

The Lambent Presence: The Shining Face of God in the Old Testament¹

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Abstract

Included among the lines of the Priestly Blessing is the prayer that ‘the LORD [would] cause his face to shine upon you’ (Numbers 6:25), at least as it is often translated. This prayer has a small number of echoes in the rest of the Hebrew Bible with sufficient similarity to suggest something like a formulaic usage, and enough difference to raise questions about the meaning of the saying in each of its contexts. Beyond this, how should this anthropomorphism be understood? What does it mean for God’s ‘face’ to ‘shine’: is this a simple, transparent metaphor? Or does its elucidation require some deeper investigation? This exploration of the ‘shining face’ of the Deity further attempts to make a contribution to a (Christian) theology of ‘divine light’, for which previous accounts have tended to ignore this potentially illuminating set of texts.

1. Introduction

When Samuel Balentine’s monograph *The Hidden God* appeared in 1983, he introduced it as a study that would bring some balance to a discourse which had been heavily skewed (he asserted) towards speaking of divine presence.² It

1. This essay was composed for the Tyndale Fellowship Old Testament Lecture for 2023. I am grateful to the TF Committee for the invitation and for the discussion the paper received on its delivery on 6 July 2023. This essay retains something of its conversational tone.

2. Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford University, 1983), v. Examples are provided on p. 164 n. 1: W. I. Wolverton, ‘The Psalmists’ Belief in God’s Presence’, *CJT* 9 (1963): 82–94; Samuel Terrien, ‘Towards a New Theology of Presence’, *USQR* 24 (1969): 227–237; James L. Crenshaw, ‘In Search of Divine Presence (Some Remarks Preliminary to a Theology of Wisdom)’, *RevExp* 74 (1977): 353–369, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463737707400306>; Walter

was based on his 1979 Oxford DPhil thesis, one of relatively few written under the supervision of James Barr. Just as it was being completed, Samuel Terrien's study of *The Elusive Presence* appeared,³ and Balentine was able to refer to it in the subsequent monograph.

Between them, the 'two Samuels' were a harbinger of a new phase of discourse. In short order, in a single series published by Fortress Press, the following titles appeared as volumes 12, 13, and 14: in 1984, James Crenshaw's *A Whirlpool of Torment*, also in 1984 Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*, and in 1985, Terence Fretheim's *The Suffering of God*.⁴ The trajectory was a powerful one, and continues to the present: the bibliography of 'hidden God' items is a very long one. It includes the recent article by Olga Y. Fabrikant-Burke titled 'Rethinking Divine Hiddenness in the Hebrew Bible', which will provide some help later in this essay,⁵ although my purpose is not to analyse or probe more deeply this drift towards the dark side.

Balentine's well-known work had its central purpose in exploring formulaic ('paradigmatically distinctive') language, both semantically and theologically: **הִסְתִּיר פָּנָיו** (*histir panim*), used almost exclusively of God (of twenty-nine occurrences, only three have a human referent: Exod 3:6; Isa 50:6; 53:3).⁶ My sense is that there may well be a corresponding formula which speaks to divine presence rather than to divine hiddenness and which is the focus of this enquiry: the shining of God's face.

Brueggemann, 'The Crisis and Promise of Presence in Israel', *HBT* 6 (1979): 47–85, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187122079X00030>.

3. Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (Harper & Row, 1978).

4. James L. Crenshaw, *A Whirlpool of Torment: Israelite Traditions of God as an Oppressive Presence*, OBT 12 (Fortress, 1984); Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, OBT 13 (Fortress, 1984); Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*, OBT 14 (Fortress, 1985). Fretheim's work might seem an odd one out, but it too finds space for problematising 'presence' in his chapter 5, 'God and World: Presence and Power', 60–78.

5. Olga Y. Fabrikant-Burke, 'Rethinking Divine Hiddenness in the Hebrew Bible: The Hidden God as the Hostile God in Psalm 88', *HTR* 114.2 (2021): 159–181, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816021000122>. More broadly, see also Daniel Howard-Snyder and Adam Green, 'Hiddenness of God', *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 edition), Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, ed., <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/divine-hiddenness/>, and Michael C. Rea, *The Hiddenness of God* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

6. See also his related article Samuel E. Balentine, 'A Description of the Semantic Field of Hebrew Words for "Hide"', *VT* 30.2 (1980): 137–153, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853380X00029>, statistics on p. 139.

This formula has not enjoyed the sort of attention that the ‘hidden face’ language has, possibly, in part, because it occurs much less frequently: there are only eight occurrences spread across six passages (and three of these come together in Psalm 80). Each of these refers to God’s face. There is a ninth occurrence if we include Ecclesiastes 8:1, which refers to a human, rather than divine, face. And, again much like Balentine’s study, there is a hinterland of related lexemes and expressions which might bear on the meaning and significance of our central terms. This brief study must, however, be mostly limited to the core texts. In what follows, I first detail the linguistic contours of the ‘shining of God’s face’ language, and how it demarcates our small corpus. I then proceed to an exploration of that corpus, working through the texts in canonical sequence (which order works the same for both Tanakh and Old Testament – or Old Greek, for that matter). Some attention, however brief, must be given to the wider context of this language, both within the HB and beyond its bounds. Finally, again following the pattern established by Balentine, I make some attempt to reflect on the implications of this investigation for broader theological concerns.

2. Language

The regularities which draw together and demarcate our small corpus are readily observed. The chief markers are use of a volitive hiphil form of the verb אור (*WR*) in combination with the ‘face’ of the Deity, along with the identification of some beneficiary. These three elements are subject to minor variation through our small set of texts. The verb, though always hiphil, may be a third-person jussive (Num 6:25; Ps 67:2), or, more frequently, an imperative.⁷ I refer abstractly to ‘Deity’, since here, too, there is variation. Only Numbers 6:25 explicitly and immediately uses YHWH, although in Psalm 31:17 the Tetragram is in close proximity (v. 15) and contextually clear. Not in close proximity, yet still contextually clear, is Psalm 119:135 in which there is no explicit antecedent for the second-person references which, however, are plainly all directed to YHWH (the closest antecedent is 119:126 in the ע (*ayin*) stanza). Two of our psalms come from the Elohistic Psalter (= Psalms 42–83, so Psalm 67 and 80), so it is no surprise that the four occurrences they contain should use אֱלֹהִים (*’elohim*), although the last uses the compound יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים צְבָאוֹת (*yhwh ’elohim tseva’ot*). And what is probably the latest member in the corpus (Dan

7. This holds true for the rest, although Ps 31:17 has a lengthened imperative with ‘paragodic ה-’, cf. Joüon §48d.

9:17) frames the formula with אֱלֹהֵינוּ ('elohenu) and אֲדֹנָי ('adonay – explicitly, not as a representation of YHWH).

The third distinguishing feature, however, shows considerable variation through the set: that is the accompanying prepositional phrase that indicates the beneficiary (or 'semantic patient')⁸ of divine illumination:

1. two use עַל ('al – Ps 31:17; Dan 9:17);
2. one uses אֶל ('el – Num 6:25);
3. one uses אֶת ('et = preposition – Ps 67:2);
4. one uses בְּ (be- – Ps 119:135);
5. one lacks this element altogether (Ps 80:4,8,20).

Public translations regularly translate each of these by 'upon' or 'on'; attempts to reflect some nuance in the preposition are rare. There is some precedent for this in the OG translations of these texts, each of which employs some form of ἐπί when representing a Hebrew preposition.⁹ Prepositions are, of course, grammatical words indicating relationship of some kind (especially locative, directional, or temporal) and their use across languages can be highly conventional and conditioned. However, although prepositions are 'grammatical' rather than 'semantic' words, their use can carry semantic information. To what extent the public translations may be justified in flattening the equivalence of these phrases across the corpus will be considered as we examine each passage in turn.

