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Historical Poetics and Generic Shift: *Niphla'ot ve-Nissim*

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Abstract
The Hebrew Bible is full of miracles, but without, it seems, a word to describe them. The post-biblical and modern term for miracle, nes (pl. nissim), does occur in the Hebrew Bible, but with only two exceptions with a concrete referent, it means a pole (Numbers 21, 9-9; Isaiah 30,17), a flag, an ensign (Isaiah 5, 26; 11, 10 and 12; 13, 2; 18,3; 62,10; Jeremiah 4, 6 and 21; 50,2; 51,12 and 27; Psalms 60, 6) or a flag on top of a mast (Isaiah 33, 23; Ezekiel 27,7). The word occurs as a metaphor twice. In Exodus 17, 16, Moses builds an altar and names it 'Adonai-nissiM/em>', that is 'the Lord is my banner'. In Numbers 26, 10, the extraordinary event in nature in which "the earth opened its mouth and swallowed" Korah and his band, is referred to as a nes, a warning sign and an example1. The term serves to name not to narrate the incident. It is absent from the biblical text which unfolds the events surrounding the disappearance of Korah (Numbers 16), but occurs in its editorial summary.

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Historical Poetics and Generic Shift: Nipha’ot ve-Nissim *

Terms for a Mysterious Concept

The Hebrew Bible is full of miracles, but without, it seems, a word to describe them. The post-biblical and modern term for miracle, nes (pl. nissim), does occur in the Hebrew Bible, but with only two exceptions with a concrete referent, it means a pole (Numbers 21, 8–9; Isaiah 30, 17), a flag, an ensign (Isaiah 5, 26; 11, 10 and 12; 13, 2; 18, 3; 62, 10; Jeremiah 4, 6 and 21; 50, 2; 51, 12 and 27; Psalms 60, 6) or a flag on top of a mast (Isaiah 33, 23; Ezekiel 27, 7). The word occurs as a metaphor twice. In Exodus 17, 16, Moses builds an altar and names it ‘Adonai-nissi’, that is ‘the Lord is my banner’. In Numbers 26, 10, the extraordinary event in nature in which “the earth opened its mouth and swallowed” Korah and his band, is referred to as a nes, a warning sign and an example 1. The term serves to name not to narrate the incident. It is absent from the biblical text which unfolds the events surrounding the disappearance of Korah (Numbers 16), but occurs in its editorial summery.

These two verses are either early indicators of meanings the lexeme nes acquired in the future, possibly through metaphorization, or they may be examples of historical usages which are not registered in any other biblical passage. Cognates to nes apparently occur in Aramaic and Syriac, meaning ‘miracle’ as well as ‘sign’; it would be anachronistic, however, to read these semantic developments into the Hebrew Bible 2.

* An earlier version of this article was delivered at the 9th congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR), held in Budapest in June 1989. Another version appeared in Hebrew in Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Folklore 13/14 (1992) 29–59. I would like to thank Alison Anderson, Charles Briggs, Susan Niditch, David Stern, and Jeff Tigay for their most valuable critical comments on an earlier draft of the present work.

1 All quotations from the Hebrew Bible are according to Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures. The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text. Philadelphia 1988.

The terminology of miracles that is available in the Hebrew Bible is limited to specific textual sources and has a narrow range of historical-thematic reference. The principal terms, *ot u-mophet* (pl. *otot u-mophethim*) 'sign and portent', are translated by the Septuagint as *semeion* and *teras* respectively. They appear in the Pentateuch as a word pair, mostly but not exclusively in the plural, primarily in texts attributed to the D source (*Exodus* 11, 9–10; *Deuteronomy* 4, 34; 6, 22; 7, 19; 13, 2–3; 26, 8; 28, 46; 29, 2; 34, 11) and to a lesser extent in texts attributed to P (*Exodus* 7, 3; see also 7, 9). In both sources and in subsequent references by the prophets (*Isaiah* 20, 3; *Jeremiah* 32, 20–21), the Psalmist (78, 43; 105, 27; 135, 9), and the history writers (e.g. *Nehemiah* 9, 10), the thematic-historical references of this word pair are the magical acts that Moses and Aaron performed before Pharaoh as a prelude to the exodus. The final and most prominent miracle in this sequence, dividing the Red Sea, is considered neither an *ot* nor a *mophet*. Furthermore, the terms are not used for later miraculous acts, such as Moses' drawing water from the rock (*Exodus* 17, 5–7; *Numbers* 20, 8–11), during the wandering of the Children of Israel in the desert (which occur in texts attributed to the E source).

The precise meaning and use of this word pair become more apparent from its one use in general rather than specific terms in *Deuteronomy* 13, 2–3: "If there appears among you a prophet or a dream-diviner and he gives you a sign or a portent [*ot u-mophet*], saying, 'Let us follow and worship another god' – whom you have not experienced – even if the sign or portent that he named to you comes true, do not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner." In his dealings with Pharaoh Moses acted as such a prophet and dream-diviner (albeit on behalf of a divine power that received the approval of the writers of the Hebrew Bible): he gave the Egyptian king signs of the divine power invested in him and omens for the extraordinary acts he potentially could perform. Note that the terms *ot u-mophet* themselves do not refer to the act of a miracle but to the meaning attributed to magical performances, identifying them as signs of divine empowerment and portents of potential future supernatural acts.

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6 In other biblical contexts these terms refer to omens and signs of prophetic fulfillment. For an analysis of their meanings and diverse literary formulas in which they appear see Fishbane, M.: The Biblical OT. In: Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies 1 (1975) 213–234 (in Hebrew).
Niphla'ot, 'wonders', the other term to which scholars attribute the meaning of miracle, or at least entertain a possible analogy to miracle, appears to be in complementary distribution with otot u-mophetim, 'signs and portents'. As a noun, niphla'ot does not occur in Deuteronomy at all, though a verb related to the same root, niphlet, does appear in verse 30, 11: "Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you [niphlet], nor is it beyond reach." Rather, 27 of the 44 times that the word appears in the Hebrew Bible, are in Psalms, making it part of the Hebrew hymnal vocabulary. The other 17 occurrences are in Job (5, 9; 9, 10; 37, 5, 14; 42, 3), I Chronicles (16, 9, 12 and 24), Daniel (8; 24; 11, 36), Exodus (3, 20; 34, 10) and once each in Joshua (3, 5), Judges (6, 13), Micah (7, 15), Jeremiah (21, 2) and Nehemiah (9, 17). In Exodus the term appears in texts attributed to the J source. Niphla'ot is primarily a term of reference to past events. It occurs, not like otot u-mophetim, in the context of performing miraculous or magical acts, but in poetic, prophetic, or historical texts that allude to such events. The terms are by no means synonymous, distinguished by their appearance in texts that differ in their literary nature, historical periods, or social circles. Rather, the two terms have different semantic values. For example, unlike otot u-mophetim, niphla'ot refers to events like the very traumatic act of the exodus, the division of the Red Sea, and subsequent wondrous situations in the desert.

Neither of these terms, however, in any literary context, refers to the 'more ordinary' miraculous acts that prophets like Elijah and Elisha performed: bringing food for the poor (I Kings 17, 9–16; II Kings 4, 1–7, 42–44), cure for the sick (II Kings 5), rain in drought (I Kings 18), and life to the deceased (I Kings 17, 17–24; II Kings 4, 18–37; II Kings 13, 20–21). In the Hebrew Bible these tales are not named, nor are they alluded to by later writers, poets or prophets. There is no meta-vocabulary to discuss them, and if there was a term for them in the spoken Hebrew of the biblical period, it does not appear in any available documents from that era.

The occurrence of several terms, each of which relates only to a specific segment of the modern semantic range of 'miracle', may tempt the scholar to an erroneous conclusion. For example, Edmond Jacob suggests that "the fact that [biblical] Hebrew has not one but several terms to signify miracles attests its

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frequency, but also its fluidity." This fallacious conclusion only masks the verbal reality that none of the available terms is equivalent to the modern 'miracle'. As I shall show in more detail below, the presence of many approximations of the modern concept, do not make up for the absence of a single verbal representation. The biblical concept of miracle is neither fluid nor flexible; it is simply non-existent.

The absence of such a term is not of only literary and linguistic concern. As Jacob Licht states unequivocally, "any discussion of miracles in the Hebrew Bible inevitably involves the analysis of the Hebrew Bible in terms of an alien conceptual system". He and other scholars recognize the conceptual dissonance between a system that does and one that does not have a term for miracle. Claude Tresmontant describes this dissonance in terms of the difference between belief systems. Whereas the modern view, according to him, conceives of miracles as thaumaturgic acts, related to the 'laws of nature', in the biblical world they were acts of signification, as the terms *ot* and *mophet* imply. Yet, in spite, or perhaps even because, of the absence of an actual term for miracle in the Hebrew Bible, Licht and others seek to articulate an alleged implicit concept of miracle that, they assume, is at the root of all narratives of wondrous events that appear in the scriptures. Rationalizing his search, Licht contends that "the narrators of the Hebrew Bible, in fact, do have a conception of the miraculous and emphasize its aspects of surprise and wonder. Wondrous miracles, which are not essentially signs and portents, are an organic part of the conception of history of the Hebrew Bible, as they are a direct and bold revelation of divine rule and God's power. Therefore," he concludes, in contradiction to his earlier statement, "it is necessary to regard miracle as one of the elements of biblical religion, even though it has not been clearly named."

