



## THE DEAD AND THEIR IMAGES: AN EGYPTIAN ETYMOLOGY FOR HEBREW ׀ֹב

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### ABSTRACT

*The term ׀ֹב has long been a philological mystery for scholars of classical Hebrew and Israelite religion. It does not seem to mean the same thing in all instances, and its etymology is unclear and contested. The present article argues that an Egyptian etymology for the term is most likely, and that it refers both to the dead and to cultic images of them used in necromancy and ancestor worship.*

The mysterious term ׀ֹב has long been a philological crux for scholars of classical Hebrew and Israelite religion. Its etymology is unclear and has been explained with reference to Hittite, Arabic, and common Semitic stock (see below), but none of these guesses have ever commanded a scholarly consensus. This article argues that the most likely etymology is Egyptian, demonstrating again the significance of Egypt’s cultural contact with ancient Israel, which often goes underappreciated by biblical scholars.<sup>1</sup>

An accessible *entrée* into the mystery of term ׀ֹב is provided by the biblical narrative of 1 Samuel 28:3–25, in which Israel’s King Saul, desperate for supernatural foresight about the outcome of a looming military battle, consults a necromancer at Endor. The woman Saul consults is called a *ba׀ֹlat-׀ֹב*, a “mistress” of *something*. She clearly has the ability to contact the dead, for she successfully raises the spirit of Samuel for Saul. Given the intriguing picture of the woman in this text, it should come as no surprise that scholars have puzzled over the interpretation of her title, and particularly the nature of the ׀ֹב as well as the associated term *yiddē׀ֹnî*, which also appears within this pericope (1 Samuel 28:3, 9). There are three common interpretations of ׀ֹב (spelled ׀ֹב in consonantal text; pl. ׀ֹבֹת / ׀ֹבֹת), which occurs sixteen times in the Hebrew Bible:<sup>2</sup>

(1) The ׀ֹבֹת are spirits of a dead person that can be consulted for necromantic purposes.<sup>3</sup> In Isaiah 19:3, the ׀ֹבֹת are classified with the *׀ֹtîm*, which, although a *hapax legomenon* in the Hebrew Bible, is almost certainly cognate with the Mesopotamian *eṭemmu* “ghosts.” Furthermore, Leviticus 20:27 condemns any person “who has in them an ׀ֹב,” almost certainly referring to one who channels a spirit of the dead. In this case, the term has been related to *׀ֹב* (also ׀ֹב in consonantal

text), “father,” and thus to the ancestor cult. The two words have the same consonantal spelling in the plural, *׀ֹבֹת*, though they are vocalized differently: *׀ֹבֹת* and *׀ֹבֹת*. The Canaanite vowel shift *ā > ō* and/or a consistent scribal emendation to differentiate the two words might account for the different vocalizations. A different etymology was offered by William F. Albright, who theorized that *׀ֹב* means “revenant/one-who-returns,” based on Arabic *׀ֹב*, “to return”;<sup>4</sup> however, this finds no support from any ancient Semitic cognate. Given the disfavor into which Arabic etymologies have generally fallen of late, Albright’s theory has won a remarkable amount of support in recent years<sup>5</sup>—which in our view reflects the weakness of the other proposed etymologies.

(2) An *׀ֹב* is a piece of equipment used in consultations with the dead. A list in 2 Kings 23:24 includes *׀ֹבֹת* and *yiddē׀ֹnîm* among cultic objects that Josiah removed (literally “burned” [*׀ֹב׀ֹר* in *pi׀ֹel* stem]), which provides the best evidence that such terms refer to objects rather than spirits of the dead or necromancers. The most widely accepted argument for the “object” theory is the contention that it is cognate with Akkadian *apu*, “pit,” which is attested in a few necromantic texts, and also with Hittite *a-a-pi*.<sup>6</sup> However, the supporting theory that Ugaritic *׀ֹב* should be understood as “god of the pit” has not found acceptance (it is usually understood to mean “god of the father”),<sup>7</sup> nor do any of the references in Hebrew necessitate the interpretation “pit.” Perhaps most importantly, in distinction from Hebrew *׀ֹב*, there seems to be no instance in which *apu* or cognates refer to spirits of the dead; the *apu* is only a pit in which they can be summoned.