The question about the value of these prepositions is worth asking, in part because there are patterns which can be observed more widely in the use of the hiphil אור ('WR): five times it appears with עַל ('al), five times with לְ (le-), but most frequently (~15×) the semantic patient is indicated without any preposition at all: e.g. הֶאֱרִירוּ בְּרָקִים תֵּבֵל (he'iru veraqim tevel), 'flashes of lightning lit up the world' (Ps 77:19). But each of our single-use members (#2–#4, above) is, in fact, a singleton: there are no other examples in the HB, nor does our set participate in two of the more frequent patterns observed, that is לְ (le-), or null = ∅.

The variations, while of some interest, do not mask or diminish the key features which bind the corpus together. It remains sensible to treat these texts

8. For this language, see 'Patient as a Semantic Role', *SIL Linguistics Glossary*, <https://glossary.sil.org/term/patient-semantic-role>; also cf. M. L. Larson, *Meaning-Based Translation: A Guide to Cross-Language Equivalence* (University Press of America, 1984), 200–201.

9. This may, in part at least, be connected with the consistent use of ἐπιφαίνω for translating the verb.

as a set, and they are so identified in the standard English lexica of classical Hebrew.¹⁰

3. Corpus

3.1 Numbers 6:25

Taking pride of place in our discussion must be the ‘Priestly Blessing’ (it also goes by other names). It is certainly the most familiar of our texts – at least its core is – as it remains an integral and frequently used part of both Jewish and Christian liturgy.¹¹ While the words of the blessing itself are oft repeated, the frame in which they are set is also significant for its meaning in context.

Both the content of the blessing and its frame have notable features. The blessing itself in vv. 24-26 displays readily observed patterns, with the clearest the progression across the three lines from three words (2+1) to five words (4+1) to seven words (4+3).¹² In each case the second slot is taken by the divine name, YHWH. Many commentators note that the first part-line and the last frame the whole with ‘blessing’ and ‘peace’ (שָׁלוֹם – *shalom*), corresponding to the final affirmation of Psalm 29, יְהוָה | יְבָרֵךְ אֶת-עַמּוֹ בְּשָׁלוֹם: (yhwah yevarekh ‘et ‘ammo vashalom – ‘the LORD blesses his people with peace’, 29:11b). Meanwhile, the frame in vv. 22-23,27 assigns these words to Aaron and his descendants, tasked with ‘blessing the people of Israel’ through these words, although in conclusion the enactment of blessing is reserved to YHWH himself: וְאֲנִי אֲבָרֵכֶם (va’ani ‘avarakhem – ‘and I, I will bless them’).¹³

While its liturgical use guarantees a certain prominence for the Blessing, further impetus to its fame was given by the discovery of the Ketef Hinnom amulets. Their story is well known, and their study has been intensive,

10. BDB, q.v. [אִוֵּר] vb, Hiph. §5; HALOT, אִוֵּר sub hif.3; DCH, 1.160, אִוֵּר sub Hi.6

11. Among many others, see Josephine Haas, ‘Der liturgische Gebrauch des Aaronitischen Segens im evangelischen und jüdischen Gottesdienst’, *Liturgie und Kultur* 9.2 (2018): 46–63.

12. The consonant count follows the same progression: 15 (9+6), 20 (15+5), 25 (15+10). While David Noel Freedman’s observations seem to me to be overhyped and ‘reconstruction’ overcooked, his metrics remain frequently cited: D. N. Freedman, ‘The Aaronic Benediction (Numbers 6:24-26)’, in *No Famine in the Land: Studies in Honor of John L. McKenzie*, ed. J. W. Flanagan and A. Weisbrod Robinson (Scholars Press, 1975), 35–48.

13. This is joined to the introduction in the OG, with the substance of v. 27 found in v. 23. Whether ‘frame’ as in MT, or wholly introduction, as in LXX, the dynamic of the blessing remains the same.

generating a lengthy bibliography.¹⁴ These are remarkable objects, potentially cracking open a window on popular religion at the end of the Iron Age.¹⁵ Jeremy Smoak in particular has been industrious in interrogating these amulets, the texts they contain, and the contexts in which they can be placed.¹⁶ Distinctively, he advocates an interpretation appealing to ‘apotropaic ritual’ and a temple milieu, although it is at these very points that his impressive work has been most resisted. As is so often the case, distinguishing literary and historical aspects of the interpretations of biblical texts can be a fraught exercise. Still, at least the perception of an ‘apotropaic’ element in this apparent use of the Blessing in popular culture remains suggestive.

In its enactment, this Blessing combines two essential elements: (1) the priestly locution or articulation of prayer for a multi-faceted wellbeing (vv. 22–23), and (2) the corresponding divine response (v. 27). The two parts are clearly distinct, but deeply intertwined. According to our text, the priests must speak the Blessing in order for God to respond, thus bringing about that blessing (in conjunction with ‘placing [his] name’ on Israel). Yet, the priests speak not of their own initiative, but at this divinely given invitation and with this divinely provided wording. There is, then, some parallax at work in how we understand this scenario. From the human vantage point, the priestly work of speech is essential: without it, there is no blessing. And yet from the divine vantage point, God’s initiative, provision, and response are essential: without divine action, there is neither this priestly speech, nor this bestowal of ‘blessing’. There is the further aspect of the grammatical ‘janus’ address, in that the words are spoken by the priest to Israel (grammatically second person), yet their modal ‘jussive’ form – thus in the third person – invokes the actions of YHWH. On the surface, then, the Blessing is addressed to the covenant people; at a deeper level, it is addressed to Israel’s God.

14. Key studies include Gabriel Barkay et al., ‘The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation’, *BASOR* 334 (2004): 41–71, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4150106>; and Jeremy D. Smoak, *The Priestly Blessing in Inscription and Scripture: The Early History of Numbers 6:24–26* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

15. So Barkay et al., ‘The Amulets’, 42 and n. 4.

16. In addition and subsequent to his 2016 monograph, I note *inter alia* Jeremy D. Smoak, ‘From Temple to Text: Text as Ritual Space and the Composition of Numbers 6:24–26’, *JHebS* 17.2 (2017): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs.2017.v17.a2>; Jeremy D. Smoak, ‘Wearing Divine Words: In Life and Death’, *Material Religion* 15.4 (2019): 433–455, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17432200.2019.1631695>; and Jeremy D. Smoak, ‘Speaking with a Divine Voice: The Rhetoric of Epistolary Performance in Numbers 6:22–27’, in *Text and Ritual in the Pentateuch: A Systematic and Comparative Approach*, ed. Christophe Nihan and Julia Rhyder (Eisenbrauns, 2021), 215–239, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781646021574-012>.

This framing further calls attention to the observation that the actions for which the Blessing calls are all divine prerogatives. Commentators debate whether these lines describe six discrete actions, or three pairs, but the frame also implies that they form a unity, even if a unity of the complex variety. Richard Briggs's rendering displays the centrality of YHWH's actions and 'a sense of blessing working its way out in ever-widening ways':¹⁷

Bless-you	YHWH	and-keep-you		
Enlighten	YHWH	his-face	to-you	and-be-gracious-to-you
Lift	YHWH	his-face	to-you	and-place to-you peace

Verses 25a and 26a have a higher verbal equivalence than is often displayed in English translation, their four words differing only in the initial verb, יָאֵר (ya'er) and יָשָׂא (yissa'). Both use the preposition אֶל, and both explicitly name YHWH. The verb-preposition combination is more frequent with נָשָׂא (nasa') than it is with אֵר (verb), this being the only example of the latter. The combination נָשָׂא + אֶל occurs some dozens of times, regularly with the sense of 'towards', even while נָשָׂא exhibits a high degree of polysemy. The 'lifting' of the face appears also to be the more transparent of the anthropomorphisms, much in the way we might speak of being 'inclined toward' someone or something,¹⁸ that favourable regard comporting well with the paired granting of שְׁלוֹם in v. 26b.