Seeking a resolution to the same predicament, Yair Zakovitch justifies his quest for the biblical concept of miracle by inverting the logical relationship between necessity and sufficiency. He points out that, in a poly-generic text formulated over different historical periods (as the Hebrew Bible is), the existence of a single term for miracle would not be sufficient for the construction of the concept. This argument could be valid, but it does not imply, as Zakovitch contends, that therefore the existence of a term for 'miracle' is also not necessary for the formulation of the concept. Rather the discovery of a term the Israelite used for that purpose is essential for the establishment of the biblical concept of miracle.

9 Jacob (above, not. 7) 223.
11 For example Weir (above, not. 7) 25; Zakovitch (above, not. 8) 19 sq.
13 Licht (above, not. 10) 877.
14 Zakovitch (above, not. 8) 19 sq.
Approaches toward a Solution

Internal contradictions and logical entanglements underscore the methodological dilemmas that students of the Hebrew Bible face in their search for the biblical miracle. In the absence of an explicit term, they endeavor to uncover the implicit conception that purportedly generated the tales and metaphors of miraculous events, and to articulate the hidden assumptions that words and language do not expose. The problem here is not unique to the concept of ‘miracle’. The analysis of the related concept of ‘nature’, for example, encounters similar methodological difficulties. The Hebrew Bible does not have a term that corresponds to ‘nature’, at least in its post-enlightenment sense. In advocating the principle of historical relativism for scriptural interpretation Gerhard von Rad states that “the concept ‘nature’, a concept which has become so indispensable to us, [was a concept] of which Israel was quite definitely unaware. Indeed, if we use the term in the interpretation of Old Testament texts, then we falsify something that was quite specific to Israel’s view.” 15 Although aware of this inherent difficulty, J. W. Rogerson, in his attempt to formulate the Hebrew Bible’s view of nature, deliberately ignores the contradiction in his effort and finds it "legitimate to translate the Old Testament into our modern terms." 16

The search for the concept of the biblical miraculous similarly leads away from the principle of historical relativism, involving an anachronistic application of a concept to a culture and a period of which it was not a part. The quest for the implicit idea of the miraculous is caught in a logical double bind. While the Hebrew Bible contains narratives that correspond in theme, form, and structure to later tales of the miraculous, the actual notion of ‘miracle’ is part of a mode of thought that is historically and culturally removed from its world. The imposition of modern concepts upon the ancient world inevitably obliterates historical differences in perception, thought, and narrative poetics, and obscures the integrity of that world’s own religious belief and poetry.

These methodological difficulties have not of course escaped the notice of students of the Hebrew Bible. In their attempts to compensate for the absence of linguistic evidence for the concept of ‘miracle’, they have looked for other kinds of testimonies that will confirm the availability of the concept for the narrators of scriptural narratives, and that will expose the implicit idea as it manifests itself in themes, metaphors, rhetorical devices, ideas, and literary forms. For that purpose they have resorted to comparative, philosophical, literary, philological, religious, and generic analyses.

Comparative Analysis

James Pritchard's essay could represent a comparative approach\(^7\). In principle, if not in practice, Stith Thompson's first edition of the *Motif Index* (1932–34) serves as his analytical framework. Pritchard stops short of analyzing the biblical tales as to their motifs, but he lays out all the other necessary ideas for considering these stories as part of comparative folklore. In fact, unjustifiably, he considers the phrase "signs and wonders" [... ] as a label for a definite type of miracle story, long a part of folk tradition". He goes even further, to propose, with emphasis as perhaps to be a cover-up for his own doubts, that "in the Hebrew mind there was a sharply defined category for a kind of marvelous event which was generally recognized as evidence for the power and presence of the deity"\(^8\).

For Pritchard the biblical miracle stories are part of biblical folklore, a product of the creative imagination of a long line of storytellers\(^9\). Seeking to fit these tales "into the general index of folkloristic motifs"\(^10\), he groups them into four thematic categories: (a) supplying food and drink for the faithful, (b) punishment for evil-doers, (c) granting children to barren women, and (d) displaying deity's power, either through contests between rivals or in direct intervention. These themes indeed recur in the folklores of many peoples and might be found in the motif clusters D 1030: *Magic food* and D 1040: *Magic drink*, Q 500: *Miraculous punishment*, and D 548.1: *Child born in answer to prayer*. While such a comparative analysis indeed demonstrates the common themes of certain tales that the Hebrew Bible shares with the folklores of other peoples, it would require a logical leap, and a fallacious one at that, to conclude that it shares with them also the concept of miracle. In the absence of a clear term, not only do the boundaries of the concept remain fuzzy, but its actual existence is in question.

The Philosophical Approach

While the comparative approach constructs a biblical concept of miracle through analogy with other, geographically remote, cultures, the philosophical approach does so by employing ideas that have emerged in later historical periods within European and Jewish philosophies. The temporal gap is bridged by the implicit proposition that Western notions of the miraculous are rooted in biblical thought. For example, Rimon Kasher, who argues that "the Hebrew Bible recognizes the phenomenon that is named *nes* [miracle]"\(^11\), traces the fundamental philosophical distinctions concerning the concept of miracle in


\(^8\) ibid., 97.

\(^9\) ibid., 101.

\(^10\) ibid., 98.

\(^11\) Kasher (above, not. 8) 52.
European theology and secular thought directly to the Hebrew Bible. He proposes to demonstrate that

"In the Hebrew Bible there are clear distinctions between the ordinary and the natural and the extra-ordinary and the miraculous. The different meanings vested in the miraculous dimension of occurrences are based on such distinctions [. . .]. While the concept of 'laws of nature', in its ancient meaning as a universal, autonomous and invariable law, cannot be inferred from the Hebrew Bible that attributes all events to God [. . .], it is possible to discover in the Hebrew Bible a clear and explicit awareness of a stable [world] order and of the ordinariness of natural events [. . .]. This awareness is found in the context of the description of miracles as well as in other contexts." 22

The path of reasoning Kasher follows in this demonstration is intricate and, as I will illustrate in the next few paragraphs, an inappropriate means to an ill-chosen goal.

The concept of miracle that Kasher projects into the Hebrew Bible draws upon the principle of 'laws of nature' and their violation by an extraordinary event. He begins specifically with David Hume's (1711–1776) definition of miracle as "a violation of the laws of nature" 23. Antony Flew notes that Hume's definition and the entire "section 'Of Miracles' has probably provoked more polemic than anything Hume ever wrote." 24 In spite of its place in a long philosophical tradition, and its significance in modern discourse about miracles 25 Hume's definition is far removed from the world view of the Hebrew Bible. It emerged within 18th century English empiricism, as part of a deliberate attempt to break philosophical thought away from its Judeo-Christian religious roots, and it has not met with universal rational acceptance even in European societies. Its employment as a starting point for the formulation of the concept of miracle in the Hebrew Bible not surprisingly renders Kasher's task difficult. Kasher accepts the position that miracle is a relative concept, interdependent with the notion of nature and its laws.


Antony Flew summarizes this attitude when he writes that “to seize the fundamental point that a miracle is an event which violates the ‘ordinary course of nature’ is to appreciate that the notion of a miracle is logically parasitical on the idea of an order to which such an event must constitute some sort of exception. This being so, a strong notion of the truly miraculous – a notion involving something more that the notions of the merely marvelous, the significant, or the surprising – can only be generated if there is first an equally strong conception of natural order.” Miracles are thus conceived not as isolated acts but as events in relation to the ordinary and the natural, and it is this relation that defines the event as miraculous; the evidence that bears upon the truth value of the perceived or experienced event establishes it as such, while the belief in a divine reason motivating the occurrence attributes to it a religious significance.

By his choice of definition for miracle, Kasher now has also to construct a concept of nature not used by the Israelites. He defines two unknown factors in terms of each other: the natural and the ordinary as the negative of the extraordinary, and the extraordinary as the abnormal of the ordinary. His task then becomes to follow Rogerson’s assertion that in the quest for the definition of nature in the Hebrew Bible it is appropriate to examine whether “there is awareness in the Old Testament of miracle understood as an abnormal or discontinuous event.”

Kasher identifies in the Hebrew Bible an awareness of cyclical regularities in nature, as reflected in such verses as “As surely as I have established My covenant with day and night – the laws of heaven and earth –” (Jeremiah 33, 25; see also ibid., 5, 24). However, in spite of the use of the term ‘laws’ – adequately translated from the Hebrew bukot – Jeremiah, and others who use this term in similar contexts refer to regularities in nature, not to causalities. In the Hebrew Bible the primary cause of all occurrences, ordinary and extraordinary is, after all, God himself. This belief and assumption are clearly fundamental to any concept of the miraculous that could be considered proper to the Hebrew Bible, as is the terminology of wonder, none of which can be easily captured starting from Hume’s definition of miracle. The fundamental belief in God Almighty necessitates the discovery of the Hebrew Bible’s own concept of the miraculous, if there were any, rather than the application of a concept that has been formulated in European societies. Even in these societies there has not been a universal rational acceptance of miracle as a viable concept. Some of the ideas in these debates have affinity with the Hebrew Bible’s terminology of wonder, others challenge directly its basic tenets.

