:112 (KJV “I have

27 In Zech 1:16 this construction also translates passive nif‘al in the verses pertaining to “the measuring-line.”

28 There are some biblical books, in which different Syriac conjugations render qal forms that are in our list: Genesis (the only case), Psalms (all seven cases), Job, (the two cases), Lamentations (two cases out of three), 2 Chronicles (the only case). It is a striking coincidence, that those are the same books, which M. P. Weitzmann, The Syriac Version of the Old Testament (Cambridge, 1999) 164–205, in his chapter “Unity and Diversity in the Peshitta” classifies as belonging to a special group of translations, after having investigated their translation technique using completely different material from that used in this paper.
inclined my heart to perform thy statutes”) versus v. 157
(KJV “yet do I not decline from thy testimonies”); Ps 78:44
(KJV “and had turned their rivers into blood”) versus v. 9
(KJV “the children of Ephraim... turned back”).

More such pairs are found in different books: Ps 119:112 versus
Judg 9:3 (KJV “and their heart was inclined to follow
Abimelech”). In Psalms, לֶבֶץ is the object of transitive
כָּהֵנָה, just as in Judges לֶבֶץ is the subject of
intransitive כָּהֵנָה, and in v. 8 the subject of intransitive כָּהֵנָה.

On the basis of the above evidence for intransitive qal in connection with
parts of the body, the transitive use of כָּהֵנָה in v. 6 may be seen as a
development of the original intransitive use in v. 8, which “alone is
evidenced in later Hebrew” (Greenberg). There, however, both the semantic
and the syntactic structure were changed completely. Instead of כָּהֵנָה
alone is used for matters (which became the subject of כָּהֵנָה) forming a
membrane (skin, film, scum, crust, etc.). Instead of רָבָּשׁ עִלָּה כָּהֵנָה
we expect in rabbinic Hebrew a structure such as כָּהֵנָה עִלָּה (or
רָבָּשׁ עִלָּה כָּהֵנָה) “and flesh grew and skinned over.”

If a change of the vocalization of either כָּהֵנָה or קָבָּקָה should at all be
considered, I would suggest to change qal קָבָּקָה into pi’el קָבָּקָה in v. 6.
One can easily find parallel transitive pi’el forms to twelve of the twenty-six
cases of intransitive qal in our list of other verbs connected to processes in
parts of the human body. Since the transitive active עָתַּרְתְּשֵׁנִי, which, as we

29 Additional word pairs from different books include: Josh 7:8: אֵשׁ אֵשׁ כָּקָפֶן לְשָׁרְאַל (KJV “when Israel turneth their backs before their enemies”) versus
Judg 20:39: כָּקָפֶן אִשׁ לְשָׁרְאַל (KJV “and when the men of Israel retired in the
battle”); Jer 13:23: כָּקָפֶן רָשַׁע לְרֹד (KJV “can the Ethiopian change his skin”) versus
Lev 13:20: כָּקָפֶן לְעֵרֵב (KJV “and the hair thereof be turned white”); one example
with מְנַע: Josh 7:12 נְכַּבֵּד מְאֹד לְשָׁרְאַל (KJV “the children of Israel... turned their backs before their enemies”) versus Judg 20:47 כָּקָפֶן לְעֵרֵב (KJV “and they
turned and fled”).

30 Besides our three qal forms of כָּהֵנָה with “heart” as subject there are eight pi’el
forms with “heart” as object: Exod 4:21; 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17. Besides the
one qal form of כָּהֵנָה with “hands” as subject there are seven pi’el forms with
saw, translates Ezek 37:6 transitive qal of הָרַע, translates elsewhere 6 times transitive pi’el forms of different verbs, שָׁרֵץ Isa 1:15; הָלֵךְ Ezek 17:6; Ps 80:12; Job 30:12; Prov 31:19,20, there is a basis, suggested by LXX, for reconstructing a conjectural possible pi’el form of רַע in v. 6, which would be better than the conjectured nif’al form in v. 8. But in this paper I have attempted to demonstrate that there is no need for any change, and that none of the ancient translations, each following the common ways of expression in their languages, really asks for one.

“hands” as object: Isa 35:3; Jer 23:14; Ezek 13:22; Job 4:3; Ezra 6:22; Neh 2:18; 6:9. Besides the seven qal forms of הָרַע with “hands” as subject there are two pi’el forms with “hands” as object: Jer 38:4; Ezra 4:7. Besides the only case of the qal of כָּרַע with “heart” as subject there are two pi’el forms with “heart” as object: 1 Sam 6:6 (twice).

31 If I would accept that conjecture, I would feel obligated to deal with the semantics of הָרַע and the syntactic function of the word רַע. But those questions are not within the scope of this paper.