We might, then, suspect that 'shining' of the face in verse 25a could have something to do with its partner in verse 25b, וִיחַנֶּקָּה (vikhunnekka), 'be gracious'. One of the challenges to our investigation is that we do not have a lot to go on, so one is forced to look elsewhere to fill out the content, much as we saw above with Smoak's appeal to a temple milieu. Much the same could be said of Simeon Chavel's magisterial study of 'The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact'. Noting that 'Yahweh desires to have his face sought out', these anthropomorphisms (and the 'shining face' in particular) are explained in the context of pilgrimage to 'Yahweh's precincts'.¹⁹ Of course, in terms of the Priestly Blessing, there is nothing contextually to suggest this correlation.

17. Richard S. Briggs, *Theological Hermeneutics and the Book of Numbers as Christian Scripture* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 226, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvp854x>.

18. E.g. 2 Sam 2:22; and cf. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 52.

19. Simeon Chavel, 'The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact: Visitation, Pilgrimage, and Prophetic Vision in Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Imagination', *JSQ* 19.1 (2012): 1–55 (see esp. pp. 18–19 and n. 61), <https://doi.org/10.1628/094457012799440186>.

Beyond that, it seems to invert the ‘shining face’ language to express some element of pilgrim activity rather than divine largesse.²⁰

If the connection commonly made to the account of Aaron’s blessing in Leviticus 9:22-24 holds value,²¹ then the ‘shining face’ seems most likely to be related to a satisfying of the conditions for YHWH’s presence to be safely experienced by his people – and the anxiety over the compatibility of YHWH’s presence with his people is a constant refrain through the wilderness narratives. So too, if the ‘being gracious’ with which the shining is partnered is understood in terms like Exodus 33:19, aligning it with compassion, then it can be parsed as an aspect of God’s mercy, just as the LXX has it here (καὶ ἐλέησαι σε, Brenton: ‘have mercy upon you’).

3.2 Psalm 31:17(16)

Like a number of psalms, but perhaps more than most, Psalm 31 resists a settled account of its origins²² and provides cues for widely differing analyses of its poetic structure. One often sees the claim that it is made up of two parts, although that masks whether the major break is placed at verses 8/9 or 19/20 (MT), which may encourage those who prefer rather to see a psalm in three parts; disagreement on the divisions persists. Amidst that uncertainty, there is fair agreement more recently on it belonging to a broad ‘lament’ genre, and displaying a unity born out of thematic and verbal repetition.

Although there is little agreement about the psalm’s macro-structure, its building blocks are more readily recognised. For our interest in the ‘shining face’ occurrence in verse 17, the bounds of its stanza can be confidently drawn from verses 15 to 19. Verse 15’s וַאֲנִי (va’ani – ‘as for me’), followed by *paseq*, deliberately marks the beginning of a new unit; perhaps this verse is an independent statement of trust, which in any case marks a break from the preceding.²³ This initiates an entreaty, formed of a string of modal verbs

20. In fact, the critique which Chavel levels against Balentine’s *Hidden God*, of insufficiently holding distinct the testimony of the Psalms and the Prophets (p. 18 n. 58), could be extrapolated to his own analysis here.

21. So G. B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, ICC (T&T Clark, 1903), 21; Baruch Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, AB 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 243–244, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780300262087>.

22. The resonances Psalm 31 shares with Jeremiah and Jonah have long been observed. Its origins have been placed variously in pre-exilic, exilic, and post-exilic settings.

23. On ‘trust’, cf. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, WBC 19 (Word, 1983), 259. A new beginning is forged with the explicit 1cs pronoun, concluding with an explicit 2ms pronoun (referring to ‘my God’); this is also an impressive ‘I-Thou’ statement.

(v. 16, impv.; v. 17, impv. x2; v. 18 coh., juss.; v. 19 juss.), the first three imperatives an appeal to YHWH to act on the psalmist's behalf, while the cohortative and jussives seek to counteract the deceitful and hostile. The grammar and tone both dramatically shift in verses 20-22, now declaring God's favour and faithfulness.

This provides a clear context (or even 'co-text') for the prayer of verse 17a, הָאֵירָה פָּנָיָךְ עַל-עַבְדְּךָ (*ha'irah fanekha 'al-'avdekha* – 'shine your face upon your servant').²⁴ It constitutes the filling of an impressive sandwich between two semantically closely related imperatives, הַצִּילֵנִי (*hatsileni* – 'deliver me') in verse 16b and הוֹשִׁיעֵנִי (*hoshi'eni* – 'save me') in verse 17b, both of them hiphil imperatives with a 1cs suffix. In the presence of hostility, and in the experience of frailty, the psalmist expresses persistent trust in YHWH, using quasi-covenantal language to declare that YHWH is 'my God' (v. 15) before proceeding to these requests for deliverance.

Commentators often at this point simply refer back to Psalm 4:7, where a related wording is found (this will be registered below). In that same vein, all occurrences of the 'shining face' idiom in the Psalms can be handled en masse, so that whatever nuance of meaning each instance may have is ignored. So, to let one example stand for many, John Goldingay's commentary asterisks the word 'face', sending readers to a glossary where a generic definition can be found, in this case: 'The shining of the face implies looking on people with a life-giving smile, with love and generosity, and acting accordingly. If someone can be prevailed on to smile at a suppliant, all else will follow.'²⁵

But for our context in Psalm 31, this is asking rather a lot of a smile, even if this is tacitly understood to be an extended metaphor. Craigie, in particular, draws attention to the resonances within the psalm – he goes so far as to identify a chiasmic pattern in verses 2-19, although this analysis has been disputed –

24. The lengthened form of the imperative, הָאֵירָה, is distinctive in this small corpus. Joïon and Muraoka, citing Fassberg, suggest such a form may indicate 'an action directed to the speaker himself ... or a more general relation to, or interest of, the speaker' (§48d, p. 132 n. 1), which would certainly work here. Equally, they note that the 'preference for the form with הָ seems usually to be purely in the interests of euphony', which may here draw attention to the form of the cohortative in the following verse.

25. John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 1: Psalms 1-41*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Baker Academic, 2006), 593. A translation using 'smile' is adopted by the NET Bible for each of the Psalms occurrences, although it reverts to other more literalistic renderings in the occurrences in Numbers and Daniel, as well as Eccl 8:1. To be sure, Goldingay's unpacking of the 'smile' inclines in the direction taken here, but at one remove.

and it is at just this point that the resonances are at their strongest.²⁶ Like verses 16-17, verse 3 seeks YHWH's deliverance and saving, using just the same terms as verses 16b and 17b (and in the same order; also cf. תוֹצִיאֲנִי (totsi'eni – 'free me') in v. 5). To complete the correspondence, the 'shining face' provides that place of rescue and shelter which the psalmist seeks as the prayer begins. It is worth noting, too, that the preposition used in this case is עַל. In other occurrences of עַל with the hiphil of אָוֹר, it suggests a spatial nuance (e.g. Gen 1:15,17; Exod 25:37). With the psalmist's desire for YHWH to provide a place of safety in which rescue can be effected and deliverance completed, the 'shining face' upon the suppliant provides that place of shelter – of salvation.