Ironically, Kasher employs the latter and side steps the former. In his attempt to articulate the theology of the Hebrew Bible Theodore Vriezen points out that “the idea of miracle […] implied in God’s creative activity”, and in a note he

27 von Rad (above, not. 15) 7; Rogerson (above, not. 16) 67.
28 ibid., 69.
29 Kasher (above, not. 8) 41 sq.
adds, "it is not concerned with breaking the laws of nature." 30 Similarly, Edmond Jacob observes that "since nature and history are both creation incessantly renewed by God, there is no room in the Old Testament for miracles in the sense of a breaking of the laws of nature or history." 31 Eichrodt phrases these theological dicta somewhat paradoxically, saying that "God works miracles in order to free his followers from the desire for miracles," and then sums up that "the miraculous fits into the Israelite view of Nature as an important, indeed indispensable ingredient. It confirms the complete dependence of the created order on its Creator without prejudicing that autonomous life which Nature leads as the possessor of divine powers." 32 Von Rad finds that in Wisdom literature Israelite theology has shifted from a concern with history to a focus on nature, and consequently "the concept of miracle has changed. [Wisdom] circles no longer designate as miracle the breaks in the historical nexus and the isolated 'signs'. [...] It was all the more turned towards the miracle of Creation, its systematic arrangement, its technical riddles and its rules" 33. He suggests that it is possible that the contact with popular Hellenistic philosophy played a part in this change, though he thinks that internal conditions in Israel were more influential.

Whatever the course of influence may be, some of the principles of Israelite theology are present, with some modifications, in later Roman views of nature and its relation to miracle. In the Hebrew Bible, at least in the Wisdom literature, the very creation of the universe is the most comprehensive divine act, and is inclusive of any apparent deviation from its universal regulation. Religious belief thus frames miracles paradoxically since there cannot be any exception from the supreme creation. Cicero (106–43 B.C.E.) formulates the same principle in terms of causality in nature:

"[... ] all portents have one and the same explanation and it is this: whatever comes into existence, of whatever kind, must needs [sic] find its cause in nature; and hence, even though it may be contrary to experience, it cannot be contrary to nature. Therefore, explore the cause, if you can, of every strange thing that excites your astonishments. If you do not find the cause be assured, nevertheless, that nothing could have happened without a cause, and employ the principles of natural philosophy to banish the fear which the novelty of the apparition may have occasioned. Then no earthquake or opening of the heavens, no showers of stones or blood, no shooting stars, or comets, will fill you with alarm. If I were to ask Chrysippus the causes of all the phenomena just mentioned, that distinguished writer on divination would never say that they happened by chance, but he would find an explanation for each of them in the laws of nature. For he would say: 'Nothing can happen without a cause; nothing actually happens that cannot happen; if that has happened which could have happened, then it should not be considered a portent; therefore there are no such things as portents.'"  

(De Divinatione 2, 28, 60 sq.)

31 Jacob (above, not. 7) 223; Weir (above, not. 7) 25 sq.  
Cicero establishes the paradox of miracle, recognizing that the very "idea of a suspension of natural laws is self-contradictory." 34 Augustine of Hippo (354–430), the fourth century Church father, synthesized the Israelite theology in the Hebrew Bible and the Hellenistic view of nature. He argued that we are wrong when we say that miracles are contrary to nature because "how can anything done by the will of God be contrary to nature, when the will of so great a creator constitutes the nature of each created thing? A portent therefore happens not contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known of nature" (City of God 21, 8). Whenever and wherever there is a discrepancy between events and the 'laws of nature' it is a manifestation of the shortcoming of human comprehension rather than a violation of the laws of nature. Later on John Locke (1632–1704) would similarly argue that "a miracle [is] a sensible operation, which, being above the comprehension of the spectator, and in his opinion contrary to the established course of nature, is taken by him to be divine". 35 This position, sharing a continuous tradition with at least some strands of the development of the Israelite world view, would be a far better starting point for a philosophical (or comparative) approach to understanding biblical concepts than Kasher's deliberate imposition of anachronistic rationalist concepts.

The Literary Approach

Yair Zakovitch, who uses a literary approach to infer an implicit concept of miracle in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible recognizes the inadequacy of Hume's definition. 36 Yet his own definition is close to Hume's. He replaces Hume's notion of "a violation of the laws of nature" with the idea that "the essence of the miracle is in the changed organization of the components of reality." 37 More specifically he discerns the principle of oppositional reversibility in nature as the basis for the construction of the miracle narratives:

"Food is given from heaven (manna); man ascends to the heavens (Elijah); a sea and a river turn into dry land (the Sea of Reeds, the Jordan). By the same token, the boundaries of time are blurred (it rains during the harvest season; the heavenly bodies deviate from their course and the day is lengthened), and even the divisions between life and death become obscured, and the dead arise to life again. Creatures and substances change places (a woman becomes a pillar of salt, water turns to blood, a staff into a snake, and creatures do not act in accordance with their nature (an ass speaks, a fish swallows a man and regurgitates him, and staff gives forth blossoms)." 38

37 Zakovitch (above, not. 8) 26.
38 ibid.
Such changes are clear 'violations of natural laws'. But Zakovitch does not rely on Hume's definition for the delineation of these events as miracles. Rather, for him, "the key for distinguishing between events that are miraculous and those that are not depends on how the event is depicted in the Bible. More specifically, it depends on the degree of magnificence of the event and on the reactions of the heroes or of the narrator." The substitution of literary for linguistic evidence is a challenging methodological proposition, but in this particular case it requires also a shift of levels from rhetoric to religion.

Literary evidence can provide only literary, not religious testimony. The character's response and the writer's evaluative comments are indicative of the narratability of these events, not of their miraculous nature, particularly because there is no linguistic evidence that such a concept existed at the time. The sense of wonder and skepticism, the two kinds of symptomatic responses that Zakovitch discerns, are in themselves literary testimony about the narrative value of the events. To paraphrase Lévi-Strauss, events that are extraordinary "are good to tell about." The narrative accounts of such events have the same verbal features as the stories that are subject to evaluative attitudes of wonder and doubt. According to Mary Louise Pratt, who employs the term 'tellability' to designate these characteristics,

"Assertions whose relevance is tellability must represent states of affairs that are held to be unusual, contrary to expectations, or otherwise problematic [. . .]. In making an assertion whose relevance is tellability, a speaker is not only reporting but also verbally displaying a state of affairs, inviting his addressee(s) to join him in contemplating it, evaluating it, and responding to it. His point is to produce in his hearers not only belief but also an imaginative and affective involvement in the state of affairs he is representing and an evaluative stance toward it. He intends them to share his wonder, amusement, terror, or admiration of the event. Ultimately, it would seem, what he is after is an interpretation of the problematic event, an assignment of meaning and value supported by the consensus of himself and his hearers."

The stories in the Hebrew Bible that could be anachronistically designated as 'miracle tales' bear all these narrative features. However, in the absence of linguistic evidence that the concept of miracle was available to the Israelites to begin with, or that the available concept encompassed tales of this kind, it would be erroneous to infer from them, or to construct upon them, a concept of miracle.

39 ibid., 42.
40 ibid., 43.
The Philological Approach

In his book *Wunder im Alten Testament* Franz-Elmar Wilms offers the most comprehensive analysis of the miraculous in the Hebrew Bible that is based on Hebrew lexemes. He proposes the abstract concept *ma'aseh Adonai*, ‘the act of God’, as the general category for the miraculous. The terminology that includes the biblical lexemes *ot, mophet, geburot, gedolot, nega, ngf, ma'aseh, mora, nora, tehilot*, and the verb *pl* distinguishes the various types of miracles. Each term designates a particular kind of divine act, and all of them together construct the idea of the miraculous. Theoretically this strict reliance on actual biblical terminology should make the construction of the concept of the miraculous completely inductive. However, the common denominator that all these terms share is not that they are component parts of the concept ‘the act of God’, but that they fit into the semantic range of the German term *Wunder*.

From the perspective of the theology of the Hebrew Bible, ‘the act of God’ is an all-inclusive concept that pertains to the creative force in nature and history. The terminology of miracles that Wilms has assembled comprises only a fragment of the entire range of God’s actions. Furthermore, as a specific term *ma'aseh Adonai* also has a rather specific reference which is narrower than the full terminological set that Wilms has constructed. Thus, while he has succeeded in avoiding the imposition of the Humean notion of miracle on the biblical Isra- elites, he cannot escape the framework provided by his own language in the search of the miraculous in the Hebrew Bible. The German *Wunder* connotes a sense of amazement, surprise, and extraordinariness. Wilms has selected terms that designate actions that have a similar connotation, with respect to the divine force, and thus inadvertently has introduced alien concepts into the analysis of the miracle in the Hebrew Bible.

The Religious Approach

Fully aware of the issues presented by the absence of a cognate for ‘miracle’, Simon de Vries proposes to classify the ‘miracle tales’ in the Hebrew Bible into two groups. Both involve divine action, the first direct, and the second mediated. He further distinguishes nine genres within the first group: (1) theophanies, (2) epiphanies, (3) holy-war stories, (4) divine punishment stories, (5) cultic legends, (6) ethnological sagas, (7) prophetic legends, (8) the Jonah story, (9) apocalyptic; and three within the second: (1) hero legends, (2) prophet legends, and (3) apocalyptic legends.