(3) *׀ֹב* is a technical term for a necromantic diviner (modern biblical translations usually render it as “medium”), in which

case the title in 1 Samuel 28 would be somewhat redundant (“mistress of diviners”?) and would not suit her actual role (no other diviners are mentioned as working with her). We do not find any other passages in the Hebrew Bible that necessitate the interpretation “medium” or “necromancer.”<sup>8</sup>

Since the first two interpretations of *ʿwb/ʿb* as “ancestor’s spirit” and “cult object” seem possible, and since the etymology still remains unclear, we would like to suggest a new explanation for the term, based on the Egyptian cognate *ʿb(w)t*. If true, this would be only one of many Egyptian loanwords (or cognates) in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>9</sup> Not only is the spelling of the term identical with the Hebrew plural, *ʿb(w)t* also has a range of meanings that meshes well with the range of biblical uses, since it may denote both a dead ancestor and a cult image. Furthermore, the term is associated with the Egyptians in the Bible: in Isaiah 19:3 they are said to consult “their *ʿbwt*”:

The spirit of the Egyptians within them will be emptied out,  
And I will confound their plans;  
They will consult the idols and the spirits of the dead  
And the *ʿbôt* and the familiar spirits (*yiddēʿônîm*).

Brian Schmidt argues that this verse is simply a formulaic (Deuteronomistic) indictment.<sup>10</sup> Yet we see here a more compelling interpretive option, namely, that this instance of *ʿbôt* reveals the Egyptian provenance of a term that was adopted into Hebrew.

The typical translation of *ʿb(w)t* in early Egyptian texts, as given in the *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache*, is “family,” or sometimes “household.” In the Coffin Texts, the deceased aspires to be reunited with “the *ʿb(w)t*, the father, the mother, the parents . . . the in-laws, the children, the spouses, the concubines, the servants . . . everything that returns to a man in the necropolis.”<sup>11</sup> Because the term can refer to the living and the dead alike, a phrase from the Coffin Texts such as *wrw nw ʿb(w)t* can sometimes also be translated “the nearest ancestors.”<sup>12</sup> Dmitri Meeks adduced a number of examples, largely from funerary inscriptions, in which the translation “family” does not quite fit; he suggests “domestic servants.”<sup>13</sup> Detlef Franke would later disagree with Meeks’ assessment; Franke acknowledged the difficulty and complexity of the term’s use, but affirmed the older understanding, “family.”<sup>14</sup> More specifically, he noted the term’s connotation of “patriarchal extended family household.”<sup>15</sup> Not coincidentally, that definition accords with the patrilineal group of ancestors that would have been honored in a cult of the dead—and as we shall see, many of the texts under consideration stem from mortuary contexts. Perhaps part of the reason for the disagreement among Egyptologists is that a nuance of the term has been overlooked. In our estimation, the use of *ʿbwt* as “family” should be understood to include “ancestors” in a number of these occurrences.

In Coffin Texts Spell 149, the deceased is given the power to become a falcon and destroy his enemy: “See, I have come and I have brought my foe, I have crushed his *ʿb(w)t*; I have thrown down his house, I have crushed his surviving children, I have crushed his cultivator who is in his field.”<sup>16</sup> This text contains descriptions of the conquest of the deceased over the estate of his enemy. The litany proceeds from the *ʿb(w)t*, indicating the enemy’s entire family—both living and dead—to the general description of “his house” and then to the particular surviving remnants of the family, the children and cultivators.

Meeks also points to BM 159, a mortuary stele of the chief priest Rudjahau, in which the deceased says, “I was a great one in his village, a rich man in his house, a lofty pillar for his *ʿb(w)t*.”<sup>17</sup> The imagery of the decedent as pillar refers to support and care for his extended family,<sup>18</sup> both living and dead. There is also the formulaic affirmation, common in autobiographical documents, that the author was “kind to his *ʿb(w)t*.”<sup>19</sup> It seems natural that a person who desired to be cared for in the afterlife, should in preparation assert that he or she had always been concerned for the well-being of the dead.