3.3 Psalm 67:2(1)

Psalm 67 seems to have attracted attention out of proportion to its relatively small size. The main bone of contention is the semantic value of its verb forms (the *qatal* form of Qal 3fs נָתַןָה (natenah) in verse 7a the most pressing of the 'problematic' verbs),²⁷ while its relationship to harvest liturgy is likewise contested on both counts: agricultural associations and liturgical role. Although details vary slightly, most see some form of concentric structure to the psalm as a whole.

Another widely observed feature of the psalm is its clear connection to the Priestly Blessing. So strong are the echoes that Friedrich Baethgen begins his exposition of the psalm with 'The psalm is a variation of the priestly formula of blessing in Num 6:24f.'²⁸ To be sure, the connection is a close one: there is a high degree of verbal overlap in 67:2 with the Blessing, as well as fainter echoes as the short psalm draws to a close (67:8a). Such ties have led some to converge or collapse the sense of Psalm 67 with Priestly/Aaronic Blessing.²⁹

More attentive readers, however, have noted the differences between the two closely related passages which suggest that their common language does not inevitably lead to shared meaning. Right away one sees the invocation of

26. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 259.

27. The debates over the prefix forms seem to me to be somewhat overblown, as the explicit jussive of יֹאֶר (ya'er) in our formula in v. 2 indicates the value of the other prefix forms which lack an explicit morphology for jussive.

28. 'Der Psalm ist eine Variation der presterlichen Sengesformel Num 624f', Friedrich Baethgen, *Die Psalmen*, HAT (Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1904), 199.

29. E.g. Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, WBC 20 (Word, 1990), 158-159; to a lesser extent James L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation* (John Knox, 1994), 224.

Elohim, rather than YHWH; like Psalm 80, this is part of the so-called Elohistc Psalter. Also readily noticeable is the differing sequence of verbs:³⁰

Numbers 6: bless → shine → gracious

Psalm 67: gracious → bless → shine

There is also the difference in framing, so important to Terrien.³¹ While the Blessing of Numbers 6 is invoked by the priests, the petition of Psalm 67 is simply spoken by the one reciting the psalm, essentially. And while the psalm clearly has the thriving of the covenant people in focus, the trajectory is to ‘all nations’ (67:3). Altogether, these differences incline the language shared with the Priestly Blessing to a different trajectory from it.

The verb sequence is the matter of greatest significance for our interest in the ‘shining face’ idiom. As Zenger notes, the key here is the shift in the plea for YHWH to be gracious: it initiates the sequence in Psalm 67, with the shining face coming as the culmination; in Numbers 6, they occur paired, but in reverse order, as the central line of three. Also to be noted in this connection is the variation in preposition used with shining. Here it is אֶת, rather than אֲל in the Priestly Blessing.³² Of public English translations that use ‘shine’ for יָאֵר, the preposition is almost exclusively rendered by ‘on’ or ‘upon’ (JPS 1917 with ‘toward’ – also odd – is a rare exception). This lends to the idiom a stronger relational element, so that even if literal ‘with’ is not used to represent it, something like ‘among’ would at least move in this direction.³³

This psalmist’s use of the idiom, then, suggests that God’s shining his face among/with his people is the outcome of his gracious acts and blessing, which in turn (67:3) is visible (apparent) to the watching nations. Zenger’s summary statement (p. 155) captures this nicely:

God will cause his benevolent, saving face to shine ‘on, in’ Israel in the gift of blessed life in such a way that the blessed Israel can be perceived as a visible sign of God’s presence in this world, and this in such a way that it

30. The sequential difference is exploited and explored at length by Erich Zenger in Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, Hermeneia (Fortress, 2005), 155.

31. Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2003), 483–484.

32. Not widely noted, but Zenger, *Psalms 2*, 155; John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42–89*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament (Baker Academic, 2007), 300.

33. Cf. DCH 1:451, אֶת sub §4b, although Ps 67:2 is there assigned to §2, ‘with, to’, most of which are instances of verbs of speech. IBHS, 195 = §11.2.4 #7 likewise links with verbs of speech, but translates ‘toward’, but noting ‘the basic sense is comitative’, so ‘in the company of’ or the like.

will be recognized and acknowledged by all the people of the earth as the 'way' and 'salvation' of *this* God (v. 3).

3.4 Psalm 80:4,8,20(3,7,19)

The set of 'shining face' occurrences in Psalm 80 bring a different set of questions from the texts already examined. For one thing, it appears as a refrain in the psalm, in verses 4, 8, and 20, with each repetition bringing a cumulative variation in the divine address.³⁴ For another, it appears without any prepositional phrase at all – although again, it is common (even typical) for public translations to supply 'upon us' or the like to indicate the beneficiaries of the shining face of God.

Similar to Psalm 31, there is here a context of hostility and a sense of urgency, although in Psalm 80 the intensity is, if anything, somewhat escalated. Partly this is due to the communal nature of Psalm 80, partly to the confession of God's people experiencing his anger (an element absent from Psalm 31). Still, the shining of God's face is allied closely to his saving acts.

While the three occurrences of the (abbreviated) formula provide a sense of refrain, they do not quite coincide consistently with the psalm's structure (unlike, e.g., the refrains in Pss 42–43). Along with some other unevenness in the flow of thought, some have found grounds for rearranging verses (e.g. Terrien) and/or proposing some layering in the development of the psalm to its final form (e.g. Zenger), perhaps a Northern psalm overlaid with Southern elements. These issues do not bear on my interest here. More relevant is the status of verse 15,

אֱלֹהִים צְבָאוֹת שׁוּב־נָא הִבֵּט מִשָּׁמַיִם וּרְאֵה וּפָקֵד גִּפְנֵי זֹאת:

O God of hosts, turn now / look from heaven and see / and tend this vine.

Throughout the psalm, צְבָאוֹת (*tseva'ot*) serves as a kind of punctuation mark,³⁵ and (it seems to me) verse 15 participates in the refrain-like contribution of the 'shining face' formula, also verse 5 to a lesser extent: they each come at a stanza boundary, in any case. The psalm operates out of the logic of 'ownership': given God's responsibility for bringing his people into existence, so too (the psalmist pleads) God should be responsible for his people's maintenance. The crisis of

34. There is a small text critical issue in the final occurrence in v. 20. While vv. 4 and 8 have the conjunction with the imperative for 'shine', there is no conjunction in v. 20, likely an instance of haplography with a *waw* preceding; the OG has καί.

35. Somewhat oddly joined to the absolute form of אֱלֹהִים, vv. 5,8,15,20; cf. also Pss 59:6 and 84:9, the only other places where such a collocation is found, rather than the more expected and frequent (15x) construct form which is always preceded by the Tetragram.

the psalm is that such care is absent – and for no apparent reason. There is neither the penitential tone of Psalm 31, nor its sensibility of divine anger. From this follows the claim that divine neglect amounts to divine responsibility for the ruined state of his people.

In this prayer, verse 15 acts as the fulcrum which renews in specific terms the plea for divine rescue with which the psalm begins in more general terms. God's absence, verse 3 implies, is the root problem and its remedy is for God to 'turn, look, and see', much like the turning point at the end of Exodus 2, when God 'heard, remembered, saw (וַיֵּרָא – wayyar)', and knew' (Ex 2:24-25). This pivot, then, informs the more regular pattern of verses 4, 8, and 20. Divine 'turning' has its counterpart in divine 'restoration' (both root שׁוּב (*shuv*)), and the acts of vision and cognisance in the 'shining' of God's face, leading to the desired outcome: being 'saved' (וַיִּנָּשֶׁה – *venivvashe'ah* (cf. v. 3b, וּלְכָה לִישְׁעָתָה לָנוּ – *ulekhah lishu'atah lanu*).

