In the Quest for the Face of YHWH / The Lord: About the Meanings of *Biqqesh Panim*

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Abstract. In Psalm 27:8 from the Hebrew Bible,[1] the syntagm *biqqesh panim* appears twice, with reference to the quest of the Face of YHWH / The Lord. Since the sphere of meaning of both terms reaches at a certain moment a point of convergence, the phrase acquires a strong significance. Is this a simple construction or can it be considered an idiom, whose meaning surpasses the cumulation of meanings of its term, acquiring the connotation of "striving for the divine Presence" or "intense desire to meet YHWH / The Lord face to face"? Our paper begins with the above question and aims to analyse the syntagm and its meanings in different contexts, to identify and to give possible arguments that would support its status of idiom and would open new research perspectives on it.

Keywords: *biqqesh panim*, quest, face to face, Hebrew Bible

> Motto:
> *əkha amar libbi **baqqəshu fanay**
> **et-panekha** yhwh (adonay) **avvaqqesh**
> Təhilim/*Psalm 27:8

Biblical poetry represents one of the most challenging fields for a translator because they must face the difficulty of rendering the original meanings after centuries or even millennia. As part of the team working on translating the Psalms from the Hebrew Bible, I learned a lot about the rich nuances that terms and phrases have in biblical Hebrew. If a translator has to choose one meaning among many, he can sometimes have the feeling that the saying *traduttore, traditore* is in some respect true. But he has a solution: to do ever more research, always thriving to explain the meaning from the time the book was written, and

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1   Hebrew Bible represents the name of the Hebrew text used in my research, the text established in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS), editio quinta emendata, Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1997.

to render as much as possible this meaning into the target language. This is my approach. Here is why the current work aims at investigating in depth one of the expressions which appears twice in Psalm 27:8, the phrase *biqqesh panim*, which is difficult to translate and requires deeper reflection on its multifaceted significance. Since both terms have a strong significant load, with theological impact, the question we are raising is whether this is a simple construction that combines the meanings of the two terms or it is an idiom, an expression that exceeds the cumulation of meanings of this term.

Starting from the question above, we try to analyse the syntagm and its meanings within the context it appears, to identify and to give possible arguments that would support its status as an idiom and, why not, to open new research perspectives on Biblical Hebrew phraseology.

With the development of linguistics, Biblical Hebrew phraseology has increasingly become an area of interest for researchers of biblical studies. The main challenge the researchers are facing concerns the difficulty of identifying the meanings that some idiomatic expressions had in biblical times.

In his research on the Biblical phraseology, Jean-Marc Babut considers that biblical phrases which have a transparent meaning or which are understandable by deducing their meaning from the particular meanings of their terms do not constitute idiomatic expressions and that idioms are represented only by those expressions that present a semantic unity. From the need to clearly identify and delimit the scope of idiomatic expressions, he proposes three essential criteria: exocentric meaning – the meaning of the phraseological unit is not a summation of the meanings of its constituents, but it is global, unpredictable, and opaque (Babut 1995: 20); stereotyping – the phraseological unit has a fixed structure, which does not admit formal or topical changes of its terms, nor intrusions upon other terms (Babut 1995: 21); monosemy – the phraseological unit has only one meaning (Babut 1995: 26). Babut considers monosemy as the essential feature of the idiom. Although it represents a notable theoretical approach to defining and classifying biblical expressions, the three criteria stated by Babut are not always supported in the case of the biblical text. Babut himself admits that there is a discontinuity between the endocentric, transparent, composite meaning and the exocentric, opaque, global meaning (Babut 1995: 18).

Despite the challenges the researchers in the field of biblical phraseology are confronted with, looking at the meanings of the phrases that have not been researched until now can bring important clarifications and nuances for a better understanding of the biblical text. Due to the contribution of related fields, i.e. research of the biblical man, about his society and culture, Biblical Hebrew idioms can be less opaque, and their meanings more precise or nuanced.

