



BRILL

The Forgotten Meaning of אֹת

Idan Dershowitz | ORCID: 0000-0002-5310-8504

Australian Centre for Jewish Civilisation, Monash University,
VIC, Australia

idan.dershowitz@monash.edu

Na'ama Pat-El | ORCID: 0000-0002-7768-0476

University of Texas, Austin, TX, USA

npatel@austin.utexas.edu

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Abstract

The Hebrew noun אֹת is generally understood to refer to a sign, frequently one that is divine or miraculous. This understanding has long informed interpretations of biblical passages and Hebrew inscriptions. The common definition, we argue, is often inapt and fails to account for many instances of the term. From ancient biblical translations to modern scholarship, myriad ad hoc explanations have been suggested for difficult passages featuring this word, none of which are persuasive. We propose that אֹת has an overlooked constellation of meanings related to proclamations and commitments, which better explains its usage in several biblical passages. Our proposal is further supported by epigraphic and comparative Semitic evidence.

Keywords

semantics – comparative semitic linguistics – signs – miracles – Cain – virgin birth

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“The meaning of a word is its use in the language.”

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*

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1 Introduction

Reconstructing the semantics of ancient words, particularly those conveying cultural and religious concepts, presents a formidable challenge. In the absence of living speakers versed in the ancient language and its associated culture, scholars must do their best with the limited data available to them. Hebrew lexicography, specifically, differs from that of some other ancient languages—Akkadian, for instance—in its reliance on centuries of traditional interpretation. In many cases these ancient traditions are a godsend, but they can also limit scholars’ imaginations and obscure interpretations that might otherwise have been clear.

This difficulty is recognized by scholars, and several new approaches have been proposed to provide a more holistic treatment of biblical lexicography.¹ A leading proponent for change in the semantic study of Biblical Hebrew was James Barr, who decried the overreliance on etymology and cognancy and advocated for the interpretation of words in their context.²

A similar approach is taken by Mizrahi, who suggests that when investigating semantic categories in Biblical Hebrew, three factors, not all of which are linguistic, play a role: the cultural context of the lexeme, the rhetorical strategies of the context in which the lexeme is found, and the date of the text.³ Based on his detailed study of the semantics of the Hebrew noun *יָצַר*, Mizrahi argues that the meaning of the noun in Biblical Hebrew is different from its meaning in post-Biblical Hebrew, contrary to previous scholarship. He shows that even well-studied words can benefit from a nuanced, text-sensitive approach that is informed by both textual criticism and linguistics. Mizrahi makes several important methodological points. He notes that words should be assumed to

1 See, e.g., Shead, *Radical Frame Semantics*.

2 Barr, *Semantics*; and idem, *Comparative Philology*.

3 Mizrahi, “Reconsidering the Semantics.”

have a semantic range, rather than a single meaning, that is conditioned by “a complex set of both linguistic and paralinguistic variables.”⁴ To achieve a proper understanding of a specific lexeme, we must consider not just its immediate context, but also the literary and textual background of the passage.

In this work, we analyze the semantics of the word אֹת in biblical and extra-biblical Hebrew. We suggest that the word has two distinct semantic families: its better-known definitions relating to “sign” and an additional cluster of meanings surrounding “proclamation.” We discuss several biblical passages where “sign” is inapt, and in all these examples, our proposed semantics resolve the exegetical difficulties. We offer comparative evidence from cognate languages to further support our hypothesis.

The approach we take in this study is similar to the one for which Mizrahi advocates. Although the word אֹת has been examined more closely than most other lexemes in the Hebrew Bible, its study often falls into the same pitfalls Mizrahi warns scholars against. As we show, despite the diverse contexts in which the word is used, its perceived meaning is highly restricted and does not permit the semantic range one expects from lexemes in a living language. Furthermore, the broad textual context is often ignored to the detriment of interpretation.

The noun אֹת occurs almost 80 times in the Hebrew Bible, 34 of which are plural (אֹתֹת). It is attested across all periods and genres represented in the Bible. It forms a part of several common collocations, such as אֹת בְּרִית, “the sign of the covenant,” and אֹתֹת וּמִפְתִּים, commonly translated as “signs and wonders,” which appears primarily in the plural.

In biblical Hebrew, the noun אֹת is typically understood to refer to a sign, often miraculous in nature. Helfmeyer, quoting Gunkel, provides a standard understanding: “*oth* ‘sign’ is an action, an occurrence, an event by which a person recognizes, learns, remembers, or perceives the authenticity of something.”⁵ Similar definitions are explicit or implicit in many other dedicated studies, which assume the word means “miracle.”⁶ Such a definition is naturally most obvious in the major biblical dictionaries. The entry in *HALOT*, for instance, reads as follows:

4 Mizrahi, “Reconsidering the Semantics,” 14.

5 Helfmeyer, “אֹת,” 170.

6 E.g., Tur-Sinai (“אֹתֹת in the Bible”) מעשה ניסים or פלא דבר “prophetic act” (e.g., Kasher, “Miracles”), “sign” (e.g., Stolz, “Zeichen und Wunder”).

תִּיָּשׁ [...] sign (frequently || → תִּיָּשׁ; fire sign Lach. 4, 11):

- a) distinguishing mark [...]
- b) standard ? [...]
- c) sign (as a reminder of a duty) [...]
- d) commemorative token [...]
- e) sign confirming the truth of an earlier statement [...]
- f) miraculous sign, which proves someone's ἐξουσία [...]
- g) omen, foretelling the future [...]
- h) warning sign, deterrent [...]
- i) misc.: to offer a sign תִּיָּשׁ, etc. [...]⁷

HALOT's definition suggests two types of sign: a perceptual or physical sign (thing or action), on the one hand, and a prophetic sign (omen), on the other hand. Indeed, most modern scholars accept that prophetic speech in which a future event is foretold can also be regarded as a sign. To be sure, scholars propose many definitions for the word that are conceptually rather distant from "sign," but always with "sign" as the core meaning.⁸

The accepted view that תִּיָּשׁ fundamentally means "sign" is even more pronounced in *BDB*:

תִּיָּשׁ n. m. 79 Ex 4:8 (f. Jos 24:17) sign [...]

1. sign, pledge, token [...]
2. signs, omens promised by prophets as pledges of certain predicted events [...]
3. sign, symbol of prophets [...]
4. signs, miracles, as pledges or attestations of divine presence & interposition [...]
5. signs, memorials [...]
6. sign, pledge of covenant [...]
7. ensigns, standards [...]
8. signs, tokens of changes of weather & times [...]⁹

BDB essentially treats all occurrences of the word as denoting concrete or visual "signs." A similar emphasis on "sign" as the core meaning is found elsewhere as

⁷ *HALOT* 1:26, s.v. תִּיָּשׁ.

⁸ E.g., Fishbane, "Biblical 'OT,'" 217.

⁹ *BDB*, 16–17, s.v. תִּיָּשׁ.

well. Keller, who has undertaken the most comprehensive study of the word אִוֶּת to date, similarly concludes that the word refers to a divine sign from God in practically all occurrences.¹⁰ Other scholars, such as Fox and Helfmeyer, suggest that the word is not exclusively religious, but that it always means “sign.”¹¹ Friebel comments that in prophetic literature, the words אִוֶּת and מִוֶּפֶת refer to “the nonverbal rather than verbal nature of the actions, and their ability to be observed visually.”¹² For him, there is only one example of a verbal message referred to as אִוֶּת, namely 1 Sam 14:10.¹³ Even where there is no indication of performance, Friebel argues that we should assume an action has taken place.¹⁴ The only comprehensive objection to the definition “sign” that we could find is a short article by Rotenberg, which we discuss below.¹⁵

As we show below, although “sign” is certainly *one* of the meanings of the word in the Hebrew Bible, it often does not fit the context, leading to countless improbable explanations. Based on narrative context, syntax, and the semantics of the associated verb, we propose an alternative definition for אִוֶּת, namely a pronouncement or promise—often spoken—rather than a sign of any kind. The commitment expressed by אִוֶּת is often unilateral (e.g., §2.1) but may also be reciprocal (e.g., §2.4). This meaning appears to be more prevalent in earlier texts and diminishes over time as the meaning “sign, miracle” comes to dominate and eventually displace the promissory meaning. Although a few scholars recognize that the meaning of אִוֶּת may be a pronouncement in specific contexts,¹⁶ they fail to draw broader conclusions. We aim to systematically explore the semantic range of אִוֶּת and the impact of the word’s meaning on the understanding of several biblical texts, some of which are quite significant.

10 Keller, *Das Wort OTH*.

11 Fox, “Sign of the Covenant”; Helfmeyer, “אִוֶּת.”

12 Friebel, *Jeremiah’s*, 29–30.

13 Friebel, *Jeremiah’s*, 29–30 n. 53.

14 Friebel, *Jeremiah’s*, 31. Other interpretations have not received scholarly support. Palache (*Semantic Notes*, 3–4), for example, argues the original meaning of אִוֶּת is “agreement,” which he assumes is derived from the root אוה “to desire” (e.g., Deut 5:21 וְלֹא תִחְמַד אִשְׁתּוֹ וְלֹא תִחְמַד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ “you shall not covet your friend’s wife nor shall you desire your friend’s house”). The verbal root אִוֶּת, presumably derived from the noun, means “to agree with.”

15 Rotenberg, “On the Meaning.”

16 Even Moberly, who thinks that אִוֶּת can refer to a speech, comments that “there is no really good biblical example of a saying as a sign” (Moberly, “Mark of Cain,” 19).

2 The Noun אֹת in the Hebrew Bible

2.1 *Rahab's "Sign" (Josh 2)*

Joshua 2 relates the story of the Israelite spies in Jericho and their engagement with a local prostitute, Rahab, who hides them in her house. As the spies set out, Rahab insists they commit to protecting her household when the Israelites attack the city (vv. 12–13), and in response the spies offer her a conditional assurance (v. 14):

וְעַתָּה הַשְׁבְּעוּ נָא לִי בַיהוָה כִּי עָשִׂיתִי עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד וְעִשִׂיתֶם גַּם אִתָּם עִם בֵּית אָבִי חֶסֶד וְנָתַתֶּם לִי אוֹת אֲמֹת: וְהִחַיְתֶם אֶת אָבִי וְאֶת אִמִּי וְאֶת אַחִי וְאֶת אֲחֹתִי [אַחֵיוֹתַי] וְאֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם וְהִצַּלְתֶּם אֶת נַפְשֹׁתֵינוּ מִמָּוֶת: וַיֹּאמְרוּ לָהּ הָאֲנָשִׁים נַפְשֵׁנוּ תַחְתִּיכֶם לְמוֹת אִם לֹא תִגִּידוּ אֶת דְּבָרֵנוּ זֶה וְהָיָה בְּתַת יְהוָה לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וְעִשִׂינוּ עִמָּךְ חֶסֶד וְאֲמֹת:

“Now then, swear to me by YHWH, for I have dealt kindly with you, that you, in turn, will deal kindly with my father’s household. Give me an אֹת אֲמֹת that you will spare my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all their property, and rescue our lives from death.” The men said to her, “Our life for yours, even to the death! If you do not divulge this plan of ours, then when YHWH gives us the land, we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.”

