The term אב 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.

An accessible entrée into the mystery of term אב 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 נידדה אב, 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 אב as well as the associated term ידדה עוניה, which also appears within this pericope (1 Samuel 28:3, 9). There are three common interpretations of אב (spelled א in consonantal text; pl. אבות / אבות), which occurs sixteen times in the Hebrew Bible:

1. The אבות are spirits of a dead person that can be consulted for necromantic purposes. In Isaiah 19:3, the אבות are classified with the עירים, which, although a hapax legomenon in the Hebrew Bible, is almost certainly cognate with the Mesopotamian etennu “ghosts.” Furthermore, Leviticus 20:27 condemns any person “who has in them an אב,” almost certainly referring to one who channels a spirit of the dead. In this case, the term has been related to אב (also א in consonantal text), “father,” and thus to the ancestor cult. The two words have the same consonantal spelling in the plural, אבות, though they are vocalized differently: אבות and אבות. The Canaanite vowel shift > 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 אב means “revenant/one-who-returns,” based on Arabic یابا, “to return”; 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—which in our view reflects the weakness of the other proposed etymologies.

2. An אב is a piece of equipment used in consultations with the dead. A list in 2 Kings 23:24 includes אבות and ידדה עוניה among cultic objects that Josiah removed (literally “burned” [עבְר 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 āpu, “pit,” which is attested in a few necromantic texts, and also with Hittite a-apu. However, the supporting theory that Ugaritic āb should be understood as “god of the pit” has not found acceptance (it is usually understood to mean “god of the father”), nor do any of the references in Hebrew necessitate the interpretation “pit.” Perhaps most importantly, in distinction from Hebrew אב, there seems to be no instance in which āpu or cognates refer to spirits of the dead; the āpu is only a pit in which they can be summoned.

3. āb 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." 8

Since the first two interpretations of ʿwb/ḥ 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 ḥb(w)t. If true, this would be only one of many Egyptian loanwords (or cognates) in the Hebrew Bible. 9 Not only is the spelling of the term identical with the Hebrew plural, ḥb(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 ḫwt":

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 ḥbêt and the familiar spirits (yiddêʿōnim).

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

The typical translation of ḥb(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 ḥb(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." 11 Because the term can refer to the living and the dead alike, a phrase from the Coffin Texts such as wrw nw ḥb(w)t can sometimes also be translated "the nearest ancestors." 12 Dmitri Meeks adduced a number of examples, largely from funerary inscriptions, in which the translation "family" does not quite fit; he suggests "domestic servants." 13 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." 14 More specifically, he noted the term's connotation of "patrilineal extended family household." 15 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 ḥb(w)t 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 ḫb(w)t; I have thrown down his house, I have crushed his surviving children, I have crushed his cultivator who is in his field." 16 This text contains descriptions of the conquest of the deceased over the estate of his enemy. The litany proceeds from the ḥb(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 ḥb(w)t." 17 The imagery of the decedent as pillar refers to support and care for his extended family, 18 both living and dead. There is also the formulaic affirmation, common in autobiographical documents, that the author was "kind to his ḥb(w)t." 19 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 ḥb(w)t, "form," which comes from the same root ẖ. 20 The term was used interchangeably with ʾbḥ, "image." 21 ḥb(w)t appears with a papyrus scroll determinative indicating an abstract concept as well as with the upright mummiiform effigy determinative, designating the mummy, statue, likeness, or form of a person. Thus in Late Egyptian orthography, the term ḥb(w)t "family" and ḥb(w)t "image" can be represented in the same way except, of course, for the determinatives: the seated man and seated woman determinatives following ḥb(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. 22 Or, to put it differently, how can ḥb(w)t continue to indicate "family" while also meaning "form"? Indeed, in some late Egyptian contexts, were it not for the determinative, ḥb(w)t could be read as either "family" or "form." Seti's dedicatory stele for his deceased father, Rameses I, reads: "I did not banish his ḥb(w)t from before me, but I reunited the survivors for a royal meal." 23 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 ḥb(w)t as "image" would also make good sense. In light of the Egyptians' affinity for wordplay and puns, 24 it seems likely that in at least some instances, the double entendre would have been intentional.

As we contend above, Middle Egyptian ḥb(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 ḥb(w)t. This sense of ḥb(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 *šabti* that can be evoked in several contexts. For example, sacrificial animals are identified as the *šabti* “images” of the enemies of the gods. The dead animals are the form of the dead enemies. Since *šabti* appears often with the (upright) mumiform 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 *šabti* has a dual sense of “ancestor” and “statue/image.” This particular semantic field makes the term a strong candidate for being cognate with Hebrew *ōbōt*. Indeed, the evidence from Late Egyptian suggests that Hebrew *ōbōt* derives from Egyptian *šabti* and means “the dead ancestors who could be represented through images.” We would view the emergence of the singular *ōb*, 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 *tērāpîm* (*teraphim*) (Ezek. 21:26; Zech. 10:2). The *teraphim* were clearly physical objects of some sort (Gen. 31:19–35; Judg. 17:5; 18:14–20; 2 Kings 19:11–17). They have frequently been compared to the Nuzi *îlānū*, “household gods,” a term that may be used either for divinized ancestors or the statues that represent them. There is reason to think that the *teraphim* were once an accepted part of Israelite family religion. 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, *ōbōt* 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.” 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 ba *šē-lat-ōb* 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 *ōbōt* 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 *āšērā* (Asherah), generally thought to be a goddess who was symbolized by a wooden pole. The term *āšērā* appears in the Bible indicating now one, now the other. Perhaps, in the cases of both *ōbōt* and *āšērā*, 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. They called this process “the substitution of the goddess by the entities through which she worked.” We suggest that the *ōbōt*, too, were both symbols and numinous beings.

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**Notes**

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8. The possible etymological connection between yiddôn and Akk. mudû, “scholar” (P. Jensen, “Akkadisch mudû,” 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.


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.


20. Meeks 1974, 64.


25. For an excellent review of the scholarship and critical issues, see Karel van der Toorn and Theodore Lewis in “טָרַפִים,” 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 teraphim may have suffered some scribal emendation, if the term comes from *āšp* (like the rephaʿim) 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, 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.


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.”