There is the matter, too, of the 'missing' beneficiary, at least so far as the formula is concerned. It is very rare to find examples of the hiphil of אֹר without any sort of 'patient', or something that is illuminated:³⁶ perhaps only Ezekiel 32:7 (and it is a negation) and Psalm 119:130 (in v. 130a, although this may be found in the complement in v. 130b):

פֶּתַח דְּבָרֶיךָ יְאִיר מִבֵּין פְּתִיּוֹם:

The disclosure³⁷ of your words illumines, bringing understanding to the simple.

Here, the participial phrase fills out the meaning of the enlightening or shining. So too in the case of these occurrences in Psalm 80, the following וַיִּנָּשֶׁה fills out, or completes the result of the shining face. And with the first plural 'sandwich' formed with the preceding object suffix with הַשִּׁיבֵנוּ (*hashivenu*), the beneficiary is abundantly clear. Grammatically, however, the omission of an explicit prepositional phrase as found in the other instances of the formula brings the shining into even closer linguistic relationship with its immediate context of salvation.

36. Setting aside the instances where it represents kindling fire, e.g. Isa 27:11; Mal 1:10.

37. For the uncertainty around the meaning of פֶּתַח, see HALOT, q.v.: either 'disclosure' (OG δῆλωσις) or a by-form of פָּתַח, 'gateway'. Still see G. R. Driver, 'Textual and Linguistic Problems of the Book of Psalms'. *HTR* 29.3 (1936): 171–195 (see pp. 191–192), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0017816000033319>. Rashi also has extended comment on this issue: Mayer I. Gruber, *Rashi's Commentary on Psalms*, BRLA 18 (Brill, 2004), 684, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047412649>.

3.5 Psalm 119:135

The poet of the Long Psalm uses פָּנִים (*panim*; contextual form = פָּנֶיךָ – *panekha*) as the seventh ‘acrostic’ word in the פ (pe) stanza (XVII), thus yielding the sole example where ‘face’ precedes ‘shining’ in our small corpus. (There are other examples of hiphil אֹר of the subject, or thing-that-shines, preceding the verb.) Each of the stanzas of Psalm 119 has its own logic and structure, often sharing general patterns. This stanza exhibits one of the common structural patterns for the Long Psalm, in that the fifth and sixth lines contain hints or overt statements of opposition or oppression that impede the Torah-shaped life of the poet.

But our formula is also a load-bearing constituent of this stanza’s structure. As we saw above, there is another occurrence of hiphil אֹר in 119:130. These two together place a frame around the eight-verse stanza. Verses 131 and 132 (lines 3, 4) continue to direct attention to the face in an allusive sense, with the acrostic word of verse 131 being פִּי (*pi*) – ‘My mouth I open and pant’ – and that of verse 132 being the verb פָּנָה (*PNH*) in פָּנֵה-אֵלַי וְחַנּוּנִי (*peneh-’elay vekhonnēni*) – ‘turn to me and be gracious to me’ – or, we might say, ‘face me!’ – almost a ‘deconstructed’ version of the Priestly Blessing. The final, pathetic, line of the stanza (v. 136) likewise calls attention to the face: יָרְדוּ-מַיִם יְרֵדוּ-עֵינַי (*palge-mayim yaredū ‘enay*) the ‘streams of tears’ occluding the vision whose clarity is expressed in the preceding verse in terms of YHWH’s shining face.

Even so, and even within the realm of Psalm 119, these expressions of opposition are somewhat muted; they are a long way from the distressing cries of Psalms 31 and 80. The presence of וְחַנּוּנִי in verse 132 and its faint echo of the Blessing gives the intercession at that point a sombre moment, withdrawing from the ‘exuberance’ (Oliver O’Donovan’s term) of the rest of the opening quatrain, and providing some transition towards the darker second part of the stanza. But the sense remains one more of apprehension, of being a slightly nervously observant suppliant rather than a cry to be saved from some life-threatening situation.

The nuance here imparted to the shining face approaches the outer edges of the realm of saving presence, but without any strong ‘salvation’ or ‘deliverance’ terms being used with this very different context.³⁸ Rather, the shining of God’s face has to do with the revelation of his ‘word’ and its capacity to shape the moral life of the psalmist, and the psalmist’s capacity to attend to that ‘word’. This is the only time that hiphil אֹר is used with the

38. The closest is פָּדָה in v. 134. Other terms are to be found elsewhere in Psalm 119, e.g. יָשַׁע, vv. 94, 111, 146; נָצַל, v. 170.

preposition **ל** for the beneficiary/patient. Given the wide range of meaning for this **ל**,³⁹ it is difficult to catch any particular nuance here, although its use here seems quite deliberate. It could simply have the sense of ‘on’, which is how it is often translated.⁴⁰ But when one notices that the collocation **ל** plus **עָבַד** (‘eved) typically carries a hostile sense, ‘against’ (e.g. Gen 44:18; Ex 9:14; Num 12:8; 1 Sam 19:4), then it looks even more odd here. Perhaps the rendering ‘on’ suffices, but one wonders whether a sense something like ‘with’ or even ‘in’ is lurking, although the interiority of the latter might be an anachronistic sense for divine illumination here.

3.6 Daniel 9:17

The last member of our small corpus – both canonically and chronologically – brings with it a new feature to the use of the formula. So far, each of our texts has sought the shining face of God for the benefit such confers on some person or community: an individual in the case of Psalms 31 and 119, or community in Psalms 67 and 80. The words of the Priestly Blessing are addressed in the second person singular, but it is framed in terms of bringing blessing to Israel as a whole. In each case, then, the ‘patient’ is a human creature or creatures. Daniel 9:17, however, names the sanctuary as the beneficiary of the shining of God’s face.

The prayer of Daniel 9 joins with Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9 as an extended post-exilic confession and intercession on behalf of the post-exilic community.⁴¹ Each has its own distinct voice and interests,⁴² but they participate in an emphasis on the culpability of the community, seemingly increasing in the literature from the post-exilic period.⁴³ At the same time, in Daniel 9 in particular there is also a noticeable drawing upon the deep reservoir of earlier liturgical language.⁴⁴

39. IBHS, §11.2.5; BHRG, 2nd edn, §39.6.

40. So BHRG, §39.6.1a(ii).

41. Broadly on this theme, Hans-Peter Mathys, *Dichter und Beter: Theologen aus spätalttestamentlicher Zeit*, OBO 132 (Freiburg Universitätsverlag; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994); William Morrow, ‘The Affirmation of Divine Righteousness in Early Penitential Prayers: A Sign of Judaism’s Entry into the Axial Age’, in *Seeking the Favor of God: Vol. I: The Origins of Penitential Prayer in Second Temple Judaism*, ed. Mark J. Boda, Daniel K. Falk, and Rodney Alan Werline, EJL 22 (Society of Biblical Literature 2006), 101–118.

42. Cf. H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Word, 1985), 128, 306–307.

43. So Morrow, ‘Early Penitential Prayers’.

44. See especially H. J. M. van Deventer, ‘Suffering, Psalms and Allusion in Daniel 9’, *OTE* 25.1 (2012): 207–226.

Attention is often given to the Psalms in this regard (naturally, rightly), but our ‘shining face’ formula fits this same trajectory.