Our research efforts can be rendered significantly easier thanks to the specificity of the Hebrew language to form words starting from a verbal root

carrying a generic meaning, which allows the identification of the meanings by referring to a common semantic field. Our main research method is based on the etymological study, by analysing the terms derived from a common verbal root. As Alexander Militarev pointed out, "the etymology of classical Hebrew words shed additional light upon the semantics of even well-known terms, enrich their comprehension, and, for some of the rare words, provide the sole source of interpretation. The etymological aspect also assists with context analysis laying bare the underestimated and, quite likely, exceptional role in creating the notions, episodes, narratives, ideas, and concepts" (Militarev 2007: 290).

In our attempt to elucidate the meanings of the formula *biqqesh panim* and the occurrences and semantics of the syntagm *biqqesh panim*, we will start with the analysis of the term *panim* and the construction *pəney yhwh/adonay*, followed by the investigation of the verb *biqqesh* and of other Hebrew verbs with similar meaning.
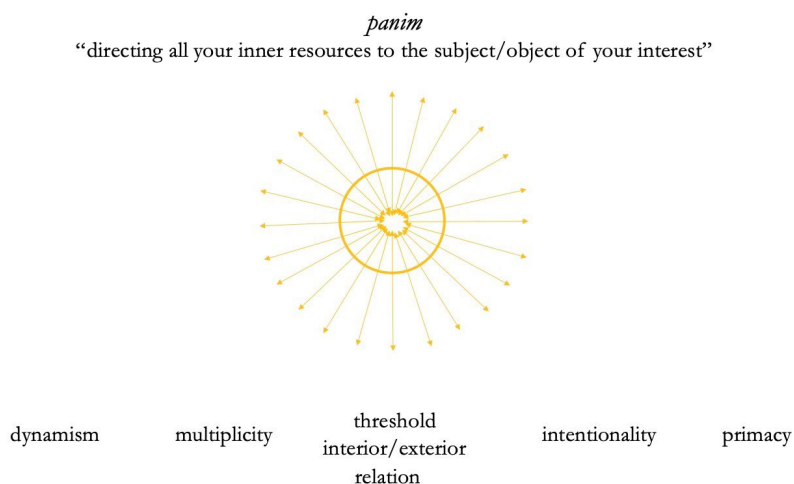
The phrase we would like to investigate brings together two terms with a strong and meaningful load. The term *panim* (BDB 2014: 815–819), normally translated as 'face', has in Hebrew a more complex meaning. Used with reference to the divine, which does not have corporeality in Judaism, the term *panim* includes meanings that deserve to be highlighted. In turn, the verb *biqqesh* (BDB 2014: 134–135) indicates by its etymology and paradigm a core of meanings that add nuances to the general signification of 'to seek', 'to search for'. In this context, the phrase *biqqesh panim* presents specific occurrences and semantic particularities.

Usually translated as 'face' or 'faces', the Hebrew term *panim* comes from the triconsonantal verbal root *pnh* (coming from the proto-semitic biconsonantal root **pn*),[2] which has the generic meaning of 'turn towards what constitutes the centre of interest, towards what is in the centre of attention, in order to see and know'. This shows that the Hebrew *panim* refers not so much to the exteriority, to appearance, like in Indo-European languages, but to the attitude and dynamism of the living person, who turns his attention to what represents the centre of their interest. The term *panim* is a *pluralia tantum* noun, indicating that the human being has many "faces", many orientations of their attention, a dynamism joining the interiority and the exteriority of a person. From this perspective, *panim* is like a threshold, a link between the inner part of a person (its volition, emotions, thoughts) and the exterior expression of his inner resources. That explains the use of *panim* in the Hebrew Bible with the meaning of 'whole person' and the translation in many modern languages, in some contexts, by a personal pronoun.