But what is the אֹת that Rahab is requesting here? The phrase אֲמֹת אֹת is typically understood to be a sign of some sort. NJPS translates “a reliable sign,” NRSV opts for “a sign of good faith,” while KJV renders “a true token.”¹⁷ Kaufmann suggests that the sign is the kindness the spies will perform.¹⁸ Fox specifies this putative sign, suggesting that it belongs to the category of “cognition signs,” as opposed to “symbol signs” and “proof signs.”¹⁹ He further particularizes the sign, saying that it belongs to the “identity,” rather than the “mnemonic,” subcategory of “cognition.” All of these variations are unsuitable, however, for the simple reason that no sign is present anywhere in the exchange between Rahab and the spies. Some scholars admit this but offer no explanation for

17 וְנָתַתֶּם לִי אוֹת אֲמֹת is not present in LXX. This absence is evidently a secondary development, given that the Greek version of v. 18 (on which see further below) expounds upon these words, by describing the crimson thread as a σημεῖον “sign.” Perhaps the phrase was lost due to a perceived redundancy with עִם אֲתָם גַּם אִתָּם עִם בֵּית אָבִי חֶסֶד or a scribal error. Kennicott 242 (Allony-Loewinger Vatican 482) is a sort of mirror image, as it lacks וְנָתַתֶּם לִי אוֹת אֲמֹת but includes עִם אֲתָם גַּם אִתָּם עִם בֵּית אָבִי חֶסֶד.

18 Kaufmann, *Joshua*, 97.

19 Fox, “Sign of the Covenant,” 563.

the problem. For instance, Keil and Delitzsch write: “lit. *a sign of truth*, i.e., a sign by which they guaranteed the truth of the kindness for which she asked. This sign consisted in nothing but the solemn oath with which they were to confirm their assurance.”²⁰ Rotenberg likewise perceives the absence of a sign and opts instead for the meaning “instruction,” understanding that Rahab is asking the spies to instruct her what to do when the Israelites invade Jericho.²¹ The instruction, he suggests, comes in v. 18, when the spies tell her to mark her window with the crimson thread. Some scholars suggest that Rahab is seeking a commitment or an oath rather than a sign in v. 12. Dozeman, for example, assumes that the phrase “to do חָסַד” is a demand for an oath but ignores the phrase אֹת אֲמַת.²²

Straining to make sense of the passage while taking the semantics of אֹת for granted, many have suggested that the crimson thread mentioned later in v. 18 is the sign, or commitment, that Rahab supposedly requested in v. 12. This interpretation is found already in the Septuagint, which reads in v. 18: θήσεις τὸ σημεῖον, τὸ σπαρτίον τὸ κόκκινον, “you will put the sign, the crimson cord...”²³ We find this possibility unlikely, however, since the thread appears in a separate scene and has a distinct purpose: marking Rahab’s house as a place for the Israelite invaders to avoid during an attack (v. 19). The thread in the Rahab narrative is sometimes compared to the string given as a pledge to Tamar in Gen 38. That this comparison is unsuitable is clear from the context: Tamar asks for and promptly receives Judah’s cord and seal as a pledge to ensure subsequent payment for her services. Rahab, on the other hand, does not ask for a pledge, and the cord is mentioned by the spies before they leave the city, not in the context of her request.²⁴ Rahab’s request is, rather, addressed immediately by the spies in their response in v. 14, which references both the חָסַד and the אֲמַת (אֹת) that she had invoked:

Request (v. 12):

וַעֲתָה הִשָּׁבְעוּ נָא לִי בִיהוָה כִּי עָשִׂיתִי עִמָּכֶם חָסֵד וְעָשִׂיתֶם גַּם אֵתָם עִם בֵּית אָבִי חָסֵד
וְנָתַתֶּם לִי אֹת אֲמַת

20 Keil and Delitzsch, *Commentary*, paragraph 3176.

21 Rotenberg, “On the Meaning,” 177.

22 Dozeman, *Joshua* 1–12, 247.

23 E.g., LXX, Rashi, ad loc.; Helfmeyer, “אֹת,” 169; Keller, *Das Wort OTH*, 40–41.

24 The interpretation of the cord as a sign is perhaps influenced by the Church Fathers, who saw in it a symbol of the blood of Jesus (Binik, “Rahab,” 71).

Response (v. 14):

נִפְּשָׁנוּ תַחְתִּיכֶם לְמוֹת אִם לֹא תִגִּדּוּ אֶת דְּבָרֵנוּ זֶה וְהָיָה בְּתַת יְהוָה לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ
וְעָשִׂינוּ עִמָּךְ חֶסֶד וְאֶמֶת

All of this serves to underscore the point that the statement by the spies is intended to allay the concerns expressed by Rahab in the previous two verses and to satisfy her request for an אִוֶּת, which is best understood here as a promise rather than any kind of sign. The thread of v. 18 is a separate matter. Notably, the thread is presented as already in the possession of Rahab—crimson threads are unlikely to have been standard issue in the Israelite espionage toolkit—making it ill-suited to serve as a pledge or sign of the spies' promise.²⁵ When the spies leave, they refer to Rahab's request for protection as שְׁבוּעָה (v. 20), an "oath," with no item or sign mentioned.

In summary, the word אִוֶּת, if understood as "sign," does not make sense in this passage. Rahab requests an אִוֶּת and receives a corresponding *promise*.

2.2 The "Mark" of Cain (Gen 4)

In the dialogue between YHWH and Cain following the first fratricide, Cain fears he will be targeted by killers. God's response includes an obscure reference to אִוֶּת (Gen 4:15), which is taken by virtually all translators and commentators to mean "sign".²⁶

וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ יְהוָה לִכְּוֹן כָּל הַרְגֵּ קוֹן שְׁבַע־עֲתִים יִקָּם וַיִּשָּׂם יְהוָה לְקוֹן אִוֶּת לְבִלְתִּי הַכּוֹת אֹתוֹ
כָּל מֹצְאוֹ

NRSV: Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the LORD put a **mark** on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

The nature of the putative sign in the Cain narrative is a perennial problem and the subject of endless discussions.²⁷ This confusion follows from the assumption that אִוֶּת means "sign," but such an interpretation of the passage is not without its problems. The basic issue here is that it is altogether unclear what the ostensible "sign" might be. In fact, attempts to explain Cain's אִוֶּת are so numerous and divergent that Westermann felt the need to classify them

25 Noegel, "Scarlet and Harlots," 7.

26 LXX σημεῖον; Vulgate signum; Peshitta ܐܘܬܐ.

27 E.g., Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 109; Mellinkoff, *Mark of Cain*, xii.

into five *categories*.²⁸ Byron summarizes the issue as follows: “It is not known what the mark was and all that can be said is that it was probably something visible.” Further, he notes that early translations and exegetical compositions (e.g., LXX, Philo, and Josephus) do not elaborate on the identification of the sign.²⁹ Indeed, most traditional and modern scholars assume that Cain was physically marked somehow. For example, Genesis Rabbah (22:12) imagines a physical deformity: קרן הצמיח לוֹ “[God] grew a horn [on] him.” Other traditions propose that the mark is a darkening or bleaching of the skin.³⁰

Other scholars, conscious that no sign is mentioned in the text, assume that the sign is incorporeal. Fox categorizes the mark as a mnemonic sign, which “communicates knowledge new to the observer,”³¹ namely that Cain is protected by God. Keller predictably translates “ein Zeichen” and argues that the sign, together with God’s word, is an expression of God’s revelation.³² Tur-Sinai suggests that God provided Cain with *proof* that he would not be killed, not a physical sign; what this proof may have been remains unclear.³³ Lohr suggests that אֹת is not a physical marker but an appointed place, namely, the city mentioned in Gen 4:17 where Cain evaded Abel’s blood redeemer.³⁴ Rotenberg argues YHWH’s אֹת is, in fact, not a sign but an instruction.³⁵ According to his understanding, the אֹת is an instruction *to Cain*. This instruction—the contents of which are not divulged for reasons unknown—would somehow help Cain avoid being murdered.

Moberly raises the possibility that the אֹת in v. 15b refers to YHWH’s proclamation, which constitutes for him a “non-corporeal sign.” He argues that the threat “whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance” (15a) is “a short

28 Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 312.

29 Byron, *Cain and Abel*, 119. See Snyman (“Cain and Vulnerability”) for early Jewish texts. For the development of the Augustinian interpretation of the “sign of Cain” and its extension to all Jews, see Unterseher, “Mark of Cain.”

30 See Junior, “Mark of Cain.” See Mellinkoff (*Mark of Cain*, 22–80) for a review of modern exegetes who associate אֹת with a physical mark on Cain’s body. An example of a painting that portrays a corporeal mark is *Cain* (1891) by the Danish artist Julius Pailson, which shows a tortured male figure being branded by a bolt emanating from an oversized hand, presumably God’s.

31 Fox, “Sign of the Covenant,” 563.

32 Keller, *Das Wort OTH*, 15–16.

33 Tur-Sinai, “אֹתות in the Bible,” 52.

34 Lohr, “So YHWH Established,” 101–103.

35 Rotenberg, “On the Meaning,” 176–179.

and pithy saying,” which is itself a mark and serves the purpose of keeping would-be murderers at bay.³⁶

We concur with Moberly insofar as we too suggest that אֹת refers to a proclamation, but we see no need to describe it in terms of signs. Indeed, the problem of what אֹת refers to disappears once we let go of the assumption that it must be a sign and allow for the possibility that it is a promise or assurance. According to this understanding, Cain complains that he will be killed by anyone who finds him, which leads YHWH to make a *promissory declaration* (אֹת ... וַיִּשָּׂם) that no one who finds him will take his life (v. 15b). Our proposed translation of the passage is therefore: “And YHWH made a promise to Cain that none who finds him shall kill him.”³⁷

2.3 The “Miracle” of the Virgin Birth (Isa 7:11–14)

The Immanuel prophecy contains several instances of the lexeme אֹת. Isaiah, on God’s command, meets with King Ahaz of Judah following an unsuccessful Syro-Ephraimite campaign against Jerusalem. Isaiah suggests that Ahaz request an אֹת from YHWH (Isa 7:11).

שְׂאֵל לְךָ אֹת מֵעַם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַעֲמֵק שְׂאֵלָה אוּ הַגְּבֹהַּ לְמַעְלָה:

Request an אֹת from the YHWH your god; request it either in the depths, or in the heights above.

When the king refuses, the prophet says the following (v. 14):

לְכֹן יִתֵּן אֲדֹנָי הוּא לְכֶם אֹת הִנֵּה הֶעֱלָמָה הָרָה וַיִּלְדֶּת בֵּן וְקָרָאת שְׁמוֹ עִמָּנוּ אֵל:

Therefore, YHWH himself shall give you a אֹת; behold, a young woman shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

36 Moberly, “Mark of Cain,” 15. Scholars have noted additional difficulties with this interpretation besides the absence of any sign in the passage. For example, the preposition ל in אֹת לְךָ is perplexing, if the sign is indeed a mark on Cain; one would rather expect the prepositions ב or עַל (ibid., 14). We should note, however, that the phrase שָׂם עַל אֹת does not occur in the Bible at all. שָׂם אֹת ב occurs four times: Jer 32:20; Isa 66:19; Ps 78:43; 105:27.

37 The phrase ל ... שָׂם is used in the sense of “give, set up, install” (BDB 962b–964b, s.v. שָׂם), which also occurs in יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשָּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם (Num 6:26), מִי שָׂם פֶּה לְאָדָם (Exod 2:14), בְּרִית עֹלָם שָׂם לִי (2 Sam 23:5), etc.