Daniel’s prayer falls into two large sections: (1) the confession in verses 4-14 which weaves together the infidelity of the community with the fidelity of their God in claiming responsibility for the outworking of curse although it is the divine nature to show mercy; and (2) the petition of verses 15-19 (note the structural turning point **וְעַתָּה** (*ve’attah*) at v. 15), in which verse 15 acts as a summary basis for the petitions themselves which follow in verses 16-19, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. This latter is framed, however, in terms of ‘Jerusalem and your people’ and it is concern for Jerusalem which appears to predominate: verse 16 ‘your holy hill’; verse 17 ‘your sanctuary’; verse 18 ‘the city which is called by your name’; verse 19 ‘[for your name is given to] your city and your people’, bringing people and place together again as the prayer closes (an explicit pairing which continues into 9:20).

Somewhat like the **פ** stanza of Psalm 119, the shining face formula in Daniel 9:17 is anticipated by another use of ‘face’ in the context, in this case as the confession section draws towards a close at 9:13b: ‘[As it is written in the law of Moses, all this calamity has come on us;] yet we have not sought the favor of the LORD our God (**וְלֹא־חִלִּינוּ אֶת־פָּנֶיךָ | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ**) – *velo’-khillinu ’et-pene yhwh ’elohenu*) by turning from our iniquity and giving attention to Your truth’ (NASB). According to André Lacocque:⁴⁵

The expression *hillah penei YHWH* probably means, on the basis of its parallel in Arabic, ‘to remove God’s face’. Its origin goes back to a common stock in the history of religions when the petitioner rubs the image of a god to entreat his favour. The concept was taken up by Israel by means of a demythologizing process: one caresses the face of the Living God to erase the wrinkles caused by his displeasure ... Then God’s face shines (see here, v. 17).

45. André Lacocque, *The Book of Daniel* (SPCK, 1979), 184; cf. Norman Porteous, *Daniel*, OTL, 2nd ed. (SCM, 1979), 138: ‘[T]he Hebrew expression used here conveys the idea of smoothing the frown from the face of someone’. A similar observation is made by James A. Montgomery, *The Book of Daniel*, ICC (T&T Clark, 1927), 366: “‘Mollify,’ the Heb. literally “soften the face of,” an antique phrase used with God or man as obj., and continuing into late religious usage ... Cf. “cause thy face to shine,” v. 17.’ Cf. Otto Plöger, ‘wir haben nicht das Atlitiz Jahwes ... besänfigt’, *Das Buch Daniel*, KAT 18 (Gerd Mohn, 1965), 132. Another suggestion is ‘make the face sweet’, so S. R. Driver, *The Book of Daniel with Introduction and Notes*, CBSC (Cambridge University Press, 1900), 130–131; so too John Goldingay, *Daniel*, WBC 30 (Word, 1989), 227.

The nuance of *חִלָּה פָּנֵי* (*khillah pene*) is very difficult to fix with certainty.⁴⁶ Still, it occurs with sufficient frequency to be sure that ‘mollify’ is the intended meaning. Further, when used with reference to God’s face, it is also apparent that this religious language does not belong to ‘the technical language of the cult’,⁴⁷ but rather is most at home in the sphere of lay ritual action: prayer (Ex 32:11), and fasting and penitence (Jer 26:19; 2 Chron 33:12; Zech 7:2-3) in particular. This mollifying action with reference to God’s face has its counterpart in the outcome sought in verse 17, with the shining of God’s face signalling the restoration of relationship with God’s beatific presence again visited on the sanctuary, and resulting too in the alertness of divine faculties of hearing and seeing in verse 18.

That this is expressed in terms of the sanctuary is a function of the post-exilic setting of this text. The shining face remains a relational concept, while the people and the place are indelibly linked together.

4. Beyond the formula

Before proceeding to some more synthetic reflections, it is important to register even briefly the wider context for this formulaic language, both within the HB, and beyond it.⁴⁸

4.1 Inner-biblical parallels

While our formula yields a well-defined corpus, there are other texts that are in some ways adjacent to it. The main comparators are (in order of decreasing proximity):

46. ‘Thus far there has been no convincing account of its derivation’ – Klaus Seybold, ‘חִלָּה’, *TDOT* 4:407. Usage in the HB increases in frequency in exilic texts and beyond: Exod 32:11; 1 Sam 13:12; 1 Kgs 13:6; 2 Kgs 13:4; 2 Chr 33:12; Job 11:19; Ps 45:13; 119:58; Prov 19:6; Jer 26:19; Dan 9:13; Zech 7:2; 8:21,22; Mal 1:9.

47. Seybold, ‘חִלָּה’, 408.

48. I am setting aside the matter of Moses’s shining (root: קרן) face in Exod 34:29-35. Not only does this account employ different terminology which brings with it its own set of issues, but it participates in its own distinctive set of thematic relationships as well. While it may well be the case that at a higher level of abstraction there is value in bringing this material together with the theological formula at the centre of this study, that must await a different context. Meanwhile, cf. Joshua M. Philpot, ‘The Shining Face of Moses: The Interpretation of Exodus 34:29-35 and Its Use in the Old and New Testaments’, *BBR* 23.1 (2013): 1-11, <https://doi.org/10.2307/26424475>; and relevant as well for extra-biblical parallels, below, Shawn Zelig Aster, *The Unbeatable Light: Melammu and Its Biblical Parallels*, AOAT 384 (Ugarit-Verlag, 2012).

1. theological uses of 'face' with 'light', but the latter now as a noun rather than a verb, 'to shine';
2. where God 'shines', still using a verb, but there is no 'face' involved;
3. as noted as we began, there is one anthropological use of the formula which is often called upon to explain or illustrate the formula's theological use; and
4. more general theological metaphors of God as light.⁴⁹

4.1.1 Theological use with 'light' as noun

There are five occurrences of the phrase **אֹר + פָּנִים** ('*or + panim*'), 'light of [the] face', in the HB: three refer to God, all in the Psalms (Ps 4:7; 44:4; 89:16); two refer to human creatures (Job 29:24) or the king (Prov 16:15). In fact, both latter references have a royal dimension in that Job describes himself in terms not only reminiscent of a king, but, as he declares in the very next verse, 'I lived like a king among his troops.' Both Job and Proverbs employ this idiom to depict the largesse and life-affirming character of the benevolent monarch. Proverbs 16:10-15 is a mini-compendium of beneficent royal behaviour, culminating with a reference to the 'light of the king's face' in verse 15. Katharine Dell's analysis of the passage inclines her to judge this final verse to be

about power: the favour of the king is in another league from that of ordinary humans, but for a theological reason – he represents the meeting place of the human with the divine ... This proverb [16:15] can almost be seen as a personification of the king in terms usually referred to the figure of Wisdom and choosing the path to life through her.⁵⁰

Here, then, even the 'anthropological' occurrences incline towards and reinforce the 'theological' – they are, already, quasi-theological. Meanwhile, the three Psalms references (4:7; 44:4; 89:16) together place this language in what one might call 'salvific' contexts: that of deliverance, rescue, salvation. In Psalm 4:7, it is a prayer to be vindicated and freed from oppression; in 44:4, the 'light of your face' takes its place along with 'your right hand and your arm' as the means by which YHWH secures victory over foes; while in Psalm 89:15 it belongs in the inventory of God's reigning as victorious king.

49. Space does not permit exploring this much broader aspect here, but cf. Joel D. Ruark, 'Toward an Old Testament Theology of Light: From Physical Concept to Metaphysical Analogy' (Ph.D. diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2019).

50. Katharine J. Dell, 'The King in the Wisdom Literature', in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. John Day, JSOTSup 270 (Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 163–186, quote on p. 175.

