

Flawed Philology

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See Also: [Can the Ages of Biblical Literature be Discerned Without Literary Analysis? How Old Is the Hebrew Bible?](#)

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March 2019

It is unusual in academia to distribute an unpublished thirty-plus page review of a book online. This opens the gates to book review as trolling. Such is the case for most of the criticisms made by Ian Young and Robert Rezetko in their unpublished [review](#) of our recent book, [How Old is the Hebrew Bible? A Linguistic, Textual, and Historical Study](#). They state, for example, that our book “eschews literary criticism” (i.e. source and redaction criticism) and displays a “lack of engagement with *any* recent scholarship in this field.” These statements are simply false, as a glance at the book easily demonstrates. They are nothing more than unsubstantiated aspersions.

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In our book we discuss the work of Young and Rezetko (in our appendix two) and diagnose three critical problems in their method: (1) a “MT-only” approach, which skews the

data to include scribal errors and other secondary textual phenomena; (2) a use of textual criticism that violates normal practices in the field; and (3) a use of statistics that violates normal practices in linguistics. Although Young and Rezetko are aware of these criticisms, they use all facets of this flawed method in their criticism of our book. Let us give an example from their discussion of the history of two verbal forms – the passive *qal* and the *niphal* – which is the prime case study in their review.

First, some background. Formally there is no passive *qal* in the MT, but the data indicate that at some time this form was in use and that traces of it remain in the text. This throws light on cases of *ktiv/qere* in MT, where an older, obsolete form was replaced with a more modern form in some traditions. After the passive *qal* form was forgotten, it was reanalyzed in the reading tradition as *pual*, *hophal*, or *niphal*, and in some cases it was simply overwritten as a *niphal*. In MT, the *ktiv/qere* forms are not simply data to be crunched, but a phenomenon to be elucidated. When we have two different forms, one with the consonants of a passive *qal* but vocalized as something else, and the other a *niphal*, the variation can be explained as a linguistic modernization. As a result of careful philological analysis, a historical sequence is inferable from these phenomena.

In contrast, Young and Rezetko claim that that the passive *qal* and the *niphal* were in free variation in biblical writings from the earliest era to the late Second Temple period.¹ They write, “On the basis of current distribution in the MT ... both forms are used for many of the same verbs in presumed early or preexilic writings.” Their primary evidence for this assertion is the distribution of forms in Samuel, where they observe that both verbal forms are found in MT for two roots that “are frequently attested in the *qal* passive,” *yld* and *ntn*. According to their count for these two roots, “Samuel uses the *qal* passive (x6) and the *niphal* (x6).” They conclude

straightforwardly: “If recourse to the *qal* passive as opposed to the *niphal* is an indication of the antiquity of a text, then Samuel does not look very old. No biblical book does.” This claim clearly rests on the methodological flaws outlined above.

They unpack their statistics as follows:

<i>yld</i>	<i>qal</i> passive (x4)	<i>niphal</i> (x3)
	2 Sam 3:2 (<i>ketiv</i>), 5, 21:20, 22	2 Sam 3:2 (<i>qere</i>), 5:13, 14:27
<i>ntn</i>	<i>qal</i> passive (x2)	<i>niphal</i> (x3)
	2 Sam 18:9, 21:6 (<i>qere</i>)	1 Sam 18:19, 25:27, 2 Sam 21:6 (<i>ketiv</i>)

Hence their result: six *qal* passives and six *niphals* in Samuel for these two roots. This is flawed philology. Notice the following problems:

- 1) This does not reflect what they call the “current distribution in the MT.” In MT the forms they identify as *qal* passives are vocalized (by reanalysis) as *puals* or *hophals*. Young and Rezetko interpret these forms as original *qal* passives. But they fail to consider the possibility that some or all of the *niphals* may also be reanalyzed *qal* passives (see below). Their preselection of the categories of data is misleading.
- 2) Two instances of *yld* in *niphal* are most likely original *qal* passives, which have been reanalyzed by late scribes: 2 Sam 5:13 and 14:27. In MT, both forms are יִלְדוּ, which arguably reflects a linguistic updating in the vocalization (and perhaps the consonantal text, by adding an additional *waw*) of the *qal* passive form יִלְדוּ, *w-yuldû*. (This is the case for the *ketiv/qere* in 2 Sam 3:2.) Young and Rezetko know that these forms are likely to be linguistic updatings of *qal* passives – they mention this scenario earlier in their review – but they fail to acknowledge it here.

3) Two instances are counted in both columns: 2 Sam 3:2 (for *yld*) and 2 Sam 21:6 (for *ntn*). Both verses are instance of *ketiv/qere*, which are presented here as free variations. As noted above, this eliminates from the outset the possibility that either the *ketiv* or the *qere* is a linguistic modernization by a later scribe. The conclusion that these are equally old readings is baked into their statistics. But this is precisely what they are trying to demonstrate. The contemporaneity of these *ketiv* and *qere* readings at the time of composition is highly unlikely. The data here are simply misleading.

4) One instance is from the second edition of Samuel:² 1 Sam 18:19 (*ntn* in *niphal*). This verse is not in the earlier edition, which is represented in LXX. The implied claim that this verbal usage is contemporary with the others in Samuel is probably incorrect. It is later, which Young and Rezetko fail to acknowledge.

5) The only remaining *niphal* for either root is 1 Sam 25:27 (for *ntn*). The LXX and 4QSam^a, however, read this verb as an active *qal*. Young and Rezetko fail to mention this complication.

A more thorough philological analysis indicates that the first edition of Samuel may never have used the *niphal* for these two roots. It is arguable that the statistics for this textual state should be as follows:

<i>yld</i>	<i>qal</i> passive (x6)	<i>niphal</i> (x0)
	2 Sam 3:2, 5, 5:13, 14:27, 21:20, 22	Ø
<i>ntn</i>	<i>qal</i> passive (x2)	<i>niphal</i> (x0)
	2 Sam 18:9, 21:6	Ø

We would not insist on this count, since there are uncertainties of interpretation. But to ignore these uncertainties, and to omit mention of the relevant philological data (later editions,

propensity for linguistic updating, internal development of *ketiv/qere*, etc.) is misleading and untruthful.

The root problem is that the desired outcome determines the method. Young and Rezetko marshal their statistics in order to baffle the reader into accepting their prior conclusion, that there is no viable historical linguistics of biblical Hebrew. In sum, their errors of commission and omission fall short of the bar for biblical philology. Such slippery-spun scholarship is easily refuted. But it does leave a bad taste.

¹ We note in passing that Young and Rezetko seem poorly informed about the historical linguistic background. For instance, they state that “the *qal* passive originated in the First Temple period.” This is simply incorrect. The *qal* passive is common Central Semitic (attested in Arabic and second millennium Canaanite) and probably proto-Semitic

² See, e.g., Ronald Hendel, “Plural Texts and Literary Criticism: For Instance, 1 Samuel 17,” *Textus* 23 (2007), 97-114 and references.