What exactly is this אִוֶּה, however? As it turns out, although scholars are unanimous in their assumption that it is a sign, “there is a lively debate among exegetes of this text about the nature of that sign.”³⁸ Indeed, the meaning of אִוֶּה in this passage has long vexed readers. The medieval scholar Joseph Kara suggests improbably that the correct prediction of the child’s sex is a preternatural sign. Samuel David Luzzatto proposes that the birth itself would be a sign (albeit not a miraculous one) that God’s words were true.³⁹ Brueggemann suggests that neither the woman nor her status are important in the biblical text, since the focus of the prophecy is the child, which is the crucial part of the sign, and his future actions.⁴⁰ Roberts argues that the participle indicates that the birth is imminent, and thus the pregnancy itself is *not* the sign.⁴¹ This is also the position of Hakam, who notes that the adjective הָרָה implies that the woman was already pregnant. Hakam rather suggests that the name אֶלְמָנוּ אֵל, or rather its meaning, is the sign.⁴² Straining to identify a miracle, Gressmann writes: “The miracle can only consist of the birth of the boy Immanuel, for the oracle contains no other miracle.”⁴³ As Wildberger puts it: “In and of itself, there is no reason to doubt that a sign was really offered.... But the conjectures of present-day exegetes, about what it might have actually been, are more problematic.”⁴⁴ Confusion surrounding the sign is evident already in the earliest translations. Where the Masoretic Text has “Request an אִוֶּה of the LORD your God,” Targum Jonathan appends a gloss: “Request an אִוֶּה from before the LORD your God; *request that a miracle be done for you*” (וְיִשְׁאַל לְךָ אִוֶּה מִן קִדְדִים יוֹי) (אִוֶּה לְךָ שְׂאֵל דִּיתְעִבִיד לְךָ גִּס). The Hebrew text, for its part, describes a perfectly natural occurrence: A young woman is pregnant with a child (vv. 14–16).

Famously, the Septuagint diverges from the Masoretic Text by describing a decidedly less natural occurrence: It is not a *young woman* who is pregnant, but a *παρθένος*—a *virgin*.⁴⁵ What might have led to this dramatic shift?

38 Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 118.

39 Luzzatto, *Isaia*, 110. The proposed sign, namely the predicted birth of a child, has very little to do with the preceding prophecy.

40 Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39*, 69–70.

41 Roberts, *First Isaiah*, 118–119.

42 Hakham, *Isaiah*, 83.

43 Gressmann, *Der Messias*, 238. Our translation.

44 Wildberger, *Isaiah 1–12*, 304. Porúbčan (“Word ‘ot,” 145) argues that the birth of the child is the prophetic sign. Watts implies that it is the timeframe (“within three years”) that is the sign: “The sign is simple. It has to do with a period by which time the present crisis will no longer be acute or relevant” (*Isaiah 1–33*, 97). Kaiser suggests that the word אִוֶּה “can denote simply that a certain event announced for the future will definitely happen” without reference to a specific symbol (*Isaiah 1–12*, 154).

45 On the claim that *παρθένος* means something else, see note 47.

It seems the translator of the Septuagint (or an earlier Hebrew-language scribe) was grappling with the same problem that has confounded generations of readers in the examples above—the passage lacks any hint of a miracle or sign, despite what appears to be an explicit reference to one. By transforming the natural birth into a supernatural one, this scribe was able to supply the text with the requisite sign.

The first chapter of Matthew (vv. 20–25) builds upon the Septuagint’s rendering of the verse to suggest that the child is conceived from the Holy Spirit. A wealth of interpretation follows from this, and it goes without saying that the idea of the Virgin Birth went on to become a major theological doctrine in Christianity. The Greek word *παρθένος*, which facilitated Matthew’s exposition, is often portrayed as a translator’s error. For instance, Morgenstern writes:

Matt. bases its doctrine of the Virgin Birth upon a mistranslation and resultant misinterpretation of Isa 7:14, which it renders, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bring forth a son.” Luke 1:26–38 records the incident of the Annunciation. In v. 27 the term “virgin” is applied to Mary, while in v. 34 Mary affirms that she has never known a man, i.e. that she is still a virgin.⁴⁶

We suggest that it may not have been a misinterpretation of the nuances of *עַלְמָה* that led to the Septuagint’s rendition.⁴⁷ Instead, the problem is the word

46 Morgenstern, *Significant Antecedents*, 87. More recently, see, e.g., Dourousseau, “Isaiah 7:14b,” 175.

47 Some scholars argue that the LXX is faithful to the Hebrew and *παρθένος* does not imply virginity. See, e.g., Delling, “*παρθένος*”; Collins, “Isaiah 8:23–9:6,” 219–220. This seems unlikely. *παρθένος* appears five times in LXX Isaiah, and each of the other instances reflects Hebrew *בְּתוּלָה*. Furthermore, of the 64 additional appearances of *παρθένος* in LXX (including one—Judg 21:11—that has no MT parallel), all but one refer to a virgin. One might have argued from Gen 24:14, 16, 43, and 55 that *παρθένος* can translate *עַלְמָה* or *נַעֲרָה*, but Rebecca is described in the very same passage as “a virgin whom no man had known” (v. 16). The exception is Gen 34. Although Dinah is unmarried at the time of her rape, and the LXX translator is unlikely to have assumed that she had had previous intercourse—whether consensual or non-consensual—this verse describes the events immediately following her rape. It should be noted, however, that this passage is difficult to make sense of, with the verse in question describing Shechem’s feelings towards Dinah in loving terms, almost as if the rape in the prior verse had never occurred. (Indeed, some scholars tease out two strands here.) Moreover, there is no word in Koine Greek that more clearly connotes virginity than *παρθένος*, while there were indeed two common words that lacked any such connotation: *παῖδισκη* and *νεᾶνις*. The Greek translators could have used either term but elected not to. Ultimately, our argument is unaffected by whether the LXX translators intended a virgin. If they did not, and the first suggestion that the

אֹת, which leads a reader of post-Biblical Hebrew to look for a “sign.” The interpretation in Matthew, that the woman was a virgin, could have been an effort to address a major textual issue—the lack of a clear sign. The struggle of ancient exegetes to identify a sign supports this direction.

If the meaning of אֹת in v. 14a is “promise” or “statement,” however, the passage’s problems are resolved. The content of the promise follows immediately—“Behold, the young woman is pregnant and shall bear a son,” namely the birth of a future leader—and no sign is necessary. In a twist of fate, it seems possible that the forgotten semantics of אֹת contributed to the seminal concept of the Virgin Birth.

2.4 *The Sabbath as a “Sign” (Exod 31)*

The Sabbath is described as an אֹת in Exod 31 (P; cf. Ezek 20), which includes the following verses:

וְאָתָּה דַּבֵּר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר אֲדָ אֶת שַׁבָּתֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ כִּי אֹת הוּא בֵּינִי
וּבֵינֵיכֶם לְדֹרֹתֵיכֶם לְדַעַת כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה מְקֹדְשְׁכֶם: ...¹⁷ בֵּינִי וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֹת הוּא
לְעֹלָם כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שָׁבַת וַיִּנְפֹּשׁ:

¹³ Speak to the Israelite people and say: Nevertheless, you must keep My sabbaths, for **this is an אֹת between Me and you** throughout the ages, that you may know that I the LORD have consecrated you....¹⁷ **it shall be an אֹת for all time between Me and the people of Israel.** For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day He ceased from work and was refreshed.

The use of אֹת here is perplexing, as no sign is forthcoming. The phrase אֹת בֵּינִי וּבֵין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל is also confusing. If the שַׁבָּת is a sign given to Israel by YHWH, we would expect אֶל or ל as the preposition. How can a sign be *between* (בֵּין) two parties?⁴⁸ The use of this preposition is consistent with a

woman was a virgin is instead found in the NT, we would simply say that the misunderstanding of אֹת by later readers led the author of the passage in Matthew to introduce a miracle, rather than attributing this understanding to LXX. We thank Benjamin Kantor for his illuminating comments on this matter.

48 LXX uses the preposition παρά (+dat.) “with, by,” rather than ἀνά μεσον “between” (cf. Gen 9:15–17). Stackert (“Priestly Sabbath,” 60) argues that the Sabbath is an *aide-mémoire* that God sets for himself. Other such reminders in P are also marked as אֹת: the rainbow (Gen 9), circumcision (Gen 17:11), and blood on the doorposts (Exod 12:13). It has also been suggested that בְּרִית in P (but not H!) is an entirely one-sided divine promise.

mutual promise—a *pact*. Indeed, in the very same passage in v. 16, the Sabbath is described explicitly as a בְּרִית “covenant.”

Nevertheless, as is typically the case, scholars assign the meaning “sign” to אֹת here, while struggling to find a sensible interpretation for the passage. Propp clearly articulates the problem:

Paradoxically, the Sabbath day is an invisible sign. It is also inevitable, built into time itself (Fox 1974: 577). That is, as day follows night, so the Sabbath comes, whether humanity marks it or not. Yet if a Sabbath may pass unnoted, how can it be a sign?⁴⁹

The same exegetical difficulty is apparent also in Sarna’s commentary, where he translates אֹת conventionally as “sign” but then describes it, incongruously, as a *declaration of faith or affirmation*:

a sign—The idea of the Sabbath as a sign is reiterated in verse 17. Its observance is a declaration of faith, an affirmation that Israel is a holy nation not inherently but by an act of divine will; that the relationship between God and Israel is regulated by a covenant.⁵⁰

The אֹת in this passage is indeed an affirmation, as Sarna infers from the context. There is, however, no reason to attach this interpretation to the definition of “sign.” As in the examples above, here too אֹת refers to a proclamation—a mutual one in this case, as indicated by the preposition. This is in keeping with the word’s usage elsewhere in the Priestly corpus. Genesis 9:12–17 and Gen 17:10–11 both feature אֶתֶּן between (בֵּין) two parties. In each of these passages, the אֹת is further specified as a בְּרִית “pact.”

2.5 “This is the ‘Sign’”

The phrase אֹת הָאֹת (אֹתָהּ) is a common phrase usually understood to introduce a sign that verifies or validates a prophecy. However, in some passages, this interpretation is contextually incoherent. In Exod 3:11, Moses doubts his ability to save Israel. God responds in 3:12:

Neither of these proposals accounts for the use of the mutual preposition אֶת in these passages. (See Baden, *Promise to the Patriarchs*, 105 and note 4; Weinfeld “Covenant of Grant,” 202–203).

49 Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, 491.

50 Sarna, *Exodus*, 201.

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ וְזֶה לְךָ הָאֹת כִּי אֲנֹכִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ בְּהוֹצִיאֲךָ אֶת הָעָם מִמִּצְרַיִם
תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הַהָר הַזֶּה

This statement is usually translated: “I will be with you; and this shall be the sign (אֹת) for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain” (NRSV).

The issue is that no appropriate sign is evident. This has troubled readers for centuries, leading early and medieval exegetes to offer various mutually exclusive interpretations. According to one approach, the sign would only materialize much later. Joseph ben Isaac Bekhor Shor (twelfth cent.) writes:

תַּעֲבֹדוּן אֶת הָאֱלֹהִים עַל הַהָר הַזֶּה – וְאִזְ אֹדִיעַ וְאֵתָן אֹת לְכָל שְׂאֵנֵי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ, וְכֹל
שְׂאֵתָה עוֹשֶׂה מִמֶּנִּי הוּא

You shall worship God on this mountain—And then I will declare and give a sign to everyone that I sent you and that everything you do is from me.

This interpretation is strained. Whether Moses required a sign to bolster his confidence, or the Israelites required a sign to trust Moses, it is unclear how a sign that would materialize only after the exodus could satisfy either urgent need.

Sensing that this passage offers no plausible sign, modern and medieval scholars have mined the broader pericope for candidates. Many have proposed the miraculous burning of the bush noted earlier in the chapter. Rashbam, for instance, writes:

כִּי אֲנֹכִי שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ הֲלֹא אֵתָה רֹוֹאָה בְּתַבְעֶרֶת הַסֵּנֶה כִּי שְׁלוּחוֹ שֶׁל הַקֵּב"ה אֲנִי, וְזֶה
הָאֹת לְךָ הוּא לְהִיֹּת בְּטוֹחַ שְׂאֵהִיָּה עִמָּךְ. וְכֵן מְצִינֵנוּ בְּגִדְעוֹן שְׂאֵמֶר לוֹ הַמְּלֹאךְ: הֲלֹא
שְׁלַחְתִּיךָ (שׁוֹפְטִים ו':י"ד).