It is not arbitrary that the main sense and communication organs are situated in the area of the face: eyes (for sight), ears (for hearing), nose (for smell), mouth (for taste for speech), and all these dynamic elements, by mimics, express the inner

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2   For the analysis of *panim*, many etymological references were used, listed in the References section.

state of the person: the face represents at the same time a medium of knowledge and of communication or life itself, not only a static image of a moment in life but the flow of continuous life, the multiple facets of being, and the capacity of a human being to turn their attention to different subjects and objects of interest. But we must emphasize that, from among over two thousand occurrences of the term in the Hebrew Bible, only a small part has the actual meaning of 'face'. In these cases, the term refers to the external reflection, through glances or gestures, of the human interiority, the face representing the medium of communication of thought, will, and emotions.

panim
"directing all your inner resources to the subject/object of your interest"

| dynamism | multiplicity | threshold interior/exterior relation | intentionality | primacy |

Figure 1. *Semantic units of panim and a graphical representation of its behaviour*

That explains why the term *panim* in the Hebrew Bible has meanings referring to the orientation of attention towards what constitutes the point of interest. Therefore, the term mainly refers to presence, and not to corporeality. Thus, speaking about the Divine Face does not represent anthropomorphizing, and the apparent conflict between the prohibition of seeing the Face of the Lord and the exhortation to seek His Face is resolved.

Biblical scholars have shown that the Hebrew phrase *pney yhwh* 'the Face of the Lord' has a theological signification, referring to divine orientation, attention, benevolence, and love towards human beings.

A schematic representation of the ramifications of *panim*'s meaning, based on the meanings highlighted by its occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, sheds light on the centrality of the meaning of 'presence' and prepares a secondary place for the bodily meaning of 'face', the latter having connotations with respect to partiality, exteriority, and spatiality.
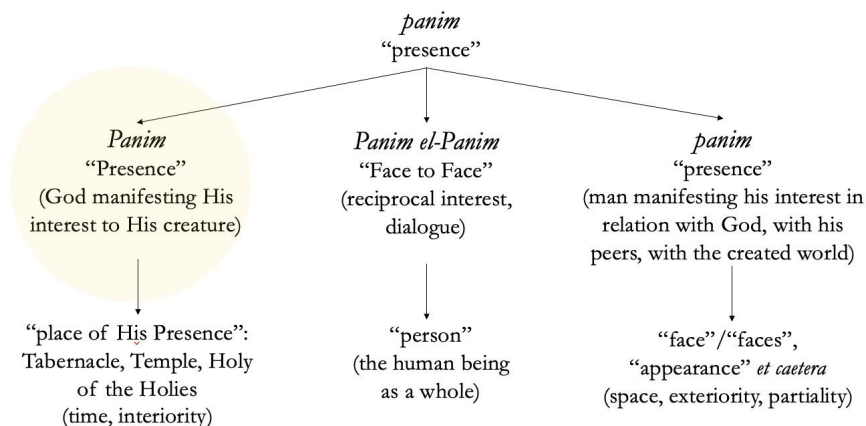
panim
"presence"

Panim
"Presence"
(God manifesting His
interest to His creature)

Panim el-Panim
"Face to Face"
(reciprocal interest,
dialogue)

panim
"presence"
(man manifesting his interest in
relation with God, with his
peers, with the created world)

"place of His Presence":
Tabernacle, Temple, Holy
of the Holies
(time, interiority)

"person"
(the human being
as a whole)

"face"/"faces",
"appearance" *et caetera*
(space, exteriority, partiality)

Figure 2. *Meaning ramifications of panim*

Regarding the verbal component of the expression *biqqesh panim*, it is necessary to underline that in Biblical Hebrew its meaning, 'to seek', is expressed through a series of verbs such as: *ba'a* (BDB 2014: 126), *baqar* (BDB 2014: 133), *biqqesh*, *darash* (BDB 2014: 205), *shachar* (BDB 2014: 1007), or *tur* (BDB 2014: 1064). The translation into modern languages of these Hebrew verbs as 'to seek' led to the impression of an equalizing synonymy and, consequently, to an impoverishment of their different nuances. In Biblical Hebrew, this general idea was expressed by at least six different verbs, each one used in well-defined contexts, with a well-defined meaning.