De Vries himself is aware of the problems his classification presents. He notes that “the Bible understands *everything* that happens as involving a level of

44 Wilms (above, not. 7) 25–31.
46 cf. Rogerson (above, not. 16).
divine causation". Therefore "what [he] call[s] 'miracle' is in no way essentially different from ordinary events except in its unusualness". Up to a point he reverses the Humean conception of miracle, conceiving the entire Israelite reality as divinely dominated, thus leaving no room for miracles in their post-enlightenment sense. Yet, unable to abandon the rationalistic and empirical point of view completely, he re-introduces the notion of 'violation of natural laws' as 'unusualness', a milder term that amounts to the same idea.

Furthermore, de Vries' generic classification may have practical analytical utility, but it bears no demonstratable relation to the Israelites' own division of narratives. He incorporates into the classification Greek religious terms like theophany and epiphany, and constructs a system that shifts from figures (prophet, hero) to actions (war, punishment) to kinds of milieu (cult, ethnology) or kinds of fiction (allegory, apocalypse). Such a system does not reveal the theological significance of miracles in the Hebrew Bible, nor does it demonstrate that miracle was a viable concept, even implicitly.

The Generic Approach

Alexander Rořé, who takes a generic approach to the analysis of miracles in the Hebrew Bible, appears to have a greater affinity with folklore theory and method than the previously discussed scholars. Focusing in particular on the six Elisha stories (II Kings 2:19–22, 23–24; 4, 1–7, 38–41, 42–44; 6, 1–7) in which the prophet performs various miraculous acts, he assumes that the tales have oral roots and considers them in comparative perspective. After all, narratives of healing, resuscitation, magic, and supernatural punishment are common in the folklores of many peoples, as well as in the Jewish traditions of other historical periods. But the very comparative generic analysis that draws upon folklore methodology exposes the deficiencies of his approach.

Rořé proposes to compare the Israelite miracle tale to the Christian legenda and to its analogue in the post-biblical tradition. But he also proposes to extend the generic comparison even further. He argues:

"It is in the hassidic age [18th and 19th centuries], [...] that this genre comes into its own. Here the legenda achieves almost canonical status as the official literature of the hassidic sects, which served to instruct their members. The dictum: 'It is enjoined to speak the praises of the saints' clearly expresses this intention, as does the Latin term legenda. The Hebrew term šébab (praise) which was applied to R. Isaac Luria, R. Israel Ba'αl Shem Tov and other kabalistic and hassidic personalities, is the Jewish equivalent of the medieval Christian legenda. In some ways the Hassidic šébab is more akin to the prophetic legenda than are the above-noted Christian parallels."  

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47 de Vries (above, not. 45) 326.
48 ibid., 327.
He proceeds by pointing out that martyrological narratives are absent from this narrative corpus and concludes by stating that “the prophetic legenda, like the hassidic wonder tale, is the creation of a band of believers who had gathered around a Holy Man, to express their admiration for him, recounted his miraculous acts.”

By aligning the miracle tale of the Hebrew Bible with the hassidic šeḥah, Roët collapses historical periods of folk literature together and obliterates the differences among the sets of systemic relations that govern the genres of a particular culture in a specific historical period. He flattens a diachronic process of change in folk poetics, and in a true comparative tradition, proposes that similarities overshadow significant variations. The term šeḥah appeared in Jewish folk and mystical literature only in the 17th century, as a generic designation of narratives followers told about a charismatic personality. While there are indeed thematic and structural similarities between the tales about Elisha and the post-biblical and hassidic accounts of miracles, conceptually and poetically they are worlds apart. An indiscriminate use of generic terms that ignores historical boundaries obscures the semantics a particular society conveys by naming a literary form in a specific period. “The names of folklore forms reflect their cultural conception and significance. The semantic components of such terms constitute sets of features which the speakers of a language regard as the primary of each verbal form. These are the characteristics of a genre which signify the symbolic meaning of a given form in a culture.” Arbitrary selecting of a term current in one period and assigning it to a form in another ignores the cultural conception and valuation of specific tales and their narrative forms. In this particular case, comparison obscures rather than brings to light the cultural conception and the poetics of both the modern tale of wonder and the biblical story.

Certainly, the goal of explaining the biblical world in its own terms is hardly new. Von Rad has already stated that “we must not transfer uncritically our accustomed ways of thinking to Israel. We must, rather, face the exacting demand of thinking ourselves into ideas, into a ‘view of life’, which are unfamiliar to us.” In folklore studies and anthropology this demand has been known as ‘emic analysis’, calling for the interpretation of other cultures from the insider’s perspective. Certainly, this approach has been subject to debate and criticism regarding its methodological attainability and philosophical tenability. But in the attempt to recover the world views and concepts that governed behavior and thought of earlier societies, such an approach, limited as it is, remains the only recourse available for the discovery of the past.

51 ibid.
54 von Rad (above, not. 15) 71.
However, those researchers who have proposed to uncover the concept of miracle in the Hebrew Bible have knowingly sought an opposite course. Not only have they not attempted to free themselves from the constraints of post-enlightenment thought, they deliberately imposed such thought upon the biblical Israelites. The Humean definition of miracle, rooted in English empiricist thought, has dominated this effort, becoming the defining principle for the discovery of the biblical concept of miracle. Consequently the comparative, philosophical, literary, linguistic, theological, and generic approaches can at best construct but not discover a possible biblical concept.

The search for the conception of miracle in the Hebrew Bible, and by implication the conception of nature, its laws and boundaries, if there were any, can be based only on evidence that language offers us in its literary context and in its relations to the narrative representation of reality. The goal of such an approach is not recovery of a static world view that transcends historical changes, contacts with other cultures, and the diversity and transformation of literary forms. On the contrary, within the axis of history, world view reveals itself as ever shifting, ever changing dimension of culture. Transformations in the meaning and use of terms only unfolds shifts in poetics and thought within the culture of a continuous society. The idea of miracles and the miracle tales that represent it, evidence such a transformation in terms of genres and concepts as they span two distinct periods in Jewish cultural history.

Wonders – as Acts and as a Narrative Genre

The idea of miracle cannot be discovered in the Hebrew Bible for the simple reason that it is not, was not, and could not have been there. The absence of the concept does not imply that the biblical Israelites had a modality of thought that did not discriminate between regularities and irregularities in nature. They did not operate according to principles of ‘primitive mentality’ or some other pre-logical thought – a possibility that Rogerson examines and rejects. Yet, as a concept and a term miracle is absent from the Hebrew Bible, and any attempt to construct it as an implicit concept is, by definition, anachronistic. Furthermore, since the biblical Israelites did not have the concept of miracle, it could not serve as the basis for generic distinctions in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible.

The Hebrew Bible describes divine acts as ma'aseh adonai, ‘The act of God’. The phrase refers to events like the awesome revelation in Mount Sinai (Exodus 34, 10), the earth opening its mouth and swallowing Korah and his sect (Deuteronomy II, 7), the wonders in the Sinai in general (Joshua 24, 31; Judges 2, 7) and the future destruction of Babylon (Jeremiah 51, 10). The phrase ma'aseh Elohim that occurs in Exodus 32, 16 and Ecclesiastes 3, 11 is not synonymous with the former, but refers specifically to God’s ability in crafts, manifesting itself in the engraving

57 Rogerson (above, not. 16).
of the tablets in particular or the construction of the world in general. The central divine act in the Israelites' history is the exodus from Egypt. The text of the Hebrew Bible refers with some textual variations to the 'strong hand', 

*yad hazakah*, which God displayed in the performance of his act. A variant phrase is 'the mighty hand and the outstretched arm' (*Deuteronomy* 7, 19), an expression that appears to have a formulaic value, occurring repeatedly in several contexts (e. g. *Deuteronomy* 11, 2; *1 Kings* 8, 42; *Jeremiah* 27, 5; 32, 17).

These are descriptive terms for divine acts. The referential term that occurs mostly but not exclusively in the hymnary literature is *nipha'ot*. The word has been associated with the vocabulary of miracles, but as is discussed above, it is not a cognate of 'miracle'. It is a plural noun derived from the root *pl* that ranges semantically from the ideas of riddle and wonder to those of salvation and redemption. This semantic range reflects a cultural attitude toward divine acts. They deliver mortals from distress in a way that is beyond human comprehension. The wondrous in *nipha'ot* does not refer to an irregularity in nature but rather to the unexplainable causality of an event. Being at a loss for an explanation for the wondrous act people attribute it to divine power as the only possible rationalization.