This is your sign that it is I who sends you—Behold, you see in the burning of the bush that I am a messenger of The Holy One, Blessed Be He. And this sign is for you, that you may be certain that I will be with you. And similarly, we find in [the story of] Gideon, to whom the angel said: I have sent you.

The bush miracle in v. 4 is, however, an implausible referent for “this” in v. 12. Additionally, YHWH’s statement in v. 12 responds to Moses’s concerns in v. 11, indicating that the previous spectacle of the burning bush had not alleviated

his doubts.⁵¹ In the nineteenth century, the traditional Jewish commentator Samson Raphael Hirsch suggested improbably that the divine sign was Moses's future success despite his inherent inadequacy.⁵²

Modern scholars have not been able to offer more satisfying answers. Sarna articulates the problem as follows:

The next clause is unclear. Hebrew *ʔot*, "a sign," is largely something that functions to corroborate either a promise or an appointment to office. But to what does the Hebrew demonstrative *zeh*, "this, that," refer? Is it the spectacle at the bush? This would mean that the phenomenon is the sign that affirms the divinely appointed nature of Moses' mission. Or is it his unique ability to negotiate freely and safely with the all-powerful pharaoh that will authenticate his calling? Either interpretation makes an independent statement of the last sentence of the verse, which begins with "when." More difficult and less likely is the possibility that *zeh* refers to the following clause, yielding the understanding that the worship of God in freedom at Sinai will retroactively legitimate Moses' role.⁵³

Sarna makes a strong case that none of the existing interpretations are sensible, but he offers no alternative proposal.

Propp grapples with this issue as well, and his bewildering summary of the competing theories proposed to date underscores the acuteness of the exegetical problem:

1. Israel's safe arrival and worship at Horeb, fulfilled in 18:12; 24:4–5. Worship at the mountain would be evidence of Providence after the fact, proof that God, not chance, freed Israel.
2. The sign is the Burning Bush, marking precisely where Israel is to worship.
3. At this point, Moses receives the divine rod.
4. The sign is "that I, I sent you."
5. The sign is Yahweh's presence with Moses, promised in the first part of the verse.
6. The very name "I-will-be" (*'ehye[h]*) is to be Moses's sign.
7. Worship at the mountain is a sign of some subsequent event.
8. Safe arrival at the mountain will certify the imminent giving of the Torah.

⁵¹ See Nahmanides, ad loc., for further implausible proposals.

⁵² Hirsch, *Pentateuch*, 25–26.

⁵³ Sarna, *Exodus*, 17.

9. Reaching Horeb will vouchsafe Israel's future arrival in the promised land of v. 8 (which may, however, come from a different source).
10. The original sign has fallen from the verse by scribal error.⁵⁴

Clearly, the commentators are grasping at straws; there is simply no sign in this passage. A better translation would be: "I will be with you; and this shall be my *promise* to you, for it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

The situation isn't much different for several other passages containing this phrase. For example, Isaiah's address to Hezekiah in Isa 37:30 reads as follows:

וְזֶה לְךָ הָאוֹת אֲכֹל הַשָּׁנָה סְפִיחַ וּבַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁנִייתָ שְׁחִים וּבַשָּׁנָה הַשְּׁלִישִׁית זָרְעוּ וְקָצְרוּ
וּנְטְעוּ כְרָמִים וְאָכֹל פְּרִיָם:

And this is the *אוֹת* for you: This year eat סְפִיחַ and in the second year שְׁחִים; in the third year, sow, reap, plant vineyards, and eat their fruit.

The word *אוֹת* is rendered "sign" in the ancient translations, as usual,⁵⁵ but there are two problems with this interpretation. First, there is no prophecy here that might require a sign of its veracity. This leads several exegetes, both traditional and modern, to invent a "ghost prophecy" out of whole cloth. Rashi, *ad loc.*, writes:

זוּ לְךָ הָאוֹת – הַדִּיבּוּר הַזֶּה אֵינוֹ לְסַנְחַרִּיב, אֲלֵא הַנְּבִיא אָמַר לְחֻזְקִיהוּ: וְהַתְּשׁוּעָה
הַזֹּאת תְּהִי לְךָ לְאוֹת לְהַבְּטָחָה אַחֶרֶת. הִנֵּה הַחֲרִיבוּ הַלְּגִיּוֹנוֹת אֶת כָּל הַזְּרָעִים וְגִדְעוּ
אֶת הָאֵילָנוֹת, וְהַקְּב"ה מְבַטֵּיחַךְ שֶׁתִּסְתַּפְּקוּ הַשָּׁנָה הַזֹּאת מִסַּפְחֵי הַזְּרָעִים שִׁיִּצְמָחוּ
מֵאֵילֵיהֶן.

And this shall be the *אוֹת* for you—This statement is not addressed to Sennacherib, but rather the prophet said to Hezekiah: "And this salvation shall be a sign to you for another promise. Behold, the legions have destroyed all seeds and cut down the trees, but the Holy One, blessed be He, promises you that this year you will be sustained from the growth of seeds that grow wild."

Some modern scholars have similarly appealed to a prophecy not found in the passage. Blenkinsopp, for instance, writes as follows:

54 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 203–204. The text is Propp's; layout and enumeration are ours.

55 LXX ἰσχυροῦς; Vulg. *signum*; Syr. and Tg. Jon. אֲתָא.

The placing of the sign (30–32) at this point is also problematic, since the purpose of a sign is to reinforce the validity of an oracle already delivered (as 7:3–16). It may have been connected with the first oracle of Isaiah at an earlier stage, since the idea of the remnant occurs only here (37:31) and in the B₁ version (37:4); or, alternatively, the editor may have read it as confirming the prediction of Sennacherib's defeat in the previous verse (37:29).⁵⁶

Even if we were to grant the existence of a “ghost prophecy,” this אִוֹת would remain troublesome. The verbal sequence following אִוֹת is modal, comprising an infinitive absolute, two imperative verbs, and another infinitive absolute, while indicative forms would be expected with the meaning “sign.” Except for the parallel text in 2 Kgs 19:29, no other case presents a command as a putative sign. Instead of a prophecy whose fulfillment could potentially serve as a sign, we suggest that אִוֹת here refers to an *instruction*. Our proposed semantics resolve these issues, producing a clear text: אִוֹת is a pronouncement, rendering the imperative use natural.

Another example for the use of this phrase is found in the divine speech to Eli in 1 Sam 2:34:

וְזֶה לְךָ הָאוֹת אֲשֶׁר יָבֵא אֶל שְׁנֵי בָנֶיךָ אֶל חֶפְנִי וּפִינָחַס בְּיוֹם אֶחָד יָמוּתוּ שְׁנֵיהֶם.

And this shall be the אִוֹת for you, what will befall your two sons: The two of them shall die on the same day.

In this episode Eli receives a prophecy from YHWH regarding the fate of his sons, household, and legacy, but no coinciding sign or miraculous act follows. In fact, the prophecy is fulfilled only years later (1 Sam 4:11). Several medieval Jewish commentators and modern scholars have suggested that the future death of Eli's sons will serve as a sign that the other elements of the prophecy will come true as well. For instance, McCarter writes: “Eli will not witness the fulfillment of the oracle ... but he will see a sign to confirm the coming disaster, namely, the simultaneous deaths of Phinehas and Hophni.”⁵⁷ Some have suggested that the prophecy was meant for the future and there was no additional act involved.⁵⁸ However, it is unusual for a verification sign to occur years after

56 Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah* 1–39, 476–477.

57 McCarter, *1 Samuel*, 91.

58 Fishbane, “Biblical ‘Oṭ,” 217.

a prophecy and moments before the death of the recipient. A more plausible explanation is that this passage deals with a proclamation rather than a sign.

An additional example is found in the divine speech in Jer 44:29–30, which reads:

וְזֹאת לְכֶם הָאוֹת נְאֻם יְהוָה כִּי פָקַד אֲנִי עֲלֵיכֶם בַּמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה לְמַעַן תִּדְעוּ כִּי קוֹם יִקְוֹמוּ דְבָרַי עֲלֵיכֶם לְרַעָה: ³⁰ כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה הִנְנִי נֹתֵן אֶת פְּרַעְיָה חִפְרַע מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם בְּיַד אֲיִבָיו וּבְיַד מִבְקָשֵׁי נַפְשׁוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי אֶת צְדָקְיָהוּ מֶלֶךְ יְהוּדָה בְּיַד נְבוּכַדְרֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל אֲיִבוֹ וּמִבְקָשׁ נַפְשׁוֹ:

²⁹ This shall be the אִוֹת for you, says the LORD, that I am going to punish you in this place, in order that you may know that my words against you will surely be carried out: ³⁰ Thus says the LORD, I am going to give Pharaoh Hophra, king of Egypt, into the hands of his enemies, those who seek his life, just as I gave King Zedekiah of Judah into the hand of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, his enemy who sought his life.

Some scholars argue that v. 29 provides a preemptive sign substantiating God's word.⁵⁹ The אִוֹת here seems to be the statement, "Thus says the LORD," etc., rather than a sign or miracle. We suggest that it is the divine pronouncement itself, not Hophra's demise, that is presented as the אִוֹת. As Lundbom notes, "The sign is the prophetic word here given, which shall be confirmed on the day evil comes."⁶⁰ Needless to say, however, a prophetic word is one thing and a sign is something else. Lundbom rightly acknowledges that אִוֹת refers to the prophetic pronouncement rather than a symbol or miracle, but he nevertheless forces this meaning into the definition of "sign."

In all the examples discussed above, the phrase הִיא/זֹאת לְךָ הָאוֹת appears despite the absence of any sign, leaving readers searching for one in vain. The simplest explanation is that אִוֹת refers in these cases to a commitment (whether auspicious or ominous)—the declaration itself.⁶¹

59 Wilson-Wright (*Jeremiah's Egypt*, 139), who agrees that the "sign" is vague.

60 Lundbom, *Jeremiah 37–52*, 167. Friebel (*Jeremiah's*, 30) also assumes that the reference is to future signs and the use of אִוֹת here is rhetorical.

61 A comparable phrase, which is more etymologically transparent, is הִיא הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר (Exod 35:4; Lev 8:5; etc.). This phrase includes the lexeme דְּבָר "speech, spoken word" and is frequently followed by the speech marker לֵאמֹר. It serves a similar purpose as הִיא הָאוֹת, namely, to introduce speech. In fact, the phrase הִיא הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר is used by Isaiah in the prophecy to Hezekiah in the same context as הִיא הָאוֹת (2 Kgs 19:21): הִיא הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה לְךָ הָאוֹת (2 Kgs 19:21). Cf. also כֹּה אָמַר ה' Talshir ("Detailing Formula") discusses this construction in the Bible and Hebrew inscriptions and argues that הִיא הַדְּבָר

3 The Verb אָוֹת in the Hebrew Bible

The verb אָוֹת appears four times in the MT: three times in the Dinah narrative in Gen 34 (vv. 15, 22, 23) and once in 2 Kgs 12:9. As far as we know, no dictionary or commentator proposes that the verb has a meaning related to “sign,” which would be the expected meaning for a verb associated with the noun אָוֹת.

LXX translates the Genesis occurrences with the verb ὁμοίω “be like,” while the 2 Kings instance is rendered as συμφωνέω “to agree.” The Vulgate offers various translations: “to unite” (*foedero*, Gen 34:15), “to rest” (*adquiesco*, Gen 34:23), “to be disallowed” (*prohibeo*, 2 Kgs 12:9).⁶² Both the Peshitta and Targum Jonathan use the verb אַפְסַחֲפַחֲ (pys, ettaphal) “to be persuaded” for all occurrences. The Palestinian Targum from the Cairo Genizah suggests a Dt form of the root שׁוּ “to become equal” for the Genesis example, akin to the LXX. These varied translations reveal the ancient translators’ struggle with an unfamiliar verb.⁶³ Ultimately, the prevailing interpretation of the verb is “consent” or “agree.”