Their precise nuances refer to either the idea of 'examination' or 'search' or the idea of 'urgency', of 'internalizing the search', 'reflection', 'contemplation', of a ritual act, or 'frequenting a sacred place and resorting to religious practice such as prayer or worship'.

ba'a

"seek/
inquire (of
rising desire)"

"cause to
boil"

baqar

"seek"

"examine"

"inquire"

"meditate"

"contemplate"

biqqesh

"seek intensely"

"quest intensely
for"

darash

"seek/resort"

"frequent (a place)"

"seek deity in prayer and
worship"

"require/demand"

"study/practice"

"care for"

shachar

"seek early/
earnestly/
eagerly for"

"seek with
longing/
long for"

tur

"seek out"

"select"

"spy out"

"explore"

"seek to (find out
how to do
something)"

Figure 3. *Comparative approach of the Hebrew verbs for 'to seek'*

The phrase *biqqesh panim* has only eleven occurrences in the Hebrew Bible, eight of them with reference to God's Face/Presence and three with reference to the face or to the presence of the ruler / of King Solomon, in relation to what God has given him – the wisdom to make justice with love, as God does, which emphasizes the special status of this expression:

> I will return to My place until they will be guilty and they will **seek (*biqqesh*) My Face**, in affliction they will earnestly seek (*shachar*) Me! (Hosea 5:15)[3]

> Seek (*darash*) YHWH/The Lord and his strength, **seek (*biqqesh*) His Face** evermore! (1 Chronicles 16:11 = Psalm 105:4)

> And if they will humble themselves, My people, who are called (by) My Name upon them, and will pray and **seek (*biqqesh*) My Face**, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heavens and I will forgive their sin and heal their land. (2 Chronicles 7:14)

> And there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year, and David **sought (*biqqesh*) the Face** of YHWH/The Lord**,** and the Lord said: Because of Saul and his house [is this], the blood upon him, that he killed the Gibeonites. (2 Samuel 21:1)

> This is the lineage of those who seek (*darash*) Him, of those who **seek (*biqqesh*) Your Face** – [the lineage of] Jakob! (Psalm 24:6)

> To you says My heart: **Seek My Face**! **Your Face**, YHWH/Lord, **I will seek**!" (Psalm 27:8)

> And the whole earth **sought the presence** of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his heart. (1 Kings 10:22, 2 Chronicles 9:23)

> Many **seek the face** of a ruler, but from YHWH/The Lord is the justice of man. (Proverbs 29:26)

We will focus on the contexts in which the expression refers to the search for the Lord's Face. It can be noted sometimes in the same contexts that combinations of two different verbs for 'to seek', like *biqqesh* and *shachar* (in Hosea 5:15), *biqqesh*

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3   The translation from Biblical Hebrew to English of the verses cited in this paper belongs to the author. We chose not to use the established translations in order to render the meanings as close as possible to those in the original text.

and *darash* (in Chronicles 16:11, in Psalm 105:4, and in Psalm 24:6), or *darash* and *shachar* (in Psalm 78:34) appear, and this allows the reader to differentiate between their meanings, to perceive their semantic nuances. For example, the verses containing both *biqqesh* and *darash* indicate that *biqqesh panim* does not refer to a meaning concerning a ritual act like 'going to a sacred place for praying or offerings' because this meaning belongs to the verb *darash*, already present in this context. Also, in verse 1 from 2 Samuel 21, the verb *biqqesh* seems to have referred to a dialogical encounter, 'face to face', between David and the Lord, and not to the request for meditation or prayer, meanings expressed by other verbs, like *baqar* and *darash*, not used in this context.

