The Passive Qal in the Hebrew of the Second Temple Period, especially as Found in the Wisdom of Ben Sira

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In the Hebrew preserved in the ancient and medieval manuscripts of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, one rarely finds any features typically associated with archaic Hebrew poetry. There are no examples of enclitic endings (mem, hiriq-yodh, or holem-waw), no examples of the 3mp suffix וּל. There are no examples of the prepositions in their expanded forms (אֱלִי, מִנִּי, מִנֵּי, עֲדֵי, עֲלֵי), even though these seem somewhat common in biblical poetry generally and even though these also appear among the Dead Sea Scrolls (= DSS). The short jussive forms that appear occasionally in non-modal contexts in Ben Sira are best construed not as preterites, but as mistakes by the ancient writer(s) or scribes who intended to convey a future or imperfect nuance. Other features connected with archaic poetry which do occur in Ben Sira are really features particular to a more contemporary Hebrew dialect, like the 2ms suffix -āk (< -āk) (דָּדָך Sir 7:30 Ms A) and the -ש relative pronoun, both of which are common in Rabbinic Hebrew (= RH), as well as other (sub)-dialects of Hebrew (like that reflected in 4QMMT [4Q394–399] and that of the Hexapla).

The absence of some archaic traits may in part reflect the absence of certain verbal forms. E.g., there are no 2fs or 3fp verbal forms attested; thus, there are no 2fs perfect verbs ending in יָד or 3fp imperfects beginning with yodh.

On the aberrant short jussive forms used as imperfects (but not preterites) in Ben Sira, see W. Th. van Peursen, The Verbal System in the Hebrew Text of Ben Sira (Studies in Semitic Languages and Linguistics 41; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 94–95. To the examples listed there may be added a further one from 44:15 (Mas), יִדָּה [ת] “the congregation will repeat,” based on the new photographs at www.bensira.org. See Eric D. Reymond, “New Readings in the Ben Sira Masada Scroll (Mas 1h),” Revue de Qumran, 26/103 (2014): 327–343, esp. 337–38. The three prefix verbal forms that can be construed as preterites do not bear the form of the jussive (see van Peursen, Verbal System, 113–119).

In other cases, the feature is attributable to the biblical Hebrew lexicon and/or morphology. The presence of waw/yodh in etymological הֶלְבָּךְ waw/yodh verb forms (outside the qal passive participle) appears restricted to the word נָתָני הָדְוָי “things that will come” (Sir 42:18 Mas), and this seems likely due to the regularity of this peculiar form in the Bible (see Isa 41:23; 44:7; 45:11 also reflected in 1Q8 [1QIsab], and in 1Qisa, with one exception [45:11]), where
There are, however, traces of archaic Hebrew orthography and morphology present in the Hebrew of Ben Sira. A final heh is read in at least two places as the 3ms suffix by a medieval vocalizer who pointed portions of Ms A (both in Sir 10:13: בִּלְעַל and נֶגַעֹה). In addition, as I have endeavored to demonstrate in another paper, this 3ms heh suffix may also exist in a handful of other passages from the Masada scroll and Mss A and B (Sir 6:22; 43:1, 18; 44:2; 46:5). While this feature cannot easily be attributed to the language of Ben Sira himself, since we do not know how he wrote, nor even if he composed with pen and ink, there is another feature which is clearly archaic in the Hebrew of Ben Sira and which may be attributable, in certain cases at least, to the literary register of the author himself. This is the passive qal conjugation.

As will be demonstrated below, the passive qal was likely not recognized as related to the qal stem itself by speakers and writers in the late Second Temple era. It seems possible, at least, that Ben Sira himself, therefore, would not have recognized this stem. Nevertheless, he would have presumably known the relevant forms of the passive qal as expressions of the pual or hophal. It seems possible that he could have used these verb forms in a manner consistent with how they are used in the Bible. As is so frequently the case when studying the Hebrew of Ben Sira, however, it is often uncertain if the Hebrew words actually can be assumed to be from an early layer of the text. In several instances, it will be shown that what we can assume to be an etymological passive qal verb form has most likely been added to the text at a later stage in the text's history. In these cases, it seems that a scribe inserted the relevant verb form into a Ben Sira passage. Such suggests a continued recognition of these verbs, at least in their peculiar pual / hophal forms, well into the Common Era.

1 The Early History of the Passive Qal and Its Interpretation

The passive qal stem, as a feature of Biblical Hebrew, has been discussed in a number of ways by previous scholars. As early as the middle ages, scholars were aware of the conjugation, though it was sometimes a matter of contention. Abraham ibn Ezra, for example, argued it did not exist, while other