The appearances of the verb in the Dinah narrative are particularly informative. After Dinah’s rape and the subsequent negotiations between her family and Hamor’s clan, the rapist’s family is given a condition for marriage—all male inhabitants of the town must undergo circumcision: אַדְּ בְּזֹאת יֵאוֹת לָנוּ אִם (Gen 34:15).

A crucial yet frequently overlooked detail is that the verb אָוֹת applies to both parties, not just Dinah’s clan:

אַדְּ בְּזֹאת יֵאוֹת לָנוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים לְשֶׁבֶת אֲתָנּוּ לְעֵם אֲחָד בְּהַמּוֹל לָנוּ כֹּל זָכָר
כְּאֲשֶׁר הֵם נְמַלִּים: ²³ מִקְנֵהֶם וְקַנְיָנָם וְכָל בְּהֵמָתָם הַלּוֹא לָנוּ הֵם אִדְּ יֵאוֹתָה לָהֶם וַיֵּשְׁבוּ
אֲתָנּוּ:

is part of a specific formula meant to illuminate a certain topic, after which a lengthier description is expected.

62 Genesis 34:22 in the Vulgate does not match MT: *unum est quod differtur tantum bonum* “one thing for which all this good is deferred” vs. אֲתָנּוּ לְעֵם אֲחָד לְשֶׁבֶת אֲתָנּוּ “only on this condition will they אָוֹת to us to live with us, to become one people.”

63 Joosten (“Sectarian Terminology”) also notes the inconsistency of the ancient translations regarding this verb. He seems to accept that in the bible, אָוֹת means “agree”; this meaning, according to him, is no longer valid in Qumran Hebrew, since by that time, the original meaning was likely obscure, prompting readers to infer the word’s semantics from context.

²² Only on this condition will **they אָוֹת to us** to live with us, to become one people: that each of our males be circumcised as they are circumcised. ²³ Behold their livestock, their property, and all their animals be ours. If **we אָוֹת to them**, they will live with us.

The reciprocal nature of אָוֹת in the Genesis passage makes the interpretation “consent, agree” hard to sustain.

Circumcision in this chapter is presented as a kinship rite, permitting marriage between the groups.⁶⁴ We therefore propose that the verb’s meaning is “commit, promise, provide assurance,” reflecting the need for mutual action and contribution from both parties. This interpretation also aligns with the suggested meaning for the noun אָוֹת. Consequently, Gen 34:15 should be translated as, “We will commit to you in this matter: If you are to become like us, each male must be circumcised.”

The same semantics apply to the sole remaining occurrence of the verb in 2 Kgs 12:9, where the context is less explicit. This passage describes the priests’ response to the king’s command after a temple audit.

וַיִּקְרָא הַמֶּלֶךְ יְהוֹאָשׁ לַיהוֹיָדָע הַכֹּהֵן וְלַכֹּהֲנִים וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם מִדּוּעַ אֵינְכֶם מְחַזְּקִים אֶת בְּדֵק הַבַּיִת וְעַתָּה אֵל תִּקְחוּ כֶסֶף מֵאֵת מְכַרְיֵכֶם כִּי לְבַדֵּק הַבַּיִת תִּתְּנֶהוּ: ⁹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ הַכֹּהֲנִים לְבַלְתִּי קַחַת כֶּסֶף מֵאֵת הָעָם וּלְבַלְתִּי חֲזֹק אֶת בְּדֵק הַבַּיִת:

⁸ So King Jehoash summoned the priest Jehoiada and the other priests and said to them, “Why have you not kept the House in repair? Now do not accept money from your benefactors anymore, but have it donated for the repair of the House.”⁹ וַיֹּאמְרוּ the priests to neither accept money from the people nor make repairs on the House.

The verb וַיֹּאמְרוּ is typically translated as “agreed” or “consented.” However, this interpretation depends on the perceived formal relationship between the temple priests and the court, specifically whether the king requested that the priests refrain from taking money or whether he *commanded* them to do so. If the latter, the priests would not be expected to “consent” but to “commit.”

The king’s role in the temple requires some elucidation. The Hezekiah and Josiah narratives in 2 Kings suggest that the king is the head of the cult, able to initiate changes in both the temple’s physical structure and the

64 Wang, “Circumcision.”

cultic performance.⁶⁵ The context of 2 Kgs 12 resembles that of 2 Kgs 22, which describes a royal initiative for temple maintenance. If the king indeed holds a high cultic position, his instructions are not subject to negotiation or agreement. Thus, 2 Kgs 12:9 should be translated as, “the priests promised to neither accept money from the people nor make repairs on the House [themselves].”⁶⁶ The verbal meaning “promise, commit, provide assurance” aligns with our analysis of אֹת as originally meaning “pronouncement, commitment.”

The verb אֹת is also attested, albeit rarely, in Qumran,⁶⁷ where its meaning is disputed. Joosten notes that the meaning “agree” does not fit the context there and makes the case that אֹת means “mix” (התערב) in Qumranic Hebrew. He argues that this meaning developed as a result of misunderstanding the meaning of the Hebrew verb, and the Aramaic translations of this verb with Aramaic אתערב (e.g., Neofiti).⁶⁸

In Mishnaic Hebrew, the verb is attested only five times, where it seems to mean “enjoy, profit from.”

אֵין נוֹתְנִין כְּלֵי תַחַת הַנֵּר לְקַבֵּל [בוֹ] אֶת הַשֶּׁמֶן וְאִם נָתַנוּ מִבְּעוֹד יוֹם מוֹתֵר אֵין גִּיאוֹתִים
מִמֶּנּוּ לְפִי שְׂאִינוּ מִן הַמוֹכֵן

One may not put a vessel under the lamp to receive rendered oil. If it is placed ahead (of the Shabbat), it is allowed, but one cannot profit from it (גִּיאוֹתִים), because it wasn't prepared (before the Shabbat). (Shabbat 3:6)

זֶה הַכֶּלֶל כֹּל שֶׁנִּאֲדָתִין בּוֹ בַּיּוֹם טוֹב מְשַׁלְּחִין אוֹתוֹ

This is the rule: anything one uses (שֶׁנִּאֲדָתִין) during the holy day, one can send away (during the holy day). (Betzah 1:10)

65 For an in-depth discussion and resources of the role of the king as the head of the cult, see Leuchter, “Royal Background.” We thank Mark Leuchter for discussing the king-temple relationship with us.

66 As the remainder of this chapter makes clear, maintenance should be performed by professional craftsmen who would be paid from the donation account. The priests, however, are entitled to a portion of the offerings alone (v. 17).

67 ויצא המשתלח והאיש אשר יוכל מהונו ואשר ידרוש שלומו ואשר יאות עמו ונכתב דברו על יד המבקר “The excommunicated will leave, and any man who uses his property, who greets him, or who יאות him, this matter will be recorded by the overseer” (4Q266, fr. 11:46–48).

68 Joosten, “Sectarian Terminology.”

It has, however, been suggested that the Tannaic verb derives from a root other than אֹת. A plausible candidate is יאה, which is attested in Tannaic Hebrew, Arabic, and various dialects of Aramaic, with the meaning “becoming, lovely.” Alternatively, Joosten and others propose an etymological connection to the Arabic root غاث “to help.”⁶⁹

4 Evolving Semantics

Having established that אֹת encompasses two primary meanings—sign and pronouncement—the question of chronology naturally arises. To address this, it will be helpful to examine two biblical passages, each of which contains an occurrence of the noun אֹת with the meaning “pronouncement” and an apparently later layer that seems unacquainted with this definition and reinterprets the אֹת as a “sign.”

4.1 The Diviner’s אֹת or מופת (Deut 13:2–6)

כִּי יָקוּם בְּקִרְבְּךָ נְבִיא אוֹ חֹלֵם חִלּוּם וַיִּנְתֵּן אֱלֹהֵי אֹת אוֹ מוֹפֵת: וּבֵא הָאֹת וְהַמוֹפֵת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהֵי לְאֹמֵר נִלְכָּה אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אַחֲרֵים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יְדַעְתֶּם וַיַּעֲבֹדֵם: לֹא תִשְׁמַע אֶל דְּבַרֵי הַנְּבִיא הַהוּא אוֹ אֶל חוֹלֵם הַחִלּוּם הַהוּא כִּי מִנְסָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶתְכֶם לְדַעַת הַיִּשְׁכֶּם אַהֲבִים אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּכֹל לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכֹל נַפְשְׁכֶם: אַחֲרֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם תֵּלְכוּ וְאֵתוּ תִירָאוּ וְאֵת מִצְוֹתָיו תִּשְׁמְרוּ וּבְקִלּוֹ תִשְׁמְעוּ וְאֵתוּ תַעֲבֹדוּ וְבוֹ תִדְבְּקוּן: וְהִנֵּי בֵיא הַהוּא אוֹ חֹלֵם הַחִלּוּם הַהוּא יוֹמֵת כִּי דִבֶּר סָרָה עַל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הַמּוֹצִיא אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וְהַפְדֶּךָ מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים לְהַדְיָחֶךָ מִן הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ לְלַכֵּת בָּהּ וּבַעֲרֹתָ הָרַע מִקִּרְבְּךָ:

If a prophet or dream-diviner should rise among you and **give you an אֹת or a מופת**, and the אֹת or the מופת declared by him takes place, saying, “Let us follow other gods whom you have not known and let us serve them,” you must not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner, for YHWH your god is testing you, to know whether you indeed love YHWH your god with all your heart and all your soul. It is YHWH your god whom you shall follow, it is him you shall revere, it is his commandments you shall observe, it is his orders you shall heed, it is him you shall worship, and to him you shall cleave. As for that prophet or dream-diviner, he shall be put to death, for he urged disloyalty to YHWH your god—who freed

69 Joosten, “Sectarian Terminology,” 222 n. 12.

you from the land of Egypt and who redeemed you from the house of bondage—to make you stray from the path that YHWH your God commanded you to follow. Thus you shall purge the evil from your midst.⁷⁰

There is a substantial syntactical difficulty in this passage, namely, what does לְאָמַר in v. 3 refer to? This problem has been widely acknowledged since Löhr in 1925.⁷¹ Pakkala, following Löhr, writes as follows:

The clause beginning with לְאָמַר in v. 3 does not connect well with the preceding sentence (וּבָא הָאוֹת וְהַמוֹפֵת אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים). Instead of explaining the giving of the signs and wonders—as the present text-form would suggest, but this idea makes little sense—the clause beginning with לְאָמַר in v. 3b is much better understood with the content of v. 2a. Consequently, the sentence that introduces the miraculous aspect of the prophets (2b–3a) should be seen as a later expansion. With this correction, the connection between the prophets and their statement becomes clearer.⁷²

The resulting reconstruction of the text is therefore:

כִּי יָקוּם בְּקִרְבְּךָ נְבִיא אוֹ חֵלֶם חֵלֹם לְאָמַר גְּלֹכָה אֶתְרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִדְעֵתֶם
וְנִעְבְּדֵם וְגו'

Since לְאָמַר does not naturally connect with דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים, scholars have looked for the proximate phrase to which it might apply. They naturally landed on the first clause of the law—כִּי יָקוּם בְּקִרְבְּךָ נְבִיא אוֹ חֵלֶם—since the word אוֹת (like מוֹפֵת)⁷³ has been universally understood to

⁷⁰ Adapted from NJPS translation.

⁷¹ Löhr, *Das Deuteronomium*, 174. See the helpful review of this topic in Stackert, *A Prophet Like Moses*, 145–154.

⁷² Pakkala, *Intolerant Monolatry*, 25–26.