Shlomoh Morag considers *nipha'ot* among the terms that are indicative of the particular monotheistic belief that the Israelites developed in the midst of the ancient polytheistic Near East. According to Morag the particular semantic configuration of *nipha'ot* is absent from the vocabulary of neighboring peoples, and it reflects the peculiarities of the biblical belief in contrast to the religious features the Israelites shared with the peoples that surrounded them. Morag states:

"A metaphysic semantic component exists [...] in the word *nipha'ot*. In most of the verses in which it occurs the word designates actions that are peculiar to God alone: 'Who alone works great marvels [*nipha'ot*]' [*Psalms* 136, 4]. The word does not refer to wonderful deeds, heroic actions and bravery that man performs. There are verses in which the metaphysical semantic component has a historical connotation. In such verses the word designates great acts of deliverance and salvation that are part of the national history (e. g., 'Where are all His wondrous deeds about which our fathers told us' [*Judges* 6, 13]; 'I will show him wondrous deeds as in the days when You sallied forth from the land of Egypt' [*Micah* 7, 15]; 'Wondrous deeds in the land of Ham' [*Psalms* 106, 22]). People tell such acts of deliverance ('I will tell all your wonders' [*Psalms* 9, 2; see also 26, 7; 75, 2; 99, 3]; talk about them [*Psalms* 106, 2]), remember them [*Psalms* 106, 5] and comprehend their essence [*Psalms* 106, 7]. In these verses *nipha'ot* belongs to the semantic field of salvation and deliverance."  

58 The JPS Translation (above, not. 1) does not render this phrase literally, occasionally substituting the phrase ‘great might’; see for example *Exodus* 6, 1.  
59 Another term, *gedolot*, appears as a possible synonym of *nipha'ot* (i. e. *Deuteronomy* 10, 21; *Psalms* 71, 19; 106, 21–22; 136, 4; *Job* 5, 9). In *II Kings* 8, 4 *gedolot* appears also as a subject of narration, serving as a designation for the content or even possibly a narrative genre. However, possibly because *gedolot* has also another semantic connotation, of sheer largeness of objects and acts, it has not occupied the same position that *nipha'ot* has in biblical Hebrew.  
60 Stoebbe (above, not. 7).  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Semantic field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Exodus 3, 20</td>
<td>So I will stretch My hand and smite Egypt with various wonders which I will work upon them;</td>
<td>Historic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Exodus 34, 10</td>
<td>Before all your people I will work such wonders as have not been wrought on all the earth or in any nation;</td>
<td>Cosmic/Historic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Joshua 3, 5</td>
<td>Purify yourselves, for tomorrow the Lord will perform wonders in your midst.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Judges 6, 13</td>
<td>Where are all His wondrous deeds about which our fathers told us, saying, 'Truly the Lord brought us up from Egypt'?</td>
<td>Historic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Jeremia 21, 2</td>
<td>Perhaps the Lord will act for our sake in accordance with all His wonders, so that [Nebuchadrezzar] will withdraw from us.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Micah 7, 15</td>
<td>I will show him wondrous deeds as in the days You sallied forth from the land of Egypt.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Psalms 9, 2</td>
<td>I will tell all Your Wonders.</td>
<td>Ethical/Historic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Psalms 26, 7</td>
<td>Raising my voice in thanksgiving, and telling all Your wonders.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
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<td>9.</td>
<td>Psalms 40,6</td>
<td>You, O Lord my God, have done many things; the wonders You have devised for us cannot be set out before you.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Psalms 71, 17</td>
<td>I have proclaimed Your wondrous deeds.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Psalms 72, 18</td>
<td>Blessed is the Lord God, God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Psalms 75, 2</td>
<td>Men tell of Your wondrous deeds.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
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<td>13.</td>
<td>Psalms 78, 4</td>
<td>We will not withhold them from their children, telling the coming generation the praises of the Lord and His might, and the wonders He performed.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
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<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>Psalms 78, 11</td>
<td>They forgot His deeds and the wonders that He showed them.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Psalms 78, 32</td>
<td>Nonetheless, they went on sinning and had no faith in His wonders.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
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<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Psalms 86, 10</td>
<td>For You are great and perform wonders.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
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<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Psalms 96, 3</td>
<td>Tell of His glory among the nations, His wondrous deeds, among all peoples.</td>
<td>Cosmic</td>
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<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Psalms 98, 1</td>
<td>Sing to the Lord a new song, for He has worked wonders.</td>
<td>Cosmic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.</td>
<td>Psalms 105, 2</td>
<td>Sing praises to Him; speak of all His wondrous acts.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
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<tr>
<td>20.</td>
<td>Psalms 105, 5</td>
<td>Remember the wonders He has done.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
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<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Book</td>
<td>Text</td>
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<tr>
<td>21.</td>
<td>Psalms 106, 7</td>
<td>Our forefathers in Egypt did not perceive Your wonders.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
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<tr>
<td>22.</td>
<td>Psalms 106, 21-22</td>
<td>They forgot God who saved them, who performed great deeds in Egypt, wondrous deeds in the land of Ham.</td>
<td>Historic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23.</td>
<td>Psalms 107, 8</td>
<td>Let them praise the Lord for His steadfast love, His wondrous deeds for mankind.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
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<tr>
<td>24.</td>
<td>Psalms 107, 15</td>
<td>“</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25.</td>
<td>Psalms 107, 21</td>
<td>“</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26.</td>
<td>Psalms 107, 24</td>
<td>They have seen the works of the Lord and His wonders in the deep.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
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<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>Psalms 107, 31</td>
<td>Let them praise the Lord for His steadfast love, His wondrous deeds for mankind.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
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<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>Psalms 111, 4</td>
<td>He has won renown for His wonders.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
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<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Psalms 119, 18</td>
<td>Open my eyes, that I may perceive the wonders of Your teaching.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Psalms 119, 27</td>
<td>Make me understand the way of Your precepts, that I may study Your wondrous acts.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
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<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Psalms 131, 1</td>
<td>I do not aspire to great things or to what is beyond me.</td>
<td>Ethical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Psalms 136, 4</td>
<td>Who alone works great marvels.</td>
<td>Cosmic/Historic</td>
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<tr>
<td>33.</td>
<td>Psalms 145, 5</td>
<td>Your wondrous acts will I recite.</td>
<td>Cosmic/Ethical</td>
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<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Job 5, 9</td>
<td>Who performs great deeds which cannot be fathomed, wondrous things without number.</td>
<td>Cosmic/Ethical</td>
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<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Job 9, 10</td>
<td>“</td>
<td>“</td>
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<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>Job 37, 5</td>
<td>He works wonders that we cannot understand.</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Job 37, 14</td>
<td>Stop to consider the marvels of God.</td>
<td>“</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Job 42, 3</td>
<td>I spoke without understanding of things beyond me, which I did not know.</td>
<td>“</td>
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<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Daniel 8, 24</td>
<td>He will be extraordinarily destructive.</td>
<td>Allegorical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40.</td>
<td>Daniel 11, 36</td>
<td>He will speak awful things against the God of gods.</td>
<td>General</td>
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<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>Nehemiah 9, 17</td>
<td>Unmindful of Your wonders that You did for them.</td>
<td>Historical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>1 Chronicles 16, 9</td>
<td>Speak of all His wondrous acts.</td>
<td>Historical</td>
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<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>1 Chronicles 16, 12</td>
<td>Remember the wonders He has done.</td>
<td>Historical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>1 Chronicles 16, 24</td>
<td>Tell of His glory among the nations, His wondrous deeds among all the peoples.</td>
<td>Cosmic</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Table I lists all occurrences of the term *niphla’ot* in the Hebrew Bible, in their syntactic context and labels them by their semantic field. A syntactic examination of these texts reveals an important aspect of the term. It occurs in the Hebrew Bible in two constructions. When God is the subject, or the object of an imperative clause, *niphla’ot* is predicated upon the verb *ase* ‘to do’, ‘to make’, or other verbs of action (for example, texts nos. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6). When humans are the subject, or the object of an imperative clause, *niphla’ot* is predicated upon the verbs *spr*, *sub*, or *shir* ‘to tell’, ‘to narrate’, or ‘to sing’. *Niphla’ot* serves in these sentences as a generic term for narratives the subjects of which are the manifestations of the divine transcendental order upon earth.

In Hebrew this dual usage of terms designating both action and its narration occurs only in the case of a few genres. Most generic terms are noun derivatives of roots of verbal actions, such as *sipur* ‘a tale’ from *spr* ‘to tell’, *aggadah* ‘legend’ from *ngd* ‘to say’, or *shir* from *shur* or *shir* ‘to sing’. But when a term such as *ma’aseh* is not a transformation of a locutionary root, it has gone through a historical-linguistic development similar to that of *niphla’ot*, designating both an act and its narration. Occasionally the use is ambiguous and *niphla’ot* functions as both action and narration. For example in text no. 4, *Judges* 6, 13, when an angel of the Lord appears before Gideon greeting him: “The Lord is with you, valiant warrior!” Gideon understands the formula literally and replies: “Please, my lord, if the Lord is with us, why has all this befallen us? Where are all His wondrous deeds [niphla’ot] about which our fathers told us, saying, ‘Truly the Lord brought us up from Egypt?’” In this dialogue – which attests also to the process of oral transmission in Israelite society – the term *niphla’ot* refers specifically to the historic tradition of the exodus from Egypt. But Gideon’s question, which includes an intertextual reference to the use of the term in *Exodus* (nos. 1, 2), alludes to God’s promissary statement as an act and a subject of narratives.