The elucidation of the semantic nuances of the verb *biqqesh* requires an in-depth analysis of the specificities of this verb. First of all, it should be emphasized that this Hebrew verb is used exclusively in *piel* stem, which expresses an intensive action, a causative action, a resultative action, or a specific kind of action, in active voice, and adds these semantic units to the core meaning of the term.

The Biblical Hebrew dictionaries and lexicons give the term *biqqesh* the following general meanings: 'seek after', 'desire to find, to obtain or to achieve something', 'ask for something from someone', 'beg', 'demand', 'inquire', 'plead', 'search or look for', 'try to find', 'pursue', 'investigate', 'strive for'. These translations do not seem to cover the meanings of the expression *biqqesh panim*, which we are researching here. Therefore, in what follows, we will try to identify possible meanings of this expression, by analysing the semantic sphere of the verb *biqqesh*, starting from the verbal root around which we can identify a wide series of terms.
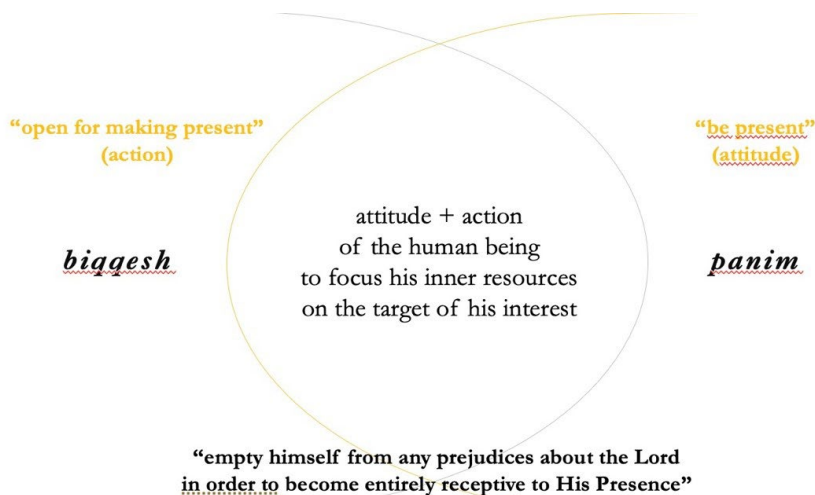
Concerning the original core meaning of *biqqesh*, it can be revealed by referring to the related terms that share the same biconsonantal proto-semitic root, *bq*, which is the bearer of their generic meaning. In Biblical Hebrew, we can find terms coming from the root *bq* such us: *baqa'*, 'cleave', 'break open or through', 'to split', 'to divide', 'to open', 'to drill' (BDB 2014: 131), *beqa'*, 'half of shekel' (BDB 2014: 132), *biq'a*, 'field', 'valley' (BDB 2014: 132), *baqia'* or *beqia'*, 'fissure', 'breach' (BDB 2014: 132), *baqaq*, 'to be empty' (BDB 2014: 132) – from which comes the term *iabboq*, designating the name of the river Jakob passes before wrestling with God, *baqbuq* (word obtained by the duplication of the root *bq*), 'container', 'vessel', 'empty', 'two parts' (BDB 2014: 132), *baqar*, 'to seek', 'to search', 'to meditate', 'to contemplate', 'to examine', 'to inspect', 'to distinguish', 'to take care', 'to evaluate', 'to ask' (BDB 2014: 133), *boqer*, 'sunrise', 'morning', 'the moment that separates night and day', 'the moment of the day when the sun appears, become present' (BDB 2014: 133–134), *baqqara*, 'seeking' (BDB 2014: 134), *biqqesh*. The meanings of the terms above reconstruct the general sense of the root *bq*, which is related with the idea of 'opening' or 'being empty', like a 'vessel', even 'concavity'.