⁷³ While a comprehensive treatment of מוֹפֵת is beyond the scope of this article, it appears to share both of אוֹת's families of meanings. In 1 Kgs 13:3, a prophecy is delivered: וְנָתַן בָּיוֹם וְהָיָה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה הַמְזִבְחַת נִקְרַע. Several factors suggest that this instance of מוֹפֵת should be understood as a proclamation. First, מוֹפֵת is presented as speech, the object of דִּבֶּר in one case and antecedent of לְאָמַר in another. Second, in v. 5 we find כִּמּוֹפֵת אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אִישׁ הָאֱלֹהִים בְּדִבְרֵי יְהוָה. Since the prophet gave a proclamation but no sign in v. 3, מוֹפֵת is better understood as referring to the prophecy predicting the destruction of the altar. Third, the phrase וְנָתַן אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר כִּמּוֹפֵת אֲשֶׁר נָתַן אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים parallels דִּבֶּר אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר אֱלֹהִים, which is the typical conclusion of a prophecy. Fourth, the second instance of מוֹפֵת in this

refer exclusively to a wonder, not a statement.⁷⁴ However, with the awareness that אֹת can mean “proclamation,” the connection to לְאמַר becomes clear, and there is no reason to suggest that v. 2b is secondary. It is only 3a that is problematic, and it was likely added by a glossator unfamiliar with the use of אֹת and מוֹפֵת in reference to proclamations. Our reconstructed original form of Deut 13:2–4 is thus:

כִּי יָקוּם בְּקִרְבְּךָ נְבִיא אוֹ חֹלֵם חִלּוּם וְנָתַן אֵלֶיךָ אֹת אוֹ מוֹפֵת לְאמַר נִלְכֶה אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים
 אַחֲרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִדְעֶתֶם וְנִעְבְּדֵם: לֹא תִשְׁמַע אֵל דְּבַרֵי הַנְּבִיא הַהוּא אוֹ אֵל חֹלֵם
 הַחִלּוּם הַהוּא וְגו'

If a prophet or dream-diviner should appear among you and make a statement or declaration, saying, “Let us follow other gods whom you have not known and let us serve them,” you must not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner, et seq.

It seems the original version of this law was not concerned with methods of ascertaining the legitimacy of prophets and dreamers. Rather, it demanded that the Israelites refrain from forsaking YHWH, even if called to do so by a diviner, and that they execute the apostate.⁷⁵ This is supported by the context of the chapter, which is devoted to addressing such sedition and executing the offenders. Nowhere else in the chapter is such subversion presented as a divine test. The detail regarding the fulfillment of an אֹת or מוֹפֵת—besides being syntactically peculiar—is in tension with the entire chapter.

4.2 Reassuring “Signs” (Exod 4)

We have already discussed the burning bush episode in Exod 3:1–12 (§2.5), where the word אֹת—rather than referring to an obscure sign or miracle, as typically understood—has the meaning “commitment.” In the continuation of

verse (הַמּוֹפֵת) is rendered in LXX as ῥῆμα “utterance, a spoken word,” instead of the typical τέρας “wonder.”

74 The infinitive לְאמַר can be used to introduce direct or indirect speech after verbs that are not typical *verba dicendi*. Goldenberg, “On Direct Speech,” 79–96; Miller, *Representation of Speech*, 206–212.

75 The law has been compared to Esarhaddon’s succession treaty (SAA 2), with both texts addressing the potential threat a religious figure poses to the ruler’s legitimacy (see Levinson, “Esarhaddon’s Succession Treaty”; Stackert, *Deuteronomy and the Pentateuch*, 97). This comparison supports our understanding of the law as a deterrent against apostasy, not a measure to distinguish legitimate and illegitimate prophets.

the same narrative in Exod 4, Moses is given two further אֵתוֹת, which in the received text are magical signs: his staff transmogrifying into a snake, and his arm spontaneously becoming scaly and then reverting to its natural state (Exod 4:6–9).

There is, however, tension between the אֵתוֹת as miracles and some of the language used to describe them. For instance, v. 8 reads as follows:

וְהָיָה אִם לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ לָךְ וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ לְקוֹל הָאֵת הַרְאִשׁוֹן וְהֵאֱמִינוּ לְקוֹל הָאֵת הַאֲחֵרוֹן

If they do not trust you and do not listen to what the former אֵוֹת says (lit: the sound/voice of the former אֵוֹת), then they will trust what the latter אֵוֹת says.

In context, we are forced to say that יִשְׁמְעוּ לְקוֹל must mean something like “be convinced (by the miracle)” or “internalize/accept (the implications of the miracle).” For this reason, Targums Onkelos and Pseudo-Jonathan substitute the verb שמע with קבל “to accept.” Sarna translates “pay heed to” and comments, “Literally, ‘listen to the voice of.’ The sign, as it were, ‘speaks’; it testifies to the divine commissioning.”⁷⁶ McNeile translates קל literally as “voice” and explains that in context it means “the purport, the lesson conveyed by the sign.”⁷⁷ Propp translates “voice” and writes, “I.e., import, meaning. We might also take *šāmaʿ baqōl* ‘hear the voice’ as a cliché meaning ‘pay attention.’”⁷⁸

It is difficult, however, to find support for any such understanding of the idiom. Outside of Exod 4, the idiom שמע לקל, like its counterpart שמע בקל, refers to the acceptance of a statement or adherence to (spoken) instructions; there is no parallel for the usage we find here. For example, in Gen 16:2, when Abram assents to Sarai’s instructions, we find the following language:

וַתֹּאמֶר שָׂרַי אֶל אַבְרָם הִנֵּה נָא עֲצָרְנִי יְהוָה מִלְּדוֹת בָּא נָא אֶל שְׂפָחֹתַי אוּלַי אֲבַנָּה מִמֶּנָּה
וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם לְקוֹל שָׂרַי:

Sarai said to Abram, “See, YHWH has blocked me from bearing children. Draw near to my slave-girl; perhaps I will be built up through her.” Abram listened to what Sarai said (lit: the sound/voice of Sarai).

76 Sarna, *Exodus*, 21.

77 McNeile, *Exodus*, 24.

78 Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 210.

Exodus 18:24 is another typical example of the idiom's use. Moses accepts his father-in-law's counsel and does as instructed:

וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה לְקוֹל חֹתָנוּ וַיַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אָמַר:

Moses listened to what his father-in-law said (lit: the sound/voice of his father-in-law) and did everything he had said.

The terms *שָׁמַע בְּ/לְקוֹל* and *הָאָמִין לְ-* appear together only four times in the Bible. Three are found in our chapter, and the fourth is in Deut 9:23:

וּבְשַׁלַּח יְהוָה אֶתְכֶם מִקְדָּשׁ בְּרִנֵּעַ לֵאמֹר עָלוּ וּרְשׁוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נָתַתִּי לָכֶם וּתְמַרוּ אֶת פִּי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְלֹא תִאֲמַנְתֶּם לִּי וְלֹא שָׁמַעְתֶּם בְּקוֹלִי:

And when YHWH sent you on from Kadesh-barnea, saying, “Go up and seize the land I am giving you,” you defied the command of YHWH your god; you did not trust him and did not listen to what he said.

Clearly, the meaning of *שָׁמַע בְּ/לְקוֹל* “listen to the voice/sound” in all the above examples is fairly literal and indicates assent. This is true even in the first verse of Exod 4, where Moses expresses concern that the Israelites will reject his claims:

וַיַּעַן מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר וְהֵן לֹא יֵאֱמִינוּ לִי וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְּקוֹלִי כִּי יֹאמְרוּ לֹא נִרְאָה אֱלֹהִיד יְהוָה:

Moses answered, “But what if they do not trust me or listen to my voice, saying, ‘YHWH did not appear to you?’”

It is improbable that the same pair of terms appears three times in the same chapter—indeed, in the same context of Moses' anxiety that he would not be trusted—but with completely different meanings. This is exacerbated by the puzzling application of “listen to the sound/voice” to the phenomena of an arm becoming scaly and a staff transforming into a snake, forcing scholars to conjure an otherwise unattested idiom.

In the episode's conclusion later in the chapter (4:28), Moses meets Aaron and relates (וַיִּגֵּד) what YHWH told him (דִּבְרֵי יְהוָה) and the אִתָּהּ that YHWH commanded him (צִוְהוּ). It is hard to reconcile either of the verbs וַיִּגֵּד or צִוְהוּ with visual miracles.⁷⁹ Furthermore, the effect of the presentation of the אִתָּהּ

⁷⁹ See Miller, *Representation of Speech*, 116.

to the people is that they “believe *and* hear” (וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ וַיֵּאֱמָנוּ הָעָם) that YHWH has visited them and seen their affliction (vv. 30–31). Like וַיִּגַּד and וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ וַיֵּאֱמָנוּ once again points straightforwardly to speech, rather than any optical wonder.

The problem with this section is evident already in the ancient translations. The Peshitta and Pseudo-Jonathan add the infinitive לַחֲבֹר “to do” at the end of Exod 4:28, indicating that it is the performance of the אֵתָת that is commanded, not the אֵתָת themselves. LXX reflects a Hebrew version that has וַיִּשְׁמְחוּ (καὶ ἐχάρη), rather than וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ, avoiding the problem of “hearing a sign.”

The keys to recovering the original stratum here are the words הֶאֱמִינָם and שָׁמְעוּ, which recur throughout the passage as a refrain. We first encounter the verb שָׁמְעוּ in 3:18, immediately after YHWH instructs Moses to convey to the elders of Israel two statements: (1) that YHWH has appeared to him, declaring that he has remembered/visited (פָּקַד) Israel; and (2) that he will deliver them from the affliction (עֲנִי) of Egypt and into the land of Canaan. The two statements are separated by the word וַאֲמַר in the beginning of v. 17. The elders will then accept/hear the voice of Moses (וַשְׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלִי). Moses responds to YHWH, asking what will happen if the elders do not, in fact, trust him (לֹא-יֵאֱמִינוּ לִי) or heed him (וְלֹא יִשְׁמְעוּ בְקוֹלִי), denying that YHWH appeared to Moses at all (statement #1). YHWH answers that if they do not trust (לֹא-יֵאֱמִינוּ) or heed/hear (יִשְׁמְעוּ בְקוֹל) the first אֵוֹת, they will surely trust (וְהֵאֱמִינוּ לְקוֹל) the second אֵוֹת. YHWH’s response indicates that statement #1 is the first אֵוֹת. In other words, parts of this text treat the two אֵתָת as statements, not signs.

These two אֵתָת—that YHWH had appeared to Moses, and that YHWH would save the Israelites from their bondage—are recapitulations of YHWH’s initial two statements in his revelation to Moses in Exod 3:6–8, which are similarly demarcated—this time by the verb וַיֹּאמֶר:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲנֹכִי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב וַיִּסְתֵּר מִשֶּׁה פָּנָיו כִּי רָא מַה־בֵּיט אֶל הָאֱלֹהִים: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה רְאֵה רָאִיתִי אֶת עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת צַעֲקוֹתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נַגְשָׁיו כִּי יִדְעֵתִי אֶת מַכְאֲבָיו: וְאָרַד לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וְלְהַעֲלֹתוֹ מִן הָאָרֶץ הַהוּא אֶל אָרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחֲבָה אֶל אָרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבָשׁ אֶל מְקוֹם הַכְּנָעַנִי וְהִחַתִּי וְהִפְרֹזִי וְהַחֲוִי וְהִיבֹסִי:

He said, “I am the god of your father, the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac, and the god of Jacob.” Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at the god. YHWH said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and their cry on account of their taskmasters I have heard. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver

them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with fat and honey,⁸⁰ to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.

