

לפני, מפני, ומלפני

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The Greek (and English) translations of the biblical Hebrew words לפני (*liphnei*), מפני (*mipenei*), and מלפני (*meliphnei*) are rather erratic. To investigate this conundrum, we first determined their frequency in the Hebrew biblical texts.

The Hebrew three letter-sequence of: פני (pni) is found in words that appear in 2010 biblical verses. In 1037 of them it appears in a four-letter sequence of: לפני (lpni), and of this subgroup there are 71 verses containing words where we find the five-letter sequence: מלפני (mlpni). There is also another subgroup of 297 verses, where we find the four-letter sequence of מפני (mpni).

For purposes of analysis we first chose from the words that contains the three-letter sequence: פני (pni), only those that have the four-letter sequence of פניך (pnich). Words that contain this four-letter sequence appear in 217 biblical verses, and of them the five-letter sequence לפניך (lpnich) is found in words that appear in 112 biblical verses. Of this five-letter sequence words, there are 10 that contain the six-letter sequence מלפניך (mlpnich). There are also 30 biblical verses with words that contain another five-letter sequence: מפניך (mpnich).

In the Book of Numbers we read: ויאמר משה: קומה יהוה ויפצו איביך, וינסו משנאיך מפניך - “And Moses said: Rise up, YHWH, and let Your enemies be scattered; and let them that hate You flee before You” (Num 10:35).

Yet in the Book of Deuteronomy we find:

יתן יהוה את-איביך הקמים עליך, נגפים לפניך: בדרך אחד יצאו אליך, ובשבעה דרכים ינוסו לפניך.

“YHWH will cause your enemies that rise up against you to be smitten before you; They shall come out against you one way, and shall flee before you seven ways” (Deu 28:7).

The English translator of this verses assumed that here both מפניך (*mipanecha*) and לפניך (*lephanecha*) mean “before you.” The Greeks translated here לפניך (*lephanecha*) as “from before you” which is the more common translation of the word מלפניך (*milephanecha*) (e.g. 2 Sam 7:15; Ps 17:2).

However, the use of the verb: “flee” with both: מפניך (*mipanecha*) and לפניך (*lephanecha*) suggests that one is a spelling error of the other, or that some of the biblical writers (or of the late scribes) assumed that both words are synonymous.

In the Book of Exodus we read:

ושלחתי את-הצרעה לפניך; וגרשה את-החוי את-הכנעני ואת-החתי-מלפניך.
“And I will send the hornet before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite, from before you” (Ex 23:28).

Yet in the following verses we find:

לא אגרשנו מפניך בשנה אחת: פן-תהיה הארץ שממה, ורבה עליך חית השדה.
מעט מעט אגרשנו מפניך,

“I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the beasts of the field multiply against you.

By little and little I will drive them out from before you” (Ex 23:29-30; see also: Ex34:11; Deu 33:27).

Here we have an association between the verb “drive out” with both: מפניך (*mipanecha*) and מלפניך (*milephanecha*). The English translator of these verses assumed that here both words mean “from before you”, while the Greek translator assumed that both meant “before you.” It is also possible that מלפניך (*milephanecha*) is a letter-insertion error of מפניך (*mipanecha*) - “from you” or vice versa. Another possibility is that already a biblical writer (or a late scribe) assumed that there is no difference between these words.

In the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

אל-תאמר בלבבך, בהדף יהוה אלהיך אתם מלפניך לאמר, בצדקתי הביאני יהוה לרשת את-
הארץ הזאת: וברשעת הגוים האלה יהוה מורישם מפניך.
לא בצדקתך ובישר לבבך, אתה בא לרשת את-ארצם: כי ברשעת הגוים האלה יהוה אלהיך
מורישם מפניך,

“Speak not you in your heart, after that *YHWH* your God had thrust them out from before you, saying: For my righteousness *YHWH* had brought me in to possess this land; whereas for the wickedness of these nations *YHWH* does drive them out from before you.

Not for your righteousness, or for the uprightness of your heart, do you go in to possess their land; but for the wickedness of these nations *YHWH* your God does drive them out from before you” (Deu 9:4-5).

Yet three chapters earlier we find:

ועשית הישר והטוב בעיני יהוה-למען ייטב לך, ובאת וירשת את-הארץ הטבה אשר-נשבע
יהוה לאבתך
להדף את-כל-איביך מפניך, כאשר דבר יהוה.

“And you shall do that which is right and good in the sight of *YHWH*; that it may be well with you, and that you may go in and possess the good land which *YHWH* swore unto your fathers,

To thrust out all your enemies from before you, as *YHWH* had spoken” (Deu 6:18-19).

Here we have an association between the verb: “thrust out” with both: מפניך (*mipanecha*) and מלפניך (*milephanecha*). The English translator assumed that also here both מפניך (*mipanecha*) and מלפניך (*milephanecha*) mean “from before you”, while the Greek translator assumed that both meant “before you.”