4.1.2 ‘Shine’ as verb, no ‘face’

Here (so far as I can find) there is only a single reference: Psalm 118:27.⁵¹ It is often seen as an echo of Exodus 13:21 and 14:20, both references to the pillar that illuminated the dark accompanying the camp of Israel during the exodus. This connection, however, does not prevent a further association with the Blessing in Numbers 6:25, especially with the responsive ‘blessing’ in Psalm 118:26, with a blessing received in verse 26a, and a blessing pronounced in verse 26b. It comes, too, as a resolution to the imperatives of 118:25: **אָנָּא יְהוָה הוֹשִׁיעָה נָּא אָנָּא יְהוָה הַצְלִיחָה נָּא** (*’anna’ yhw hoshi’ah na’ ’anna’ yhw hatslikhah na’* – ‘O LORD, deliver! O LORD, bring success!’), with the salvation terms seen previously in association with the shining face in Psalm 31:16–17.

This all points to a close connection between this ‘faceless’ saying, and the full expression of the formula. There is, of course, one clear difference: here, the shining occurs as a statement, not a volitive. In this last stanza of Psalm 118, it serves as the fulcrum between the cry for deliverance and the experience of blessing on the one side, and its response of worship on the other (Ps 118:27b–29). As such, its resonance is that of the statements of confidence that appear as an integral part of the psalms of lament: the cry for relief from pain, for release from oppression, or for deliverance from the enemy has a corresponding declaration of praise.

4.1.3 Ecclesiastes 8:1

As Stuart Weeks notes regarding Ecclesiastes 8:1, ‘The literal meaning of the Hebrew is not in doubt, but the implication is less clear.’⁵² While observing the

51. Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150: A Commentary* (Augsburg, 1989), 394, follows G. R. Driver’s suggestion to emend **וַיִּאָּר** by dropping the conjunction (and thus the wayyiqtol form) and reading instead **יִאָּר**, a jussive = ‘may light be given’, claiming the authority of one Hebrew ms (from de Rossi) and some versional evidence (especially Pesh and Tg; G. R. Driver, ‘Psalm 118:27 – **אֲסוּרֵי חַג**’, *Textus* 7 (1969): 130–131, <https://doi.org/10.1163/2589255X-00701010>). This is rightly resisted (so e.g. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150*, Hermeneia (Fortress, 2011), 230 n. t). It is noteworthy that there are only two examples of the form **וַיִּאָּר** in the HB, as noted by the Masoretes: here, and Exod 14:20, referring to the pillar of cloud – the Masoretic notation drawing attention to this suggestive intertext between the event at the Red Sea and the Psalm which is the climax to the Egyptian Hallel.

52. Stuart Weeks, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ecclesiastes. Volume 2: Commentary on Ecclesiastes 5.7–12.14* (T&T Clark, 2022), 317, <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780567666567>. The trajectory of the idiom sketched on p. 318 towards spiritual/cognitive enlightenment in the DSS further inclines this text away from the theological formula.

linguistic overlap with sayings associated with Numbers 6:25, Weeks is inclined to distinguish those exclusively theological sayings to do with ‘showing favour’ from this instance in Qoheleth. He is more impressed here with parallels to do with physical ‘animation’, such as the “‘brightening” of the eyes’ that comes with ‘being alive (Prov 29:13) or as the result of respite (Ezra 9:8)’.⁵³

Weeks’s judgement is sound: the context of Ecclesiastes 8:1, too, is very different from the theological uses examined thus far. There is nothing of the danger or oppression that accompanies most of our sayings, nor any sense of shelter or safety. It rather has to do with understanding and insight, and the parallels that Weeks points to on the more mundane or human level fill out the significance of the saying in Ecclesiastes. It is, then, equally the case that the converse is also true: the significance and rationale of the theological sayings are not to be connected to or sought in Ecclesiastes 8:1.

4.2 Extra-biblical parallels

Several substantial studies identify and draw out the Mesopotamian parallels to the shining of God’s face.⁵⁴ These demonstrate that this biblical formula has comparators in the cognate literature. The Akkadian equivalent uses *namāru* (‘to dawn, brighten, illuminate’⁵⁵) in conjunction with *pānū* = ‘face’. Cohen adduces a number of texts to argue that our idiom is semantically equivalent to a number of cheered up body parts (so liver and heart as well as face) all of which yield the notion of benevolent rejoicing:

Thus, for example, in a 12th century B.C.E [sic] Akkadian boundary stone (*kudurru*), we find a statement of faith that joyously, the god Enlil looked favourably in a steadfast way upon Nebuchadrezzar I: *ina nummur pañišu damqūti ina būnīšu namrūti* ‘with his (Enlil’s) beautiful radiant face, with his (Enlil’s) shining countenance’.⁵⁶

Cohen utilises these parallels for the most part to argue that the six verbs of the Priestly Blessing should not be understood, contra Fishbane, as six distinct actions, ‘but rather as three composite actions’,⁵⁷ joining ‘attitude’ to

53. Weeks, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes 5.7–12.14*, 317.

54. Especially Chavel’s ‘The Face of God’, Aster’s *The Unbeatable Light*, and Chaim Cohen, ‘The Biblical Priestly Blessing (Num. 6:24–26) in the Light of Akkadian Parallels’, *TA* 20.2 (1993): 228–238, <https://doi.org/10.1179/tav.1993.1993.2.228>, which treats our formula specifically on pp. 230–233.

55. *CAD: N, Part 1*, XI/1:216.

56. Cohen, ‘The Biblical Priestly Blessing’, 230–231.

57. Cohen, ‘The Biblical Priestly Blessing’, 228.

‘consequence’.⁵⁸ That may be, although this nuance does not significantly shift the sense of these actions.

What I find more striking for our formula in particular is that it occurs with as great, if not greater, frequency with human subjects than deities (at least so far as collected citations suggest). This contrasts markedly with the biblical texts, where there are only one or two examples of ‘the shining of the *human* face’ in contrast to the more frequent ‘shining of the *divine* face’. Another difference from our formula (less so for the ‘lifting of the face’ which Cohen also discusses) is found in the nature of the sayings preserved. Unless I have missed it, in no case is the Akkadian language employed in a wish or prayer – rather, it is in every case a statement or report of experience. (Note how Cohen styles the example cited above as ‘a statement of faith’.)

The picture that emerges from these Akkadian parallels, then, is one in which this formula is employed (generally, or even exclusively) to depict enjoyment of the beatific life or, as Cohen phrases it, ‘a symbol of joy and contentment’ in describing the scenario ‘throughout the ancient Near East’.⁵⁹

Aster’s study of *melammu* or ‘radiance’ phenomena comes at a somewhat greater linguistic distance, but it is still worth registering his broad conclusion, noting that he also advocates methodological rigour in discerning the framing and value of common language. He concludes by glossing *melammu* as: ‘the covering, outer layer, or outward appearance of a person, being, or object, or rays emanating from a person or being, that demonstrate the irresistible or supreme power of that person, being, or object’.⁶⁰

The parallels are suggestive, then, but not, in my judgement, determinative for understanding the nuance of the formula in our biblical corpus of texts.

5. Theology (by way of conclusion)

It is time to draw these threads of investigation together before making some attempt to relate these results to some constructive engagement with the theological use to which the ‘shining of God’s face’ formula may be put. The biblical parallels set alongside our central corpus went some way to reinforcing a pattern that was observed also in our core texts, while the extra-biblical parallels (at least the closest ones) provided something by way of contrast.