At the end of the passage (4:31), the people of Israel believe (וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ) and hear (וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ) that: (1) YHWH has remembered (דָּרַךְ) Israel, and (2) that he has seen their affliction (עָיַן). Here the two statements are once again clearly distinguished—in this case by the words כִּי and וְכִי, which introduce each one separately. In other words, this episode concludes with the people accepting the two statements, the אִוֶּה.⁸¹ The two magical signs were added only at a later stage, and this both reflected and likely contributed to the latter-day misapprehension of the noun אִוֶּה. The supplementer of the text left several vestiges of the original usage of אִוֶּה intact, making the direction of literary development clear. It makes sense that someone unfamiliar with the “proclamation” meaning would supply signs to a text that lacks them. It is much harder to understand why a supplementer would take a text referring to signs and add language that paradoxically suggests that the people would “hear the voice/sound” of those signs.

4.3 *A Diachronic Perspective*

In the two previous examples, the “proclamation” sense is older and the “sign” sense is younger. This comports with the many post-biblical examples of אִוֶּה’s misconstrual discussed in section 2 but pushes the fading of the proclamatory sense into the biblical period. From the evidence at our disposal, we cannot conclude with any certainty whether the two families of meanings were available in parallel already in the earliest periods, with one eventually falling into disuse, or if the “sign” sense only entered the scene later. But the trendline is clear: the noun אִוֶּה gradually stopped being used in reference to statements, with this sense eventually being fully supplanted by “sign.”

If we had to hazard a guess, we would suggest that אִוֶּה originally denoted an oral proclamation, from which sprouted secondary meanings encompassing various specific types of proclamation, such as promises, pacts, and commandments—some written. (The first use of the word may have antedated the invention of writing, in which case *all* proclamations would have been oral.) The “(written) proclamation” sense may have evolved into “written

80 On this rendering of הַלֵּב, see Dershowitz, “A Land Flowing with Fat and Honey.”

81 Cf. Exod 19:3–8, which appears to continue the proposed earlier stratum of Exod 4.

sign,” leading to tertiary meanings, such as “miraculous sign” and “omen.”⁸² It is also possible that the meaning “sign” developed from “proclamation” through an intermediary meaning of “commitment,” such as a verbal confirmation that a prophecy will come true.⁸³

In CBH the noun אֹת and its associated verb covered a relatively large semantic field: “pronouncement, promise, pact,” on the one hand, and “sign, omen, mark,” on the other. This sort of duality is not unusual. The noun דָּבַר, for example, can mean both “speech” and “thing, matter,” and the former is tied to the connotation of its verbal root.⁸⁴ Both meanings appear to be attested simultaneously.⁸⁵ Similarly, the noun *awātu* in Akkadian denotes both “utterance” and “affair.”⁸⁶ As discussed, the semantics of the verb אֹת support the notion that the basic meaning of the root is associated with (oral) proclamations, tied to the connotation of its verbal root. It is plausible that the concrete meaning is secondary, similar to the case of דָּבַר.

The noun rarely appears in LBH. אֹת occurs once in Nehemiah in the standard phrase אֹתָהּ וּמִפְתָּיִם (Neh 9:10) in the same context as Deut 6:22, and four times in Ezekiel. Two of the Ezekiel occurrences (Ezek 20:12, 20) are related to Exod 31, which we have discussed above (§2.4). Ezekiel 4:3 is especially instructive; in this section, Ezekiel is commanded to build a model of Jerusalem during the Babylonian siege:

וְאָתָהּ קַח לְךָ מִחֻבַּת בְּרֹזֶל וְנָתַתָּהּ אֹתָהּ קִיר בְּרֹזֶל בֵּינְךָ וּבֵין הָעִיר וְהִכִּינָתָהּ אֶת פְּנֶיךָ
אֵלֶיהָ וְהִיָּתָה בְּמִצּוֹר וְצָרְתָּ עָלֶיהָ אֹת הִיא לְבַיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל

Then take an iron plate and place it as an iron wall between you and the city; set your face toward it, and let it be in a state of siege, and press the siege against it. This is an אֹת for the house of Israel.

82 It is also possible that “sign” developed from “proclamation” or a similar meaning without written connotations.

83 We thank Heath Dewrell and Raanan Eichler for suggesting this possibility.

84 For the semantic range of this word in Biblical Hebrew and for a possible developmental path, see Mylonas et al., “Speaking”

85 E.g., both may occur in the same verse: אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְבַר יְהוָה אֶל אַבְרָם בְּמַחֲזָה לְאֵמֹר (Gen 15:1), “After these events, YHWH spoke to Abraham in a vision, saying...”

86 CAD 1 [A₂]: 29.

Since the actions the prophet is instructed to undertake are performative (lying on his side, eating specific foods) and not spoken, the phrase אֹת הִיא is unlikely to refer to a statement. The referent of הִיא here is thus probably not the instruction as a whole, but rather the singular feminine noun מַחְבֵּת בְּרִזָּל “iron griddle.” It seems that the author of this passage did not understand אֹת as a declaration or speech, like in earlier prophetic texts, but as a concrete perceptual sign.

The meaning “statement, proclamation” seems to have fallen into disuse in post-Biblical Hebrew. A possible indication of this development is found in the Qumranic *Book of Mysteries* (חכמת הרזים). The common prophetic phrase וְזֶה לְכֶם הָאֹת is used there to introduce a statement (1Q27 5–6), but a second hand added the phrase כִּי יִהְיֶה above the line:⁸⁷

וזה לכם האות כי יהיה בהסגר מולדי עולה יגלה הרשע מפני הצדק כגלות חושך
מפני אור

No sign is mentioned in the text, and the original sentence seems to refer to a promise for the distant future. The later addition of the phrase כִּי יִהְיֶה changes the meaning to reflect an understanding that the promise is in fact a (future) sign. This is clearly how Harrington interprets this phrase: “[t]he sign that the divine visitation is taking place will be the cessation of wickedness and of the wicked, and the clear revelation of righteousness.”⁸⁸

In other post-Biblical Hebrew examples, the influence of Aramaic is observable. In Qumran, the noun frequently denotes “banner,” a meaning that is peripheral in CBH and may have become more common under the influence of Aramaic:⁸⁹

ובלכתם למלחמה יכתובו על אותותם אמת אל צדק אל כבוד אל משפט אל

When they go to war, they shall write on their insignia אל אמת אל, אל צדק אל,
אל כבוד אל, משפט אל (1QM 4:6)

87 We follow Qimron’s reconstruction of the text (Qimron, *Hebrew Compositions*).

88 Harrington, *Wisdom Texts*, 71.

89 In the Peshitta, אֶמְצָא is most used to render the Hebrew נִסָּא “banner” (Num 21:8–9; 26:10; Isa 5:26; 11:10, 12; 13:2; 18:3; 30:17; etc.). This is also the case for the Jewish Aramaic Targums (Num 21:8–9; 26:10; Isa 5:26; 11:10, 12; 13:2; 18:3; 30:17; etc.).

In Tannaic Hebrew and Aramaic, the noun refers most typically to written signs or letters, a meaning that is not attested in Biblical Hebrew. For example, in Mishnah Shabbat 8:3, we find: דיו כדי לכתוב שתי אותות “ink in order to write two letters.”

We have shown that the proclamatory sense of *אוֹת* is possibly earlier than the “sign” family of meanings, based on several arguments. First, the verbal root *אוֹת* only indicates a type of statement. It is used in the N stem, which is associated with the G stem, and not D or C, the typical stems of denominal verbs. Second, a similar direction of change, namely from proclamation to thing, is known from Hebrew (דָּבָר) and Akkadian (*awātu*).

The concrete meaning “sign” appears to dominate in later Hebrew; in no known post-biblical dialect is *אוֹת* used to refer to a proclamation or other types of speech. Perhaps the infiltration of Aramaic semantics, where the lexeme typically refers to a visible sign (“banner, written letter”), can help explain the loss of the early meaning and the resulting exegetical difficulties.

6 Epigraphic Hebrew

The word *אוֹת* is attested in Lachish 4, an Iron Age Hebrew inscription. Unsurprisingly, it has typically been understood as “sign,”⁹⁰ in accordance with its accepted definition in Biblical Hebrew. As we show below, this interpretation is unlikely.

In this early sixth-century BCE text, the scribe includes a brief report about several tasks, presumably responding to earlier correspondence and instructions. Most scholars assume that Azeqah, mentioned in lines 12–13, has already fallen, and Lachish now faces a similar fate. Among the tasks noted, our scribe mentions keeping track of the fire-signals of Lachish (משאת), per the אתה (line 11) that the addressee has given.

ישמע-יהו[ה את אד]ני-עת כימ-	1
שמעת טוב-ועת ככל אשר-שלה-אדני.	2
כנ-עשה-עבדכ כתבתי על הדלת ככל-	3
אשר שלח[ת]ה אלי-וכי-שלה-א	4
דני-על-דבר בית הרפד-אינ שמ-א	5
דמ וסמכיהו לקחה-שמעיהו ו	6
יעלהו-העירה ועבדכ-אינ[ג]	7
ישלה שמה את הע[ד הימ]	8

⁹⁰ E.g., Na'aman, “Fire Signals.”

כי אמ-בתסבת-הבקר [י]ב[א]	9
וידע-כי אל-משאת לכש-נה	10
נו שמרמ-ככל-האתת-אשר נתנ	11
אדני-כי לא-נראה את עז	12
קה	13

1 May YHW[ח] cause my [lord] to hear at this time
 2 a good report! And now, according to everything that my lord sent,
 3 so your servant has done. I have written upon the door⁹¹ about
 everything
 4 that you sent to me. And, indeed, my lord has sent
 5 about the matter of Beth-HRPD, there is no one there.
 6 As for Semachiah, Shemaiah has seized him and
 7 brought him up to the city. And, as for your servant, I am [not]
 8 sending the wit[ness] there [today].
 9 Rather, he shall come with the morning tour
 10 and he will know that for fire-signals of Lachish w-
 11 e are watching according to all the אֹת that my lord
 12 gave us, for we cannot see Aze-
 13 kah.

91 It has been suggested that the word דלת is used metaphorically here and refers to a hand-held writing medium (Hicks, “Delet and Mgillah,” 50–53; Zhakevich, *Scribal Tools*, 94–97; Ahituv, *Echoes*, 71). This interpretation is based primarily on a single instance of דלת in the book of Jeremiah. Hicks suggests that the phrase וקרעה בקער (Jer 36:23) indicates that the scroll was cut at the stitches that joined each sheet, which he hypothesizes had three columns in some cases and four in others. But if the author of the Jeremiah passage wanted to indicate the cutting of sheets at the stitches, why be so elliptical and not say so directly? Furthermore, this understanding of Jer 36:23 is, in fact, inconsistent with the same scholars’ reading of Lachish 4. Hicks and others do not suggest that דלת in Lachish 4 means “column” as they do for the Jeremiah passage, since that would make no sense in context. Instead, they generally propose it means “writing board” or “tablet,” making דלת in Jer 36:23 and Lachish 4 two separate *hapax legomena*. (See, however, Na’aman “Fire Signals,” who nevertheless proposes “a column (of a papyrus sheet)” as a possibility [p. 65] but then glosses it as “papyrus sheet” [p. 66].) Be that as it may, there is no reason to interpret the Lachish letter’s use of דלת metaphorically. That important texts were written upon doorways is supported by both biblical references (Deut 6:9; 11:20: ובעריד ובשעריד) and archaeological evidence from the region. The Kuntillet ‘Ajrud inscriptions “were drawn on wall plaster, mostly on door jambs, as well as on pottery vessels ... in one case, they were drawn directly on one of the stones in the jamb of the entrance to the southern storeroom” (Meshel et al., “14C Dating,” 208). For more on the interpretation of דלת, see Zammit, “Lachish Letters,” 133–136. Zammit is ultimately agnostic: “It would seem that any of the above three options fit the meaning of *dlt* in our ostrakon.”

