What Does the Mob Want Lot to Do in Genesis 19:9?

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WHAT DOES THE MOB WANT LOT TO DO IN GENESIS 19:9?

Christopher Heard
Pepperdine University

Most English Bible translations render נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ in Gen 19:9 with some variant of “Stand back!” However, a very few interpreters recommend a translation along the lines of “Come closer!” more in keeping with the typical gloss on נָתַן. A detailed study of the syntax and semantics of both נָתַן and נָתַן, as well as constructions similar to נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ, demonstrates the strength of the minority suggestion.

Genesis 19:9 presents an interesting semantic conundrum. In this familiar scene, the men of Sodom have gathered outside of Lot’s house to demand that he bring out to them his two visitors. When Lot himself comes out instead and interposes himself between the rapacious mob and the closed door behind him, the narrator reports, “They said, נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ! They said, ‘This one came to live as a stranger, and he keeps on playing the judge! Now we will do worse to you than to them.’ They pressed very hard against the man, against Lot, and they drew near to break down the door.” The curious phrase נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ rarely draws explicit comment from interpreters and translators, although it admits of two virtually opposite translations. Since נָתַן has the sense “to approach, to draw near,” and respected lexicographers regard נָתַן as an adverb meaning something like “yonder,” most translators and commentators render נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ using some variation on “Stand back!”¹ A very few interpreters, however, have rendered נָתַן נַפְשׁוֹ as something like “Come closer!”² They very fact that scholars have translated the phrase in precisely


opposite ways attracts sufficient interest to invite a more careful examination of this intriguing phrase.

1. THE SEMANTICS AND SYNTAX OF שָׁנַע

Because the verb שָׁנַע generally has the sense “to draw near, to approach,” some readers might consider it unusual to find a speaker using the verb to mean “move away.” Thus one line of argument in favor of translating הָאָדָם as “come here” concerns the semantics of the verb itself. In two separate studies, Lyn Bechtel has argued for translating הָאָדָם along these lines, but her two treatments differ somewhat from one another.

In a 1998 essay, Bechtel translated הָאָדָם as “Draw near!” In doing so, she appealed to the use of שָׁנַע in the judicial context of Deut 25:1. Bechtel contends that the mob’s use of the verb shows invites readers to hear judicial overtones in the mob’s speech. In making this argument, however, Bechtel seems to have construed הָאָדָם as a statement made by the men of Sodom to each other; according to her, “The townsmen are to ‘draw near’ in judgment of Lot.” However, the grammar speaks against this idea. In saying “הָאָדָם,” the mob uses a masculine singular imperative, but in Gen 19:9 the mob speaks with one voice as “we,” using the first person plural form שָׁנַע (“we will do harm”), and the narrator describes the mob’s speech using plural verb forms (as זוֹלַע ‘they said’). It seems unlikely that in the midst of all these plurals, the mob would address itself (or the men of the mob each other) using a singular imperative rather than, say, a plural cohortative. הָאָדָם surely stands as a command that the crowd barks at Lot, not at itself.

Bechtel takes a different tack in a 1999 essay. Again invoking the mob’s use of שָׁנַע to view the scene judicially, and again cross-referencing Deut 25:1 and Isa 50:8, Bechtel this time translates הָאָדָם as “Present yourself.” The crowd thus demands that Lot present himself for judgment, as at the conclusion of a court case. Although Bechtel’s attempts to interpret this scene with a jurisprudential spin carry some prima facie plausibility, her interpretation really stands or falls with the adequacy of its treatment of שָׁנַע.

The intriguing verb יָגוֹל appears 125 times in the Tanak, making it well-attested though not exceptionally common. In some verses, writers use both Qal and Niphal forms of יָגוֹל to refer to the same event, demonstrating clearly that no significant semantic difference obtains for יָגוֹל between these two binyanim. For example, Gen 33:7 reads, “Leah also drew near [יָגוֹל, Qal] with her children, and they bowed down, and afterward Joseph drew near [יָגוֹל, Niphal] with Rachel, and they bowed down.” The verb implies movement, “drawing near” toward some destination, but writers may indicate such destinations in various ways. When they specify the destination, biblical writers usually use the preposition לַעֲרָה to mark it, but they can also use a variety of other prepositions, such as לַאָ, בַּעֲרָה, לַעֲרָה, לַעֲרָה, and לַעֲרָה. In a handful of cases, the adverb מִלְאָ or the adverb מִלְאָ, both meaning “here,” appear alongside יָגוֹל. In about ten cases, the destination goes unspecified, but the purpose of the “drawing near,” usually indicated using לַא (or, once, מִלְאָ), imply the direction of motion. Over forty appearances of the verb יָגוֹל lack any preposition or adverb marking the direction or purpose. In many of these instances, the clause that follows יָגוֹל opens with a wayyiqtol form potentially indicating purpose. Table 1 summarizes these data.