In late Egyptian, one can find numerous occurrences of the word *ʿbwt*, “form,” which comes from the same root *ʿb*.<sup>20</sup> The term was used interchangeably with *tʿt*, “image.”<sup>21</sup> *ʿbwt* appears with a papyrus scroll determinative indicating an abstract concept as well as with the upright mummiform effigy determinative, designating the mummy, statue, likeness, or form of a person. Thus in Late Egyptian orthography, *ʿb(w)t* “family” and *ʿbwt* “image” can be represented in the same way except, of course, for the determinatives: the seated man and seated woman determinatives following *ʿb(w)t*. It is impossible to know for certain if the two terms were homophones, but it seems likely that they were.

In any case, one wonders how and why this semantic shift from “family” or “household” to “form” obtains in late Egyptian.<sup>22</sup> Or, to put it differently, how can *ʿb(w)t* continue to indicate “family” while also meaning “form”? Indeed, in some late Egyptian contexts, were it not for the determinative, *ʿb(w)t* could be read as either “family” or “form.” Seti’s dedicatory stele for his deceased father, Ramesses I, reads: “I did not banish his *ʿb(w)t* from before me, but I reunited the survivors for a royal meal.”<sup>23</sup> In the context, “survivors” seems to confirm the sense of “family.” However, given Seti’s larger concern in this text for the establishment and provisioning of his dead father’s image—again, were it not for the determinatives—reading *ʿb(w)t* as “image” would also make good sense. In light of the Egyptians’ affinity for wordplay and puns,<sup>24</sup> it seems likely that in at least some instances, the double entendre would have been intentional.

As we contend above, Middle Egyptian *ʿb(w)t* refers to both living and dead family members in a number of contexts. And indeed, in some contexts, dead family alone seems to be the main referent of *ʿb(w)t*. This sense of *ʿb(w)t* as dead ancestors provides the link that facilitated the semantic shift from “family” to “form” in Late Egyptian. How else would the deceased ancestors be represented except through their forms?

In late Egyptian, there are also mortuary connotations of the *ḥwt* that can be evoked in several contexts. For example, sacrificial animals are identified as the *ḥwt* “images” of the enemies of the gods. The dead animals are the form of the dead enemies. Since *ḥwt* appears often with the (upright) mummiform effigy determinative one must certainly conclude that the term could signify some form of a wrought image of the dead.

Thus, taken from a synchronic perspective, Late Egyptian *ḥwt* has a dual sense of “ancestor” and “statue/image.” This particular semantic field makes the term a strong candidate for being cognate with Hebrew *ʾōbōt*. Indeed, the evidence from Late Egyptian suggests that Hebrew *ʾōbōt* derives from Egyptian *ḥwt* and means “the dead ancestors who could be represented through images.” We would view the emergence of the singular *ʾōb*, as found in 1 Samuel 28, as a subsequent intra-Hebraic development.

Ancient Israelites did have figurines representing ancestors that were used for divination: in other contexts, these are called *tērāpīm* (*teraphim*) (Ezek. 21:26; Zech. 10:2).<sup>25</sup> The *teraphim* were clearly physical objects of some sort (Gen. 31:19–35; Judg. 17:5, 18:14–20; 2 Kings 19:11–17).<sup>26</sup> They have frequently been compared to the Nuzi *ilanū*, “household gods,” a term that may be used either for divinized ancestors or the statues that represent them.<sup>27</sup> There is reason to think that the *teraphim* were once an accepted part of Israelite family religion.<sup>28</sup> They are never condemned in the legal codes, but only in 1 Samuel 15:23 and in the report of their removal by Josiah in 2 Kings 23:24. Quite plausibly, *ʾōbōt* is another term for the same figures.

Yet the images of the ancestors may have been those that were conjured as well, not created by human hands. As Jan Assmann observed, in Egyptian mortuary-cult art, “[o]ne principle reigned supreme: a depiction was not a depiction of a body, it was itself a body. . . . [T]here was no distinction between corpse and statue.”<sup>29</sup> First Samuel 28 indicates that the summoned spirit of Samuel was visible, though only to the woman. Saul asks her what he looks like and she describes him as an old man wrapped in a robe. Thus the *baʾālat-ʾōb* was a “mistress of image of the dead” because she could control them and summon their images.