*Niphla’ot* occurs as a generic term in *Psalms* (nos. 10, 12, 13, 17, 19, and 33), and in *Job* (no. 38), as well as in later books such as *Daniel* (no. 40) and *I Chronicles* (nos. 42, 44). Thematically, in these cases the historic reference is primarily to the exodus from Egypt, the most traumatic event in the historical consciousness of the Israelites. But the term also alludes to the cosmic and the ethical components of the generic term.

In fact, an examination of Table I reveals that the cosmic, the ethical, and the historic are three distinct semantic domains to which the word belongs. God’s acts have been wondrous in the creation and regulation of cosmos and society as well as the conduct of the history of His people. All three dimensions are imbued with unpredictability, irrationality, and apparent irregularity. The notion of the divine offers order in nature, principles for human conduct, and causality for events. In a universe writhing with conflict, torn by wars, and troubled with human misery, the very thought of order, justice, and regularity is wondrous. It is then not surprising that semantically *niphla’ot* combines components of wonder: incomprehensibility and paradoxically, even irregularity. With the divine power
in control, even the irregular becomes part of a little understood but assumedly rational plan.

Thus the narratable element in nipha'ot is not the extraordinary event that occurs in the miracle tales, rather it is world harmony, or restored harmony. In the story of Israel in Egypt, the discord, after all, has been slavery and oppression; the gained freedom restored some balance in the world. Nipha'ot, hence, are narratives that tell of unity and harmony, within the universal spheres of nature, society and time and between them.

Nipha’ot is a cognate of neither miracle nor miracle tale. Neither is it, as many have proposed, one of several terms that together with others represent the broader semantic range of miracles in the Hebrew Bible. Rather, the term is an integral part of the narrative representation of the Israelites' world view. It reflects their attitude toward cosmic and historical actions that were beyond their control and comprehension, and toward ethical principles that they idealized more often than realized.

Ancient texts contain within them the terms of past poetic systems. These are neither complete nor comprehensive; they do not represent the full life of the verbal forms in society and social interaction, but offer only a few partial glimpses into historic poetic systems. The names that label the genres of speech distinguish them from other verbal forms, indicating their position in the cultural cognitive system. In this sense "historical poetics reconstructs the position of the literary genre in a distinct literary, even cultural reality".

**Historical Generic Shift**

The historicity of the system has, however, another dimension that is often absent from the ethnographic description of folklore. In non-literate societies, for which past written records are unavailable, the historical perspectives may be partially revealed through hypothetical reconstruction of the past and through etymological investigation. Methodologically, this approach is inevitably restricted to current views of the past because the terms and the accounts are obtained in the present. However, the literary documentation of oral genres in historical texts shows that they are in the process of change. The emergence of new terms and the disappearance of others from the discourse about literary forms permits the view of poetics as a changing cultural system. From such a perspective, poetics becomes historical not just because it is of the past, but also

62 For example, Grant (above, not. 7) 153; Jacob (above, not. 7) 224; Procksch (above, not. 7) 456-458; Robinson (above, not. 7) 37-39; Sabourine (above, not. 7) 236 sq.; Stoebe (above, not. 7); Weir (above, not. 7) 26; Wilms (above, not. 7) 115-137.


because it spans diachronic dimension. It is a system in flux. Its changes are neither evolutionary nor teleological, but correspond to the adjustments a group makes in reaction to new cultural influences, new institutions, new roles, and new ideas that become an integral part of its social and religious life. Historical poetics is a poetics of shifts, permutations, and transformations in which verbal forms are appropriated into new contents and styles, and in which new terms function to discourse about acts and their narrative representations. Genres shift names and frames and thereby their significance in culture. Therefore textual and lexical comparisons of documents from different literary-historical periods have a crucial methodological role in uncovering the generic shifts in historical poetics. The significance of such an approach becomes apparent in the comparison of generic terms from two successive literary periods.

In post-biblical literature the term niphla'ot occurs only in quotations from the Hebrew Bible and has virtually disappeared from the discourse about God and man. But the subject of the miraculous did not disappear. Such tales, if anything, flourished at that period among Jews, pagans and early Christians. The intervention of the supernatural in the world of nature and humanity has been the subject of numerous narratives throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, cutting across nationalities, religions, and languages. In the Mishnah and in the talmudic-midrashic literature that represents the verbal activity in the Jewish society of that period, there is no dearth of stories about unexpected changes in nature and society, the cause of which could be attributed only to a divine force. Some of these narratives suggest a thematic, even formal, continuity between the biblical Elijah and Elisha stories (I Kings 17, 9–24; 18; II Kings 4, 1–7, 18–37, 42–44; 5; 13, 20–21) and the rain-making and healing narratives of the post-biblical literature. Yet neither the term niphla'ot nor its post-biblical substitute applies to these stories in either period.

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68 See the quotations of Psalms 107, 8, 15, 21 and 31, in the Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 54b; Psalms 72, 18; 139, 14 and Job 9, 10 in Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 31b; Psalms 98, 1 in Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 24b; Psalms 40, 6 in Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 77a, and Job 9, 10 in Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 2a and Ketubbot 8b.
In the tannaic and amoraic traditions\textsuperscript{71} there was a lexical substitution for the term \textit{niphla'ot}. This lexical shift of the term designating such acts was accompanied by a semantic extension on the one hand and a restriction on the other. In the process the new term represents also a clear transformation of the concept of divine intervention in reality.

The term that substitutes for \textit{niphla'ot} of the Hebrew Bible is the biblical word for a pole, a flag, an ensign, or a banner – \textit{nes} (pl. \textit{nissim})\textsuperscript{72}. While in the Hebrew Bible (nos. 1–6, 11, 13–15, 19–22, 32–33, 41–44 in Table 1) \textit{niphla'ot} refers to the acts of God in Egypt, in the Mishnah the word \textit{nissim} refers to these events – “Ten wonders \textit{nissim} were wrought for our fathers in Egypt” (\textit{Avot} 5, 4) – as well as to other acts. Other tannaitic and later sources expound upon this formulaic enumeration of miracles by constructing a sequence of metaphoric references to the exodus story, considering each metaphor as a separate miracle\textsuperscript{73}. In the historical myth of the Jewish nation, the exodus from Egypt functions as an archetypal narrative of divine deliverance, and therefore other deliverance stories are conceived as miraculous, \textit{nissim}. The last of them appears in the Hebrew Bible in the \textit{Book of Esther}, as Rabbi Assi, a Palestinian amora of the third generation (late 3rd and early 4th centuries) expounds: “Why was Esther compared to dawn [\textit{Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin} 54b]? To tell you that just as the dawn is the end of the whole night, so is the story of Esther the end of all miracles” [\textit{Babylonian Talmud, Yoma} 29a].

In their interpretive effort the rabbis themselves illustrate that they considered \textit{nissim} to be a lexical substitution for \textit{niphla'ot}. They interpret the verse “Blessed is the Lord God, God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things \textit{niphla'ot}” (\textit{Psalms} 72, 18) in the following way: “Even the person for whom a miracle \textit{nes} is performed is unaware of the miracle” (\textit{Babylonian Talmud, Niddah} 31a). When the interpreter tries to resolve the problem how God alone could be aware of the miracle, not the person who is saved by it, he indirectly translates the term \textit{niphla'ot} by its post-biblical equivalent \textit{nes}.

In the \textit{Avot} tractate of the Mishnah there is a clear indication of the semantic extension of the term represented in the listing of the ten miracles \textit{nissim} that “were wrought to our fathers in the Sanctuary.” These miracles concern possible disasters, or simple human failures, that did not happen:

\begin{quote}
“No woman miscarried from the odour of the holy [i. e., sacrificial] flesh; 
The holy flesh never became putrid; 
No fly was seen in the slaughterhouse; 
No personal uncleanness occurred to the high priest on the day of atonement; 
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{71} The tannaim were the Jewish rabbis in Palestine during the first two centuries C. E.; the amoraim were the rabbis in Palestine and Babylon from the 3rd to the 6th centuries. 
\textsuperscript{72} For references see above at the first paragraph of this essay. 
The rains did not extinguish the fire of the wood of the pile;  
The wind did not prevail against the column of smoke;  
No disqualification was found in the omer, or in the two loaves, or in the shewbread;  
They stood serried, yet prostrated themselves [with] wide spaces [between them];  
Never did a serpent or a scorpion do injury in Jerusalem;  
And no man said to his fellow: ‘The place is too strait for me to lodge overnight in Jerusalem’” (Avot 5,5)\(^\text{74}\).

The term *nes*, meaning miracle, occurs already in the tannaic period in the Mishnah, with its extended semantic range as a unique extraordinary event. There are two references to a legendary narrative: “Nicanor experienced miracles [nissim] with his gates and his money was praised” (Yoma 3, 10), and “All the original gates were changed for gates of gold, except the gates of Nicanor because a miracle [nes] wrought to them. Some say, however, it was because the copper of them gleamed [like gold]” (Middot 2, 3). The nature of the miracle becomes apparent from another source from the same period (Tosefta, Yom Ha-Kippurim 2, 4) and was fully articulated in the Babylonian Talmud:

“What miracles happened to his door? It was reported that when Nicanor had gone to fetch doors from Alexandria of Egypt, on his return a gale arose in the sea to drown him. Thereupon they took one of his doors and cast it into the sea and yet the sea would not stop its rage. When, thereupon, they prepared to cast the other into the sea, he rose and clung to it, saying: ‘Cast me in with it!’ [They did so, and] the sea stopped immediately its raging. He was deeply grieved about the other [door]. As he arrived at the harbour of Acco, it broke through and came up from under the sides of the boat. – Others say: A monster of the sea swallowed it and spat it out on the dry land” (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 38a)\(^\text{75}\).