This information funds an assessment of Bechtel’s treatment of יָגוֹל in Gen 19:9. Bechtel bases her jurisprudential interpretation of the scene almost entirely on the appearance of יָגוֹל later in the verse. If one defines a “judicial context” quite loosely as one in which “judicial language,” broadly construed, appears, then יָגוֹל arguably appears in nine (other) “judicial contexts.” Bechtel’s parade examples, Deut 25:1 and Isa 50:8, do not provide close conceptual or syntactical parallels to Gen 19:9. In Deut 25:1, two disputing parties “draw near for judgment” (יָגוֹל לָא לַעֲרָה), appearing before

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3 See also Exod 24:2, “Moses drew near [יָגוֹל, Niphal] to הַעֲרָה alone, but [the people] did not draw near [יָגוֹל, Qal],” and Jer 30:21, “I will bring him near and he will approach [יָגוֹל, Niphal] me, for otherwise, who would dare to approach [יָגוֹל, Qal] me, declares הַעֲרָה.” These comments presuppose the accuracy of the masoretic vocalization of יָגוֹל in the seventeen instances where it appears to stand in the Niphal form. In every instance, the Niphal forms attested in the MT—third person masculine singular perfect (8), third person feminine singular perfect (1), third person common plural perfect (5), second person masculine plural perfect (2); and masculine plural participle (1)—would be indistinguishable from the corresponding Qal forms in an unpointed text. Using the masoretic vocalizations, יָגוֹל is never attested in the Qal perfect or the Niphal imperfect. According to P. A. Siebesma, The Function of the Niph’al in Biblical Hebrew (Assen and Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1991), p. 90, this use of Niphal in the perfect and Qal in the imperfect is a pattern with this verb and others (זָרַע and לָיָל, to name but two). In this, Siebesma follows M. Lambert, “L’emploi du Nifal en Hébreu,” RÉJ 41 (1900); unfortunately, I was unable to obtain a copy of Lambert’s article while preparing this study.

4 In all three cases where לַא marks the destination (Num 4:19; 1 Sam 9:18; 30:21), and in one case where לַא appears (Ezek 44:13), some manuscript evidence suggests that copyists may have written these letters accidentally, distorting an original לַא. Such evidence does not exist for the other case using לַא (Ezek 9:6).

5 Gen 18:23; Exod 24:14; Deut 25:1, 9; Isa 41:1, 21; 45:21; 50:8; Amos 6:3.
a third party who renders a judicial decision. Nothing of this kind happens in Gen 19:9, nor does the mob tell Lot to יָנֵּס. In Isa 50:8, the speaker invites any would-be-accusers to “approach me” (יָנֵּס) in the manner of a plaintiff accusing a defendant. Here too only the weakest of analogies obtains with Gen 19:9; the mob does not tell Lot to יָנֵּס, as though inviting Lot to sue them. None of the other occurrences of יָנֵּס in “judicial contexts” resemble Gen 19:9 any better than these conceptually, much less syntactically. Indeed, the fact that the mob self-professedly intends to “do harm” (יָנֵּס) suggests that “justice” lies far from their top priority.

Most importantly, however, Bechtel simply ignores the adverb יָנֵּס. If one accepts Bechtel’s claim that Gen 19:9 constitutes a “judicial context” that influences the sense of יָנֵּס therein, one must still take the adverb into account. In the nine other arguably judicial contexts where יָנֵּס appears, it either stands alongside יָנֵּס plus a term naming or evoking a recognized judiciary (twice: Exod 24:14; Deut 25:1), stands alongside יָנֵּס joined to a noun or pronoun naming the defendant (twice: Deut 25:9; Isa 50:8), or stands alone, without any preposition or adverb providing additional specification (the remaining five cases). Syntactically, none of these instances strongly resemble יָנֵּס in Gen 19:9. One must therefore judge Bechtel’s rendering of “present yourself”—based on the nuances of יָנֵּס in judicial contexts—as insufficiently warranted.

2. THE SEMANTICS AND SYNTAX OF יָנֵּס

David Gunn’s translation of יָנֵּס depends not on the nuances of יָנֵּס, but on the semantic function of יָנֵּס. Gunn himself does not go into much detail, but posits that “the Hebrew means not ‘draw back out of the way’ as most translations have it but ‘get close and them some more!’”