Unsurprisingly, scholars interpret the אַתָּה in line 11 as some sort of signs, whether “fire-signs,”⁹² “codes,”⁹³ or “miracles.”⁹⁴ The first of these options is not logical, considering that the term for fire-signs/signals in line 10 is מַשְׂאָת, and it would not make sense to say, “for fire-signals of Lachish we are watching according to all the fire-signals that my lord gave us.” The second meaning, *codes*, is without precedent. The third, which was proposed by Tur-Sinai, is wholly suppositious.⁹⁵

Most scholars are more concerned with the meaning of the combination שָׁמַר אֵל (lines 10–11) and whether it refers to watching *over* something or watching *for* something.⁹⁶ A more plausible possibility is to understand אֵל לְכַשׁ מַשְׂאָת not as a complement of the verb שָׁמַר, marking a goal, but as an adverbial phrase, equivalent to עַל “concerning,” in this context. This use of the preposition אֵל is attested in MT, for example in Jer 33:14: וְהִקְמַתִּי אֶת דְּבַר הַטּוֹב אֲשֶׁר דִּבַּרְתִּי אֵל בֵּית יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל בֵּית יְהוּדָה “I will establish the good thing which I promised the house of Israel and the house of Judah.”⁹⁷ If correct, the phrase should be understood as a change of topic: “as for the fire signals of Lachish.” This interpretation is supported by the initial position of the phrase, as a verbal complement is typically positioned after the verb in an unmarked declarative sentence.

92 E.g., HALOT 1:26, s.v. אִוָּת: “sign (frequently || → מוֹפֵת; fire sign Lach. 4, 11).” See also Ahituv (*Echoes*, 70, 76).

93 Dobbs-Allsopp et al. (*Hebrew Inscriptions*, 319); Pardee (*Handbook*, 91, 94); Begin (“Does Lachish,” 166–174); Bekins (*Inscriptions*, 127–128); Rainey (“Watching Out,” 150–151).

94 Tur-Sinai, “Lachish Letter IV,” 365–377. Zammit (“Lachish Letters”) 140, is inconclusive on this point and accepts either orders or signs (“indications”) as interpretations of אִוָּת.

95 An excerpt from Tur-Sinai’s extensive hypothesis (“Lachish Letter IV,” 375–376), which is premised on the notion that אִוָּת can refer only to a miracle, illustrates its phantasmal nature: “Hosha’yahu’s letters addressed to Yaush tell us about his and his fellow-worshippers’ attempts to save the prophet from the threatened death. In Letter IV he writes to the prophet himself, assuring him that everything is being done to save him and that the belief of Hosha’yahu and his friends in the prophet is unshaken. After the greetings he tells the prophet that he has written on the sheet (הַדְּלֵת) according to whatever the prophet had asked him in his message—and we may assume that the writer refers to one of such letters as Hosh[a]’yahu had sent also to Yaush, asking him to use his influence in order to save the prophet. One of the trusted friends of the holy man whom Hosha’yahu should have contacted, unfortunately was no longer at the guest house where the prophet was staying, but Hosha’yahu would try to find him in ‘the city’ whereto Shema’yahu had taken him, perhaps also in order to try to save the prophet by direct appealing to the king’s officers.”

96 Emerton (“Were the Lachish”) reviews much of the literature on this issue.

97 Other examples of אֵל with this meaning are found in, e.g., Exod 6:13; 25:22; Lev 27:34; 2 Sam 7:19; 2 Kgs 19:32; Jer 34:17.

The remainder of the sentence (נחנו שמרם ככל האתת) can be compared to a similar Hebrew phrase that suggests following orders, as in Deut 17:10, וְשָׁמַרְתָּ לְעֹשׂוֹת כָּל אֲשֶׁר יֹרֶדְךָ “you shall observe whatever they command you” or 2 Kgs 21:8, אִם יִשְׁמְרוּ לְעֹשׂוֹת כָּל אֲשֶׁר צִוִּיתִים, “as long as they observe whatever I command them.” In this context, אֹת appears to refer to instructions rather than codes or signals. These instructions likely relate to those sent by the commander, mentioned in line 2. Consequently, the full translation of lines 10–12 should be: “as for the fire-signals of Lachish, we are following the instructions that my lord gave us.”

7 Comparative Semitics

Cognates of the word אֹת are found in several Semitic languages. The plural and verbal root in Hebrew and the Aramaic noun (ܐܘܬܐ *ʾātā*) imply a middle-weak root. The first attestations of the root are in Aramaic texts associated with Judeans (Biblical Aramaic, Qumran Aramaic), which may indicate a Hebraism. However, the vocalization of the nominal form with a long *ā* is more likely a reflection of an original Aramaic form. It is unlikely that speakers of Aramaic borrowed a Hebrew word but represented it in its pre-Canaanite form. Furthermore, hebraisms in Aramaic typically maintain their Hebrew vowels; for example, אלוהין (<*ʾilāh*>), תהום (<*tihām*>), אבדון (<*ʾabdān*>), etc.⁹⁸

On the other hand, the Arabic word آية *ʾāya*, assumed to be etymologically related (אֹת BDB), suggests a final weak root. The Arabic lexeme, however, is likely borrowed from an Aramaic dialect,⁹⁹ with the final radical *t* interpreted as a feminine marker, which is orthographically represented in Arabic with *ʾ* <h>. The Arabic lexeme primarily means “sign, token, mark” and secondarily “verse (of the Qurān), a connected string of words.”¹⁰⁰ That the latter meaning is subsequent is evidenced by the absence of a standard division of the Quran until a comparatively late stage and the much more prevalent meaning of “sign” in early Meccan surahs.¹⁰¹ The Arabic lexeme, therefore, appears to represent a later semantic shift.

98 Fassberg, “Hebraisms”; Stadel, “Hebrew Influence.”

99 Lane, *Arabic-English*, 1135; Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 72–73.

100 Lane, *Arabic-English*, 1135.

101 Spitaler, *Die Verszählung*; Sinai, *Qurʾan*, 17.

The noun אֹת also possibly occurs in a Moabite inscription, likely from the seventh century BCE,¹⁰² on a stone incense stand, which was located by the city's gate:

מקטר אש עש אלשמע // ליסר בת אֹת

An incense altar which Elišama made as an addition to the אֹת house.

The plene spelling of the word אֹת is unexpected in a text that does not use *matres lectionis*; however, given that at least one word in the Mesha inscription is written plene (אִשׁוּחַ, KAI 181:9), it is plausible that אֹת is indeed *ʔōt*, and most scholars accept this reading.¹⁰³ What the construct *bēt ʔōt* means is hard to say. Based on the biblical בַּיִת כְּלָיו “armory, where the battle gear is kept” (2 Kgs 20:13), it is possible that it refers to a room containing cultic objects, which may include written oracles.¹⁰⁴

Akkadian *ittu* is also likely related. Superficially, the Akkadian form poses a problem due to its unexpected geminated *t*. If, however, the original noun in Akkadian was **ʔwt-*, the middle radical *w* could have assimilated to the following *t* (cf. I-w roots in the perfect *ittarad* < **yiwtarad*), resulting in **ʔitt-*.¹⁰⁵ In Akkadian, *ittu* (pl. *ittātu*) has a similar distribution as the Hebrew lexeme: It refers to either a sign (or a prophetic omen) or proclamation, particularly one that is written. The phrase *ana ittī-šu*, “upon (typically a written) request,” is already attested in early Akkadian sources, and *ittu* is regularly the object of verbs of speech (in the following example, *dabābu*, “to speak”):

aštāl-šū-mā ittātīm ša šut wardī šarrim idbub-am (ShA 1 11: 24)

I asked him and he related to me information about the king's attendants.¹⁰⁶

102 Routledge, “A Comment.” Rainey (“New Inscription,” 81) believes it is more than a century older.

103 Bloch, however, who assumes the inscription is Phoenician, prefers the reading **ʔawôt* (“Making One's Way,” 151 n. 11).

104 For a review of writing and archiving prophecies in the region, see Nissinen, “Spoken.”

105 Huehnergard, “Hebrew Verbs I-w/y,” 465. Note that the vowel preceding the glide must have been either *a* or *i*, but not *u*. There is some confusion about the exact etymology of this word due to its synchronic similarity to another lexeme, *ittu* (< *id-t*). These lexemes have different plurals (*ittātu* vs. *idātu*) and are written with different logograms (ISKIM vs. Á). These two lexemes have separate entries in *CDA*, but not in *CAD*, the former likely because there is some mixing between these forms.

106 Sasson translates “he was able to give me details of those working for Warad-šarrim” (*From the Mari Archives*, 162).

aššum tēm gerrim ša bēlī illaku ittātīm zikkaram u sinništam ašqi (ARMT 26/1 207 3–6)

For a report on the campaign that my lord wants to undertake, I instructed everyone (lit., male and female) [with] signs to drink.¹⁰⁷

In one example, the *ittāti* of a group of Gutians convince Assyrian King Shamshi-Adad I to trust them. Tigay’s note on this text in his commentary on Deut 13:2–6 highlights the tension between the default understanding of תִּשָּׂא and the demands of the context: “The signs in that case were not supernatural wonders but convincing information contained in the messenger’s answers.”¹⁰⁸

In sum, the epigraphic and Semitic evidence support the notion that the root had an ancient proclamatory sense, quite likely inherited by Hebrew, not developed there.¹⁰⁹

8 Conclusion

In this study, we have revisited the semantics of תִּשָּׂא. Despite enjoying universal consensus, the assumption that the noun means “sign” frequently does not match the text, leading to countless unconvincing interpretations of individual appearances of the word. We argue that in these instances, the noun תִּשָּׂא refers to a “promissory proclamation” while its associated verb means “to commit.”

The sense related to the semantic field of speech is attested in other Semitic languages and may have been a shared Semitic meaning that gradually faded, leaving later readers perplexed. The unsuitability of the “sign” understanding for many biblical occurrences has been overlooked by nearly all scholars, with the exception of Rotenberg, who noted the proliferation of vaguely related sub-definitions of תִּשָּׂא, which still failed to make sense of various biblical texts.¹¹⁰ Rotenberg’s proposed primary definition for תִּשָּׂא is threefold: (1) remembrance of past events, (2) instruction in the present, and (3) supernatural prognostication of future events. To this he adds a secondary definition: (4) miracle. We agree with Rotenberg’s assessment of the problem and his conclusion that

¹⁰⁷ Sasson suggests “I gave everyone signs” (*From the Mari Archives*, 283). The drink here is perhaps a truth potion, which is given to attendees before they are questioned about the predicted outcome of the king’s military campaign in line 6 (*ibid.*, 257 n. 66).

¹⁰⁸ Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 130.

¹⁰⁹ The Ugaritic evidence is somewhat unclear, given that most readings of *ât* are uncertain. It is nevertheless notable that the word apparently occurs only in the context of omens (DUL 117–118), which may be comparable to the Moabite inscription.

¹¹⁰ Rotenberg, “On the Meaning,” 1.

תִּסֵּא can have speech-related meanings unconnected to any sign, but his own interpretations are largely unsubstantiated, and they often fail to explain the biblical texts, as discussed above.

We have also suggested that this definition is an early one, and that it gradually fell into disuse, possibly beginning in the exilic period. Subsequent readers of early biblical passages were only familiar with the alternate semantics of the word, leading several texts to be reconceived. Leaning heavily on traditional interpretations while giving short shrift to the literary contexts of the biblical passages, scholars have shoehorned a host of improbable meanings into “sign,” rather than considering a wholly different definition.

Our proposed meaning is not based solely on contextual considerations but is also supported by comparative and epigraphic evidence. In light of these findings, we recommend updating biblical lexicons to include the meanings “pronouncement, promise, assurance” for the noun תִּסֵּא and “commit” for its corresponding verb.

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