As *nes*, miracle involves a violation of the laws of nature: in the above example, preventing metal from sinking into the deep sea. The Hebrew Bible has already recounted such a miracle in the story of Elisha’s disciple who dropped his iron ax head into the river. “And he cried aloud, ‘Alas, master, it was a borrowed one!’ ‘Where did it fall?’ asked the man of God. He showed him the spot; and he cut off a stick and threw it in, and he made the ax head float. ‘Pick it up’, he said; so he reached out and took it” (II Kings 6, 5–7). In the Hebrew Bible, however, the act, though violating the laws of nature, is not labeled as a miracle. In the post-biblical period such events have been reformulated in terms of later perspectives.

Such a reformulation of past narratives is apparent in the dialogue between Rab and Samuel, the two leading Babylonian amoraic of the first generation (3rd century). They comment upon the story of Elisha and the abusive little boys. “As he [Elisha] was going up the road, some little boys came out of the town and jeered at him, saying, ‘Go away, baldhead! Go away, baldhead!’ He turned around and looked at them and cursed them in the name of the Lord. Thereupon,

\(^{74}\) See also Schechter (above, not. 73); Goldin (above, not. 73) 143–147.

two she-bears came out of the woods and mangled forty-two of the children” (II Kings 2, 23–24). “Rab and Samuel [differ in their interpretation]; one said it was miracle, while the other said it was a miracle within a miracle. He who said it was a miracle did so because there was a forest but there were no bears; he who said it was a miracle within a miracle did so because there was no forest nor were there any bears” (Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 47a). Their debate centers around the dimension, not the quality, of the incident. Immoral as it was, both agree to rename the event as a miracle – nes. The extent of the miraculous in this sequence of events depends upon their deviation from the natural state of affairs at that location.

Perhaps the most dramatic illustration of the transformation of the concept of the miraculous appears in the following story:

“Our Rabbis taught: It once happened that a man’s wife died and left a child to be sucked, and he could not afford to pay a wet-nurse, whereupon a miracle was performed and his teats opened like the two teats of a woman and he suckled his son. R. Joseph observed, Come and see how great was this man, that such a miracle was performed on his account! Said Abaye to him, On the contrary: how lowly was this man, that the order of the Creation was changed on his account” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 53b).

Whether an expression of the man’s meritorious or lowly behavior, in this case the miracle clearly violates the laws of nature rather than becomes part of the divine harmony of nature, history, and society that is implicit in the concept of niphalot. Nature, the concept to which the phrase ‘order of Creation’ refers, becomes a knowable rather than a mysterious domain. It has its own laws and regulations, causes consequences that are known or discoverable. But a miracle in this particular Jewish society is not simply a violation of these ‘laws of nature’ but a change, the cause of which is not natural but ethical or religious. In other words, a nes occurs when ethical values affect the course of nature.

In the post-biblical period miracle is not a willed act. The texts of the tales about miracle-workers and rain-makers such as Honi the Circle Drawer (Mishnah Ta'anit 3, 8; Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 23a; Palestinian Talmud, Ta'anit 3, 9–10); and Nakdimon ben Gurion (Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit 19b–20a; Aboth de Rabbi Nathan 1, 6) do not refer to their acts as nissim. These were not miracles from the cultural perspective.

Neither are these wonder-workers counted among the tannaitic rabbis who were ‘experienced in miracles’. The latter were figures such as Nahum ish Gamzo, a tanna of the second generation who lived at the end of the first and the

78 These two sources differ from each other with respect to the use of the term nes. While in the Babylonian Talmud the term is absent, it occurs in Aboth de Rabbi Nathan, an earlier source in Hebrew. The term occurs in Nakdimon ben Gurion’s appeal to God to show his debtor that the day is still long.
beginning of the second century (*Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit* 21a; *Sanhedrin* 109a\(^7^9\)), Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai (*Babylonian Talmud, Me'ilah* 17b), and the wife of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa (*Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit* 25a). They were not miracle workers: miracles happened to them. In the talmudic-midrashic literature a person is an object of a miraculous action, but not a subject who performs it.

As *nissim*, miracles were always performed by God as *niphla'ot* were; however while *niphla'ot* affected an entire community, *nissim* could be related either to a community or to an individual. The dual applicability of the term becomes apparent in the talmudic concern regarding the benediction commemorating miracles. The Mishnah states: "If one sees a place where miracles were wrought for Israel, he should say, blessed be He who wrought miracles for our ancestors in this place" (*Berakhot* 9, 1). Rabbi Yohanan, a Palestinian amora of the second generation (250–290 B.C.E.) commented upon this Mishnah: "For a miracle done to a large body it is the duty of everyone to say a blessing, for a miracle done to an individual he alone is required to say a blessing" (*Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot* 54a).

The examples the rabbis employed demonstrate that the knowledge of and information about miracles was available to them through local legend narratives associated with a particular locale:

"What of the case of the man who was once travelling through Eber Yemina [the southern suburb of Mahoza in Babylon] when a lion attacked him, but he was miraculously saved, and when he came before Raba [a Babylonian amora of the third generation, 290–320] he said to him, Whenever you pass that place say, Blessed be He who wrought for me a miracle in this place? There was the case, too, of Mar the son of Rabina [a Babylonian amora of the sixth generation, 375–425], who was once going through the valley of 'Araboth and was suffering from thirst and a well of water was miraculously created for him and he drank, and another time he was going through the manor of Mahoza when a wild camel attacked him and at that moment the wall of a house just by fell in and he escaped inside; and whenever thereafter he came to 'Araboth he used to say, Blessed be He who wrought for me miracles in 'Araboth and with the camel, and when he passed through the manor of Mahoza he used to say, Blessed be He who wrought for me miracles with the camel in 'Araboth" (*Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot* 54a).

In the Hellenistic and early Christian traditions supernatural forces perform miracles through people, but among the Jews of that time, in continuation of beliefs held in earlier periods, no human could perform miracles. Instead, through ethical and religious behavior a person could achieve a state of piety in which he or she would be, when he is in dire need, worthy of miracles. Baruch Bokser is correct when he writes about the tanna Hanina ben Dosa that he "does not claim to rely on a miracle. It is the reader, seeing that Hanina is doing something extraordinary, who makes that deduction."\(^8^0\) The miracle is wrought to

\(^{79}\) See Agus (above, not. 77) 115–135.

him or his wife, he does not perform it for the community or others as the rainmakers do.

The precise use of the term *nes* (pl. *nissim*) is illuminating. In a sequence of narratives about the poverty of Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa, the term occurs when he or his wife is the object of supernatural help; when he prays for help and a neighbor is the beneficiary of divine intervention the term *nes* ‘miracle’ does not appear in the text.

“[a.] Every Friday his wife would light the oven and throw twigs into it so as not to be put to shame. She had a bad neighbour who said, I know that these people have nothing, what then is the meaning of all the [smoke]? She went and knocked at the door. [The wife of R. Hanina] feeling humiliated [at this] retired into a room. A miracle happened and [her neighbour] saw the oven filled with loaves of bread and the kneading trough full of dough; she called out to her: You, you, bring your shovel, for your bread is getting charred; and she replied, I just went to fetch it. A tanna taught: She actually had gone to fetch the shovel because she was accustomed to miracles.

[b.] Once his wife said to him: How long shall we go on suffering so much? He replied: What shall we do? — Pray that something may be given to you [she replied]. He prayed, and there emerged the figure of a hand reaching out to him a leg of a golden table. Thereupon he saw in a dream that the pious would one day eat at a three-legged golden table but he would eat at a two-legged table. Her husband said to her: Are you content that everybody shall eat at a perfect table and we at an imperfect table? She replied: What then shall we do? — Pray that the leg should be taken away from you [she replied]. He prayed and it was taken away. A tanna taught: The latter miracle was greater than the former; for there is a tradition that a thing may be given but once; it is never taken away again” (*Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit* 25a).

But in the following story that appears in the same narrative sequence the term *nes* is absent and the translator added the adverb ‘miraculously’ parenthetically as an interpretation.

“Once a woman neighbour of R. Hanina was building a house but the beams would not reach the walls. She thereupon came to him and said: I have built a house but the beams will not reach the walls. He asked her: What is your name? She replied: Aiku. He thereupon exclaimed: Aiku, may your beams reach [the walls]. A tanna taught: They projected one cubit on either side. Some say, new pieces joined themselves [miraculously] to the beams. It has been taught: Polemo says: I saw that house and its beams projected one cubit on either side, and people told me: This is the house which R. Hanina b. Dosa covered with beams, through his prayer” (*Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit* 25a).