In the Book of Deuteronomy we read:

יהוה אלהיך הוא עבר לפניך, הוא-ישמיד את-הגוים האלה מלפניך
“*YHWH* your God, He will go over before you; He will destroy these nations from before you” (Deu 31:3).

Yet in the Book of Samuel we find:

ואהיה עמך בכל אשר הלכת, ואכרתה את-כל-איביך מפניך;
“And I have been with you whithersoever you did go, and have cut off all your enemies from before you” (2 Sam 7:9; see also: Deu 12:29, 30; 1 Ch 17:8).

Here we have an association between the verbs: “destroy” and “cut off” with both: מפניך (*mipanecha*) and מלפניך (*milephanecha*). Here again the English translator assumed that both words, מלפניך (*milephanecha*), and מפניך (*mipanecha*) mean “from before you.”

These examples suggest that in many cases the differences between the words: לפניך (*lepheneicha*), מפניך (*mipaneicha*), and מלפניך (*milephaneicha*) were already lost prior to the time of the Greek translation of the Bible (2nd century BC).

To find out whether these conclusions also apply beyond the selected subset of words containing the four letter sequence פניך (pnich), we investigated also another subgroup of the three-letter sequence פני (pni), those where the sequence פני (pni) is followed by the word יהוה - "YHWH."

There are 258 verses that contain פני יהוה (pni YHWH). Of them 226 verses contain the four-letter sequence (followed by the word YHWH): לפני יהוה (lpni YHWH). Of them there are 14 verses that contain the five-letter sequence (followed by the word YHWH): מלפני יהוה (mlpni YHWH). There are also 9 other verses which contain the four-letter sequence (followed by the word YHWH): מפני יהוה (mpni YHWH).

The Psalmist wrote:

אז ירננו כל-עצי-יער.
לפני יהוה, כי בא-כי בא לשפט הארץ:

“Then shall all the trees of the wood sing for joy;
Before YHWH, for He is come; for He is come to judge the earth” (Ps 96:12-13).

When the Chronicler repeats these words he writes:

אז ירננו עצי היער: מלפני יהוה-כי-בא לשפוט את-הארץ.
“Then shall the trees of the wood sing for joy, before YHWH, for He is come to judge the earth” (1 Ch 16:33).

The Greek (and English) translation of both these verses indicates that certain translators assumed that both: לפני יהוה (*liphenei YHWH*) and מלפני יהוה (*meliphenei YHWH*) mean: “before YHWH.” However, we do not know whether a letter-substitution error occurred here, or whether the writer of the Book of Chronicles preferred the words מלפני יהוה (*meliphenei YHWH*) (see: 1 Ch 16:33; 2 Ch 19:2; 33:23) over לפני יהוה (*liphenei YHWH*).

In the Book of Chronicles we hear God’s words to King Josiah:

יען רך-לבבך ותכנע מלפני אלהים, בשמעך את-דבריו על-המקום הזה ועל-ישביו, ותכנע לפני ותקרע את-בגדיך ותבך לפני; וגם-אני שמעתי, נאם-יהוה.

“Because your heart was tender, and you did humble yourself before God, when you heard His words against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, and had humbled yourself

before Me, and had rent your clothes, and wept before Me; I also have heard you, said YHWH (2 Ch 34:27).

It appears that the English (but not the Greek) translator assumed that here both **מלפני** (*meliphnei*) and **לפני** (*lephanai*) mean “before.”

In the Book of Kings we find similar words:

יען רך-לבבך ותכנע מפני יהוה, בשמעך אשר דברתי על-המקום הזה ועל-ישביו להיות לשמה ולקללה, ותקרע את-בגדיך ותבכה לפני; וגם אנכי שמעתי נאם-יהוה.

“Because your heart was tender, and you did humble yourself before YHWH, when you heard what I spoke against this place, and against the inhabitants thereof, that they should become an astonishment and a curse, and you had rent your clothes, and wept before Me, I also have heard you, said YHWH” (2 Ki 22:19).

Although the English translator assumed that here both **מפני** (*mipenei*) and **לפני** (*lephanai*) also mean “before.” The Greeks translated here **מפני יהוה** (*mipenei YHWH*) as: “from before the Lord” which suggests that they believed that **מפני יהוה** (*mipenei YHWH*) is a letter-deletion error of **מלפני יהוה** (*meliphenei YHWH*). However, it is not certain that here we have a letter-deletion error or whether the writer of **מפני** (*mipenei*) (2 Ki 22:19) believed that it is synonymous to **מלפני** (*meliphnei*) (2 Ch 34:27; see also: 2 Ch 33:12, 23). We should also notice that the combination **מפני יהוה** (*mipenei YHWH*) does not appear in the Book of Chronicles.

The analysis of biblical verses that contain **לפני** (*liphenei*), **מפני** (*mipenei*), and **מלפני** (*meliphnei*) in combination with “YHWH”, indicate that here again the differences between them were already lost prior to the time of the Greek translation of the Bible (2nd century BC).