The same principle may have obtained in Judah: if the Israelite *ʾōbōt* sometimes appeared to be numinous entities, and sometimes cultic objects, then perhaps the term could denote either or both. This situation finds a better-known analogy in Hebrew *ʾāšērā* (Asherah), generally thought to be a goddess who was symbolized by a wooden pole. The term *ʾāšērā* appears in the Bible indicating now one, now the other. Perhaps, in the cases of both *ʾōbōt* and *ʾāšērā*, the Bible reflects a diachronic shift in the sense of the term, but as Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger observed, divinities and their symbols were often interchangeable; the Asherah pole was de-anthropomorphized in certain periods of Israelite and Judean iconography.<sup>30</sup> They called this process “the substitution of the goddess by the entities through which she worked.”<sup>31</sup> We suggest that the *ʾōbōt*, too, were both symbols and numinous beings.

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#### NOTES

1. We would like to thank David L. Petersen, Brent A. Strawn, and especially Gay Robins for graciously taking the time to read earlier drafts of this article, which had its origins in an idea in the dissertation of Christopher B. Hays: “I Set Before You Death and Life’: The Rhetoric of Death in First Isaiah” (Ph.D. diss., Emory University, 2008). As always, their comments were incisive and instructive. Of course, we alone are responsible for all opinions and any errors in this essay.
2. See Joseph Blenkinsopp, “Deuteronomy and the Politics of Post-Mortem Existence,” *Vetus Testamentum* 45 (1995): 1–16.
3. Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 219 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986): 253–254; Manfred Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquin Sanmartin, “Ugaritisch *ILIB* und hebräisch *ʾ(W)B* ‘Totengeist,’” *Ugarit Forschungen* 6 (1974): 450–451; Hedwige Rouillard and Josep Tropper, “*Tṛpym*, rituels de guérison et culte des ancêtres d’après 1 Samuel XIX 11–17 et les textes parallèles d’Assur et de Nuzi,” *Vetus Testamentum* 37 (1987): 340–361; Johan Lust, “On Wizards and Prophets,” in *Studies on Prophecy: A Collection of Twelve Papers*, Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 135; Hans-Peter Müller, “Das Wort Von Totengeistern (Jes 8,19f.),” *Die Welt des Orients* 8 (1975–76): 65–76; Adolphe Lods, *La croyance à la vie future et le culte des morts dans l’antiquité Israélite* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1906), 248. William F. Albright quite plausibly suggested restoring *ʾōbōt* for *ʾābōt* in Job 8:8–10 in *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 142.
4. William F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, 5th ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 202, n. 32.
5. E.g., Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit*, Harvard Semitic Monographs 39 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 56, 113, n. 36; Brian B. Schmidt, *Israel’s Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition*, *Forschungen zum Alten Testament* 11 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 151. For a critique, see Lust 1974, 135.
6. Harry A. Hoffner, “Second Millennium Antecedents to the Hebrew *ʾōb*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 (1967): 385–401; Maurice Vieyra, “Les Noms du ‘Mundus’ en Hittite et en Assyrien et la Pythonisse d’Endor,” *Revue Hittite et Asiatique*