Occasionally there is an apparent contextual and textual ambiguity in the use of the term *nes*. But closer examination reveals that such a semantic confusion results from the anachronistic projection of the modern meaning of the term into the talmudic text. In the story about the curative power of the second century tanna, Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, “who was experienced in miracles” (*Babylonian Talmud, Me’ilah* 17b), the term *nes* could potentially have two references. Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai and another rabbi were going to appeal to the Emperor to annul a harsh decree:
“Then Ben Temalion [a demon] came to meet them. [He said]: Is it your wish that I accompany you? Thereupon R. Simeon wept and said: The handmaid of my ancestor’s house was found worthy of meeting an angel [reference to Hagar, Genesis 16] thrice, and I not even to meet him once. However, let the miracle be performed, no matter how. Thereupon he [the demon] advanced and entered into the Emperor’s daughter. When [R. Simeon] arrived there, he called out: ‘Ben Temalion leave her, Ben Temalion leave her’ and as he proclaimed this he left her. He [the Emperor] said to them: Request whatever you desire. They were led into the treasure house to take whatever they chose. They found that bill [containing the decrees against the Jews], took it and tore it to pieces” (Babylonian Talmud, Me’ilah 17b)\textsuperscript{81}.

This unusual curative power may appear miraculous because it deviates from the laws of nature, and the term nes could have referred to it. But the narrator does not use the term to designate the act of healing. Rather, he calls a nes the act of deliverance of the Jewish community. When the rabbi says: “Let the miracle be performed”, he refers to the future lifting of the decree against the Jewish community. The means of salvation, whether with demonic or angelic assistance, does not matter at this moment. It is a nes, the same way the deliverance from Egypt, and the saving of the Jewish community in Persia at the time of Esther were miraculous acts.

The property of deliverance is part of the concept of miracle when it relates to individual martyrs, not only to an entire community. The very act of martyrdom implicitly manifested an expectation of miraculous deliverance. A rabbinical decree that sought to discourage people from rushing into giving up their life for the sake of their belief underscores both this attitude and, at the same time, the notion of the miraculous. It states: “Whoever gives his life on condition that a miracle be done for him – no miracle will be done for him. But if it is not on condition that a miracle be done for him, a miracle will be done for him (Sifra, III Emor 9, 5)\textsuperscript{82}.

The association between miracles and martyrdom becomes also apparent in the following legend:

“What is Trajan’s [Day]? – It was said: When Trajan was about to execute Lulianus and his brother Pappus in Laodicea [Lydia] he said to them, ‘If you are of the people of Hananiah, Misael and Azariah, let your God come and deliver you from my hands, in the same way as he delivered Hananiah, Misael and Azariah from the hands of Nebuchadnezzar’; and to this they replied: ‘Hananiah, Misael and Azariah were perfectly righteous men and they merited that a miracle should be wrought for them, and Nebuchadnezzar also was a king worthy for a miracle to be wrought through him, but as for you, you are a common and wicked man and are not worthy that a miracle be wrought through you; and as for us, we have deserved of the Omnipresent that we should die, and if you will not kill us, the Omnipresent has many other agents of death. The Omnipresent has in His world many bears and lions who can attack us and kill us; the only reason why the Holy

\textsuperscript{81} See an analysis of a later version of this story in Noy (above, not. 69) 136–138.
One, blessed be He, has handed us over into your hand is that at some future time He may exact punishment of you for our blood.' Despite this he killed them. It is reported that hardly had they moved from there when two officials arrived from Rome and split his skull with clubs" (*Babylonian Talmud, Ta'anit* 18b).

The post-biblical *nes* is a term for a specific kind of divine intervention in reality, and does not correspond to all the properties of miracles in modern languages. A confusion between the modern and the tannaic and amorica concept of miracle still prevails and is a source of some important theological and historical discussions. Ephraim E. Urbach, for example, sets up a dichotomy between magic and miracle-working as two contrasting concepts in the ancient Jewish world. The rabbis, as the Hebrew Bible, rejected the former and endorsed the latter. While Urbach offers an abundance of evidence in support of these attitudes, the texts he cites do not support the contention that for the rabbis magic and miracles were binary opposite categories. While magic requires human verbal or ritualistic action, miracle is neither a human act nor subject to human mediation. *Nes* occurs independently of human agency. This concept of the miraculous is succinctly expressed by a rhetorical question and its response: "Who performs miracles? The Holy One, blessed be He" (*Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot* 50a).

Such a statement was not simply part of the rabbinical propaganda against ancient and Hellenistic paganism or against Christianity. Neither was such a dialogic proposition an attempt to suppress folk beliefs and to uphold monotheism. There have been plenty of rabbinical narratives about Jewish healers, rain-makers, and other manipulators of nature that resemble stories of other nations, cults, and religions. However, their performances were not *nissim*. In terms of the post-biblical belief system, as it is manifested in the language of the period and its use, the only miracle-worker was God himself. The application of this phrase to a mortal would have been a contradiction in terms. Like *niphla’ot* in the biblical period, *nissim* were performed by God and were subject to His measure of justice and awareness of need.

The acts of *nes* are in a category apart, in which human beings are passive recipients of God’s help. The manipulation of the supernatural through appeals, prayers, and incantations is a different type of action in the cognitive world of post-biblical Jewish society. Such actions indeed could be directed at either positive or negative supernatural forces, and this determined the religious authorities’ approval of such acts. But neither of these manipulations of nature, health, and economy is either identified or contrasted with the concept of *nes*, which connotes a divine authoritative change or maintenance of world order.

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Moreover, not all divine acts and manifestations are *nissim*, miracles. For example, in their examination of the relations between miracles and law, Guttmann 86 and Baumgarten 87 do not take sufficiently into consideration the talmudic-midrashic terminology. Consequently they confuse different types of divine intervention, and most significantly do not distinguish between these acts and their verbal accounts. Both would agree that “miracle stories were significant weapons in the arsenal of ancient polemics, Jewish and non-Jewish” 88. Guttmann further discerns a historical decline in the influence miracle stories had on the law, a decline that paralleled the growth of Christianity 89. In their analysis they resort to a broad range of narratives recounting divine interference in human affairs and the course of nature. From their modern perspectives all such stories are miracle tales. However, the language of those texts does not bear out this assumption. Guttmann cites many talmudic-midrashic narratives in which a heavenly voice interferes in events upon earth. But these narratives do not mention the occurrence of a miracle, *nes*, but instead the sound of a *bat kol*, an echo, a metaphor for a divine voice 90. *Bat kol* and *nes* are two distinct types of divine manifestations in nature and society. The rabbis rejected both as a basis for the formulation of laws. Guttmann conflates these two rejections and treat them as a single type of event, and in his extensive discussion suggests that the talmudic dictum “you may not quote miraculous deeds [in support of an argument]” (Babylonian Talmud, Yebamot 121b; Hulin 43a; Kiddushin 39b) applies to both cases 91.

This dictum, however, introduces a new concept. The talmudic text employs not simply the term *nissim*, miracles, but *ma’aseh nissim*, the narration of miraculous events. The rabbis rejected the narrative accounts of miracles as a valid precedent for settling legal cases. These accounts consolidated themselves in the society as a new narrative genre, miracle tale, *ma’aseh nissim*. From a judicial point of view this genre has no bearing upon reality or society. Its application is confined to belief, or, if you will, fiction. It is not a verifiable account and hence could neither support nor generate laws.

**Conclusion**

The lexical substitution for the biblical *nipha’ot* by the post-biblical *nissim* and *ma’aseh nissim* represents a shift in genre and a change in the conceptual view of the relationships between God, humans and nature. The concern with the transformation of one genre to another has been a fundamental issue in theories

86 Guttmann (above, not. 69).
87 Baumgarten (above, not. 69).
88 ibid., 253.
89 Guttmann (above, not. 69) 405.
of genre in folklore and literature. Not only the classification and nomination of literary forms are at stake, but also questions concerning the rise and fall of verbal forms in society and history.

The relation between the biblical niphla'ot and the post-biblical nissim and ma'aseh nissim offer a case study in generic formation, continuity and discontinuity. The term niphla'ot began to function as a name for a genre only after it named a class of actions. It marked first the wondrous acts of God, and only later the narratives that represented them. As a narrative genre niphla'ot appears clearly in the biblical hymnary in Psalms as part of the meta-communication about literature, rather than the literary expression itself.

The disappearance of the term, and with it the generic category, from the post-biblical literature occurred simultaneously with the rise of Hellenistic influence upon Jewish society, and the conceptual changes that it precipitated. Nature had become an entity independent of God. It has its own rules and regulations, and its events are consequences of causes that are knowable and discoverable. At that time the term nissim became a substitute for niphla'ot, but at the same time it was extended to convey the schism between the natural and the supernatural. It represented events that involved changes in the normal course of nature, the causes of which were not in the natural but in the ethical realm. Postbiblical Judaism conceived of a fluid connection between ethics and nature. Nissim was the term for acts of individual and communal deliverance referring to both biblical and post-biblical events. Ma'aseh nissim became the name for their narrative representation.

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92 Bahktin, M.: Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics. s.l. 1973, 87; id. (above, not. 63) 60–102; Ben-Amos (above, not. 49); Frye, N.: Anatomy of Criticism. Princeton 1956; Jauss (above, not. 66) 76–109; Jolles, A.: Einfache Formen: Legende, Sage, Mythe, Rätsel, Spruch, Kasus, Memorabile, Märchen, Witz. Halle 1930 (Tübingen 1982); Schaeffer (above, not. 64); Todorov (above, not. 67).