Although Gunn does not document or otherwise attempt to justify his claim about the sense of יָנֵּס, his claim finds some measure of support in Gershon Brin’s study of the formulae halhוֹדוֹד and halhוֹדוֹד. Brin suggests that both the “positional” and “temporal” uses of these phrases “convey the idea of an unlimited continuation of the thing described.” Brin’s study deals mainly with the term halhוֹדוֹד in phrases describing someone’s age, particularly in census texts, and he does not treat יָנֵּס constructions in detail. Brin himself cites יָנֵּס in Gen 19:9 as an example of a

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typical positional use of הָדַד, translating the entire phrase as “stand back.” Yet Brin’s translation of הָדַד-שֶׁב arguably fails to follow through on his conclusion that הָדַד formulæ “convey the idea of an unlimited continuation of the thing described,” since the unlimited continuation of שֶׁב would seem (at first glance, at least) to involve drawing ever nearer, not moving farther away. This reasoning seems to elucidate the substance of Gunn’s implicit argument.

Further examination of the actual uses of הָדַד, uncommon as they are, seems to confirm Brin’s general characterization of the adverb’s semantic value and, in so doing, lends support to Gunn’s understanding of הָדַד-שֶׁב. In eleven of its sixteen occurrences in the Tanak, הָדַד appears in the construction [NP]-שָׁב הָדַד, where “NP” stands for a noun or noun phrase (the שָׁב usually stands prefixed to the noun rather than joined by maqqeph, but this makes no semantic difference). Five of those eleven instances involve temporal references, such as “from the eighth day הָדַד” (Lev 22:27). Most English translations render הָדַד as “on,” “onward,” “forward,” or “thereafter” in these verses, acknowledging the basic dynamic that Brin says הָדַד denotes: continued movement in a specified direction. In its temporal usage, the directional aspect of הָדַד conforms to the linear flow of time. The phrases cited here never imply a backward recollection of past time, but always refer to a forward temporal trajectory.

Six verses in the Tanak exhibit a geographical use of הָדַד in the construction [P]-שָׁב הָדַד, where “P” stands for a place name or geographically specific phrase. When such phrases concern personal motion, הָדַד rather clearly denotes moving along a trajectory already underway (1 Sam 10:3). In Num 32:19 and 1 Sam 20:22, 37—where this construction stands in direct discourse—speakers use this construction to verbally locate objects or places that lie beyond the addressee or point of reference along a trajectory away from the speaker, such that the addressee must follow that trajectory away from the speaker to locate the objects or reach the location envisioned. Curiously, the three instances where שָׁב is attached to הָדַד itself attest a similar sense. If one glosses הָדַד as “yonder,” as the standard lexicons suggest, then one might suspect that the construction [P]-שָׁב הָדַד would mean something like “from over there toward P,” but in fact the opposite case obtains. Amos 5:27 amply illustrates this point: clearly does not mean that Amos thinks his Israelite audience will start out somewhere on the far side of Damascus (with respect to Bethel) and move

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toward Damascus, but rather that his audience will begin from its own land and move in the direction of Damascus and then continue beyond that point. Thus, even the construction [P]_NIm hDaVlDhEm denotes movement in a trajectory away from the place designated. The very interesting fact that phrases constructed as [P]_NIm hDaVlDhEm have virtually the same semantic value as those constructed as [P]_NIm hDaVlDh Em suggests that the _NIm affixed to hDaVlDh functions partitively, and the NIm affixed to the toponym functions ablatively, such that one could justly render qRcD;mådVl hDaVlDhEm MRkVtRa yI as “I will exile you to one of the places that is reached by going onward from Damascus.” A wooden substitution of “yonder” for hDaVlDh does not fit these circumstances, and this casts doubt on whether readers should regard hDaVlDh as having any absolute spatial sense at all.

Isaiah 18:2, 7 present a more complicated picture. Both verses describe a people as being hDaVlDhÎw a…wh_NIm a∂ rwøn. English translations render hDaVlDhÎw a…wh_NIm variously as “near and far” (NRSV), “far and away” (NJPS), “far and wide” (NIV), and so on. All of these renderings imply that hDaVlDh functions chiefly to denote distance. Structurally, though, hDaVlDhÎw a…wh_NIm perfectly matches the other four occurrences of hDaVlDh [P]_NIm, and its content differs only in the use of a…wh instead of a place name or a noun phrase denoting a place. In the other such instances, however, hDaVlDh seems to denote continued motion rather than a specific position. One may thus plausibly suggest that a…wh_NIm hDaVlDhÎw bears the sense “from this [place] and onward” (or “outward”), in whatever direction and however far one might be going.