- 19 (1961): 47–55; Hoffner, “בּוּיָא,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* 1:130–134. Other possibilities include a bag (Job 32:19) and a “whirring stick” (H. Schmidt, “*ʾw̄b*,” in *Vom Alten Testament: Festschrift K. Marti*, Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 41 [Giessen: Töpelmann, 1925], 253–254).
7. Lust 1974, 136–137; Dietrich, Loretz, and Sanmartin 1974, 450–451.
  8. The possible etymological connection between *yiddēʾōnī* and Akk. *mudu*, “scholar” (P. Jensen, “Akkadisch *mudu*,” *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 35 [1924]: 124–132; *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 666a; *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 393) is too tenuous to form a basis to define both Hebrew terms.
  9. See, e.g., Yoshiyuki Muchiki, *Egyptian Proper Names and Loanwords in North-West Semitic* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999); Thomas Lambdin, “Egyptian Loan Words in the Old Testament,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 73 (1953): 145–155.
  10. Schmidt 1994, 157.
  11. Dmitri Meeks, “Notes de Lexicographie,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 26 (1974): 56.
  12. Meeks 1974, 59.
  13. Meeks 1974, 52–65.
  14. Detlef Franke, *Altägyptische Verwandtschaftsbezeichnungen im Mittleren Reich* (Hamburg: Verlag Borg, 1983), 277–288.
  15. Franke 1983, 288.
  16. Raymond O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts: Spells 1–1185 & Indexes* (London: Aris & Phillips, 2004), 128. Faulkner translates *ʒb(w)t* as “family.” Note also Spell 147, “As for any soul or any god who shall cause N’s *ʒb(w)t* to be taken from him, N shall cause his head to be broken” (124). Cf. Meeks 1974, 56.
  17. See Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Autobiographies Chiefly of the Middle Kingdom: A Study and an Anthology*, Orbis biblicus et orientalis 84. (Fribourg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 72.
  18. See Juan Carlos Moreno García, “La gestion sociale de la mémoire dans l’Égypte du III<sup>e</sup> millénaire: Les tombes des particuliers, entre emploi privé et idéologie publique” in Martin Fitzenreiter and Michael Herb (eds.), *Dekorierte Grabanlagen im Alten Reich: Methodik und Interpretation*, Internet-Beiträge zur Ägyptologie und Sudanarchäologie 6 (London: Golden House Publications, 2006), 215–242. Online: [http://www2.hu-berlin.de/nilus/net-publications/ibaes6/publikation/ibaes6-moreno\\_garc%EDa.pdf](http://www2.hu-berlin.de/nilus/net-publications/ibaes6/publikation/ibaes6-moreno_garc%EDa.pdf).
  19. Meeks 1974, 58.
  20. Meeks 1974, 64.
  21. Jean Yoyotte, “Hera d’Héliopolis et le Sacrifice Humain,” *Écoles Pratiques des Hautes Études, Ve section, Annuaire Résumés des Conférences et Travaux* 89 (1980–81): 48.
  22. On the various forms of semantic changes, see E. C. Traugott, “Semantic Change: Bleaching, Strengthening, Narrowing, Extension,” in Keith Brown (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, 2nd ed., vol. 11 (Amsterdam: Elsevier), 124–131.
  23. Meeks 1974, 62. See Kenneth A. Kitchen, *Ramesside Inscriptions Translated and Annotated: Translations*, vol. I, *Ramesses I, Sethos I and Contemporaries* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 112:11.
  24. See, e.g., Antonio Loprieno, “Puns and Word Play in Ancient Egyptian,” in Scott B. Noegel (ed.), *Puns and Pundits: Wordplay in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2000), 3–20; also Scott Noegel, *Nocturnal Ciphers: The Allusive Language of Dreams in the Ancient Near East*, American Oriental Series 89 (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 2007), 89.
  25. For an excellent review of the scholarship and critical issues, see Karel van der Toorn and Theodore Lewis in “תְּרַפִּים,” in G. Johannes Botterweck (ed.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 15. Trans. David E. Green and Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006), 777–789. The size and number of the *teraphim* are apt to cause confusion. In Genesis 31, Rachel can hide the *teraphim* underneath her, and they are clearly plural, whereas in 1 Samuel 19, it is singular and apparently large enough to function as a dummy for David. Most likely the term was frozen and applied to any representation of any size of an ancestral god.
  26. Also like many terms surrounding the cult of the dead, the *tērāpīm* may have suffered some scribal emendation, if the term comes from *ʾtṛpʾ* (like the *rephaʾim*) but with the loss of the final *aleph*. For a survey of the more than half-dozen suggestions about the etymology, see van der Toorn and Lewis 2006, 778–79.
  27. See recently Rouillard and Tropper 1987, 340–361.
  28. Herbert Chanan Brichto suggests that the *teraphim* were not a threat because they were used for *veneration* of ancestors rather than worship, but this is a doubtful distinction (“Kin, Cult, Land and Afterlife,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 44 [1973]: 44). Note Jacob’s disposal of “foreign gods” in Genesis 35:2–4 (E) and the discussion by Othmar Keel, “Das Vergraben der ‘fremden Götter’ in Genesis XXXV 4b,” *Vetus Testamentum* 23 (1973): 305–336.
  29. Jan Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), 106, 109. Zainab Bahrani has argued similarly about Mesopotamian royal images: “In Babylon and Assyria the king’s image functioned as his valid representation . . . [so as to] blur the division of real and representation” (*The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003], 146).
  30. Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God in Ancient Israel*, trans. T. H. Trapp (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), e.g., 314. See also p. 394: “It is quite improbable that names like ‘Asherah’ . . . always referred to the same reality or concept.”
  31. Keel and Uehlinger 1998, 147.