Connections with this meaning appear also in the Hebrew terms having the sequence *bq* inversed, the biconsonantal root *qb*, related symmetrically with the idea of 'being empty', with meanings as 'convexity', or 'being full', like in terms such as: *qavav*, 'arch', 'dome', 'vaulted tent' (BDB 2014: 866), *qav*, 'volume' (BDB 2014: 866), *qubba*, 'large vaulted tent' (BDB 2014: 866), *qeva*, 'belly', 'womb' (BDB 2014: 866), *iaaqov* – the Hebrew name of Jakob – from *aqev*, 'heel', 'footprint' (BDB 2014: 784), *aqov*, 'steep', 'hilly' (BDB 2014: 784).

From an etymological point of view, it seems that *biqqesh* is more related with *baqar*, as it shares the same biconsonantal root *bq*, a root that refers to the idea of 'being empty'. As both verbs express the idea of searching, it is obvious that they would be redundant if each one of them did not have a very precise meaning. Starting from this core general meaning of 'being empty' or 'opening', the *piel* stem is adding the nuances of intensity or causative action, and the specific meaning of the verb *biqqesh* seems to relate to the ideas of "internalization", "emptying himself of all preconceived ideas and representations", "opening himself for making something or someone to be present".

It becomes obvious that both terms from the phrase *biqqesh panim* have meanings whose spheres intersect and are convergent: both of them refer to the idea of "presence", one as "attitude", the other as "action", and together they express the total involvement (not only the intention but also the action) of the human being in order to focus his inner resources on the target of his interest, in this case, to encounter the divine.

"open for making present"
(action)

"be present"
(attitude)

biqqesh

attitude + action
of the human being
to focus his inner resources
on the target of his interest

panim

"empty himself from any prejudices about the Lord
in order to become entirely receptive to His Presence"

Figure 4. *Meaning spheres convergence in biqqesh panim*

Given all these arguments, both grammatical and semantic, it can be considered that the expression *biqqesh panim* could have meanings such as 'seek intensely

God's Presence', "intense quest for the Face of God', 'long for God's Presence', 'desire strongly to meet YHWH / The Lord Face to Face', 'desire and prepare oneself to meet God Face to Face', 'have the attitude and do what's needed to focus one's inner resources on finding God and on acquiring the status that could allow one to stay in the Presence/before the Face of God', 'open/empty/free oneself from any prejudices about the Lord in order to become entirely receptive to His overwhelming Presence'. The fact that the phrase *biqqesh panim* requires a complex, nuanced explanation, impossible to render synthetically in modern languages, constitutes an argument for assigning it the status of an idiom.

As the perfect prophet needs to empty himself from any prejudices and representations about the Lord in order to become entirely receptive to His Presence, so does it appear as God's exhortation to the Psalmist, in Psalm 27:8. That is the complex meaning that we recognize in the expression *biqqesh panim*.

Table 1. *Transliteration and pronunciation of Hebrew letters*

	Consonant	Transliteration and pronunciation
א	*aleph*	- (glottal stop)
בּ	*bet*	B
ב	*vet*	V
ג	*gimel*	G
ד	*dalet*	D
ה	*he*	h
ו	*waw*	w, v, u
ז	*zayin*	Z
ח	*het*	ḥ (h)
ט	*tet*	T
י	*yod*	y, i
כּ	*kaf*	K
כ	*khaf*	kh (h)
ך	*khaf sofit*	kh (h)
ל	*lamed*	L
מ	*mem*	M
ם	*mem sofit*	M
נ	*nun*	N
ן	*nun sofit*	N
ס	*samekh*	S
ע	*ayin*	-
פּ	*pe*	P
פ	*phe*	F
ף	*phe sofit*	F

	Consonant	Transliteration and pronunciation
צ	*tzadi*	Tz
ק	*qof*	Q
ר	*resh*	R
שׁ	*shin*	Sh
שׂ	*sin*	S
ת	*taw*	T

Other clarifications regarding the marking of the Masoretic signs:
– *loud shewa*:   ə
– *dagesh forte:*   doubling the letter
– *he*, as *mater lectionis*, is not marked.

Note: when part of the verbal root,
– *aleph* is transcribed by '
– *ayin* is transcribed by '.

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