‘Smile,’ ‘gracious favour’ – some form of benevolent disposition is usually put forward as an explication of the ‘shining of God’s face’ formula. To be

58. Cohen, ‘The Biblical Priestly Blessing’, 236.

59. Cohen, ‘The Biblical Priestly Blessing’, 230.

60. Aster, *The Unbeatable Light*, 352.

sure, such suggestions have some limited value, but I would contend that they remain nonetheless just that: limited. It seems to me such abstractions fail to take sufficient account of the contexts in which the formula is found, and the nature of the speech acts which give it utterance.⁶¹

This investigation into the language of our small corpus uncovers its consistent environment and disposition. The language is in every case that of prayer or volition. The environment of the prayer or speaker is one of lack or need, with that need varying from an expression of yearning (Ps 67:2; 119:135) to a cry for deliverance with some degree of distress (Ps 31:17; 80; Dan 9:17). The non-formulaic parallels within the HB mostly display this same setting, with the exception of Ps 118:27, although even here this (lone?) *statement* of experience of God's shining face comes as a response to appeals for saving and delivering. The rather surprising inference is that the formula imploring God that his face shine is not, itself, an *expression* of presence: it is a prayer that accompanies some kind of *experience* of absence. It expresses a desire for God's presence – especially God's *saving* presence – rather than giving voice to the experience of divine benevolence (the typical gloss on our idiom in commentaries).

It thus seems to me that 'benevolence' is an insipid shorthand for the shining of God's face. Something more than eliciting a divine 'smile' is the object of the petition: God's shining face has a capacious connotation, in that by experiencing just this aspect of divine presence, so too the petitioner will experience the longed-for deliverance. The contrast with the Mesopotamian parallels are particularly instructive here. Aster's study of the *melammu* phenomena did not, it is fair to say, directly engage the shining face idiom. But, as indicated earlier, the way in which such phenomena are associated with power is suggestive. Studies both theological and exegetical commonly make the association between light and glory, but the link to power is not entirely absent.⁶² What appeared in the Akkadian texts as the assertion of divine approval in 'statements of faith' is seen rather in the HB in pleas for that

61. Some methodological grounding for this claim might be found in Ronald Langacker's account of metaphor, and in what he calls 'cognitive grammar'. Within complex statements built up from simple ones, the semantic value of the simple terms is insufficient to determine the meaning of the complex statement. On the other hand, the setting of the complex statement necessarily invokes its own domains, and not necessarily those of its constituents. Ronald W. Langacker, *Cognitive Grammar: A Basic Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. 51–54, 463–467, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195331967.001.0001>.

62. More on this below, but cf. here especially Marilyn E. Burton, *The Semantics of Glory: A Cognitive Corpus-Based Approach to Hebrew Word Meaning*, SSN 68 (Brill, 2017), 127,

approval which brings deliverance. There is no presumption of divine favour: this, rather, is precisely what the petition seeks.

For the most part, then, the ‘shining of God’s face’ language becomes a vehicle for articulating a desire for deliverance, or in broader terms, ‘salvation’. In surveying a similar cross-section of texts with a view to unpacking the significance of Psalm 27:1a, ‘The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?’ (RSV), Friedhelm Hartenstein draws attention to the ways in which these texts share an interest in the ‘rescuing action of YHWH’ (“‘Rettungshandeln” JHWHs’), especially as an aspect of YHWH’s royal and cosmic rule.⁶³ This dimension is too often overlooked, it seems to me, in many treatments of God’s shining face. Altogether, these observations draw our formula into the sphere of divine absence, rather than the divine presence which a more superficial understanding might suggest.

Still, I would not wish to leave the impression that it is a question *either* of divine presence *or* absence. At one level, this is because I believe it is important to heed Olga Fabrikant-Burke’s contention that divine hiddenness and divine absence are different things, and their distinction needs to be maintained.⁶⁴ The maintenance of this distinction provides helpful nuance and sharpens the observation that our ‘shining of God’s face’ formula/corpus intersects with an experience of divine absence rather than hiddenness (for ‘God’s hidden face [is encountered] not only in situations of divine absence, but also of hostile presence’⁶⁵). This exegetical refinement further deepens the connection with the theological observation that, in any case, God’s presence is ‘complicated’, to use the language of Trevor Hart; reflection on ‘the interplay of divine presence and absence’ leads to the notion of divine ‘presence’ as essentially ‘orientating’, while Hart acknowledges also the persistent sense that it is ‘elusive’.⁶⁶ If God’s presence provides a sense of orientation, seeking the shining of God’s face does yet more than that. Hart writes of Christian theology at this point (and in dialogue with Ingolf Dalferth), but it is equally true, it seems to me, within

171, 281–282, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004342170>, and the brief but noteworthy treatment of Hab 3:4 in connection with רָץ on pp. 217–218.

63. Friedhelm Hartenstein, *Das Angesicht JHWHs: Studien zu seinem höfischen und kultischen Bedeutungshintergrund in den Psalmen und in Exodus 32–34*, FAT 55 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 182–193.

64. Fabrikant-Burke, ‘Rethinking Divine Hiddenness’, 162–164 and *passim*.

65. Fabrikant-Burke, ‘Rethinking Divine Hiddenness’, 164.

66. Trevor Hart, ‘Complicating Presence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on a Theological Question’, in Nathan MacDonald and Isaak de Hulster, ed., *Divine Presence and Absence in Exilic and Post-Exilic Judaism*, FAT 2/61 (Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1–21, esp. 3–4, 15.

the framework of the HB (as well as Old Testament) in the words found in our corpus, for there we find a community whose

lives ... must be lived, furthermore, *coram Deo* – before the face of God himself, and thus in his presence ... For God to *be*, Dalferth reminds us, is, according to Christian theology at least, for God to be *active*, and therefore divine presence is always a matter of God's *becoming present* as the one who acts, whatever the precise mode of that presence and action may be.⁶⁷

I submit, then, that to seek the shining of God's face involves the concept of repair of relationship, in which the felt absence of the saving God gives rise to a petition desiring his presence.

But we might, at this point, sense a twinge of anxiety. Does this interpretation of the corpus neglect its most famous member? On the face of it, the Priestly Blessing does not look like a plea to experience God's saving presence which is so markedly present in the rest of the small corpus. On the other hand, the suggestion of an apotropaic force in its use in antiquity draws the formula's use within the Blessing towards the sphere of salvation. One can go further. At least as it is currently (canonically) framed in the book of Numbers, there is a deep intertwining of divine and priestly activity in the instruction of Numbers 6:22-27, as noted above. The priests speak the words of blessing, but at the behest of YHWH who in turn is the one who acts to bless in response to the priestly words (their obedient response, we might say). Such a recognition invites us to reflect that 'all blessing draws one back to dependence on God', in the words of Richard Briggs.⁶⁸ He goes on:

If we take blessing as the (priestly) invoking of God's good presence – and its various signs – upon the blessed one, then this text draws its readers into the positive aspects of YHWH's presence: a presence that 'shines' and gives a 'peace' that might be imagined as light in the midst of darkness. It is a present blessing in the midst of troubles.⁶⁹

And that, it seems to me, is an entirely appropriate way of situating the shining of God's face with other expressions which more immediately foreground the troubles of those who seek deliverance by this 'lambent presence'.

67. Hart, 'Complicating Presence', 6-7; emphasis original. For the way in which this sense of divine absence inclines towards prayer, cf. Michael Purcell, 'When God Hides His Face: The Inexperience of God', in *The Experience of God: A Postmodern Response*, ed. Kevin Hart and Barbara Wall, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (Fordham University Press, 2005), 113-129, <https://doi.org/10.5422/fso/9780823225187.003.0010>.

68. Briggs, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 228.

69. Briggs, *Theological Hermeneutics*, 230.

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