In sum, the majority of the Tanak’s uses of hDaVlDh commend the view that the word normally functions adverbially to extend a temporal or geographical trajectory along a particular path to some indeterminate extent. Thus far, Gunn’s glossing of hDaVlDh_v‰…g in Gen 19:9 as “get close and then some more” apparently stands on solid semantic ground with respect to the sense of hDaVlDh.

3. PARALLEL CONSTRUCTIONS

Though Biblical Hebrew exhibits stable semantics and syntax, individual writers do employ creative variations (never mind simple grammatical mistakes). Therefore, one might do well to examine the closest verbal parallels to hDaVlDh_v‰…g before reaching a conclusion about the phrase’s sense in Gen 19:9. With regard to the use of the adverb hDaVlDh, Num 17:2 (16:37 in most
English versions) offers the closest parallel phrase, הָרְדָּה דֵּרֶד.⁹ Among all sixteen biblical uses of הָרְדָּה, only the phrases in Gen 19:9 and Num 17:2 lack the usual syntactical framework of prepositions and conjunctions that clarifies the adverbial function of הָרְדָּה. English translations of Num 17:2 variously render the הָרְדָּה in הָרְדָּה הָרְדָּה as “far and wide” (NRSV), “abroad” (JPS, NASB), “some distance away” (NAB, NET, NIV), “far away” (HCSB; cf. NJB), and so on, apparently taking הָרְדָּה as “yonder,” as in the usual translation of Gen 19:9. However, these translations seem to absolutize the spatial result of the more frequent הָרְדָּה constructions rather than indicating the semantic function of הָרְדָּה as appropriate to this particular passage. An outward trajectory already seems to inhere in the verb הָרְדָּה ‘to scatter’ (an antonym of הֶרְז ‘to gather’ as in Jer 31:10). In Num 17:2, then, the verb הָרְדָּה indicates that the ashes will initially move away from the censers, and the adverb הָרְדָּה indicates that the ashes will continue to follow that path until they come to rest.

With regard to the verb שָנַה, the closest parallels stand in the three examples of direct discourse where an imperative form of שָנַה, followed by an adverb, appears. In all three cases, an adverb meaning “here” follows an imperative form of שָנַה (specifically, מְשַנַּת in Ruth 2:14 and 1 Sam 14:38, and הָרְדָּה in Josh 3:9). While these instances cannot, of course, demonstrate that הָרְדָּה שָנַה in Gen 19:9 means anything like “get close and then some more,” neither do they give any support to the idea that characters speaking in biblical narrative might use an imperatival form of שָנַה to tell someone to move farther away from the speaker. Readers must resist the temptation to assume that הָרְדָּה שָנַה functions more or less as an antonym of מְשַנַּת and הָרְדָּה, for (as discussed above) such an inference would not really fit the attested sense of הָרְדָּה.

4. CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

The typical biblical uses of both שָנַה and הָרְדָּה support the minority translation of הָרְדָּה שָנַה as “come here” a bit better than the traditional translation, “stand back.” Before drawing a conclusion from this data, however, readers would do well to examine the phrase in its immediate context to see whether that context demands one translation or the other.

⁹ The BHS apparatus offers הָרְדָּה הָרְדָּה as a speculative emendation, with no manuscript support; K. Elliger and W. Rudolph, eds., Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1983).
By the moment when the mob tells Lot to “הָדָא וַיֹּאמֶר,” the narrator has drawn for readers a picture of Lot standing outside of his house, facing the crowd, with the door closed behind him. The verb בָּלַע frames the verse. At the beginning of the verse, the mob tells Lot to “הָדָא וַיֹּאמֶר”; at the end of the verse, the narrator informs readers that the men of Sodom “דָּרַע נָשָׁתְנוּ לְבֹקֶץ וּלְכָרְשָׁת הַמֶּרֶץ.” Syntactically, the use of בָּלַע in Gen 19:9b fits the reasonably well-attested pattern in which בָּלַע is followed by the preposition ל attached to a noun or infinitive verb that reveals the purpose of the motion denoted by בָּלַע, and in so doing implicitly supplies also the direction of that motion. In this case, Gen 19:9b indicates that the crowd wants to break down or breach the door of Lot’s house. If Lot himself stands between the crowd and the door, then translating בָּלַע as “stand back” makes good contextual sense: the mob wants him out of the way so that it might more easily invade his home.

Yet the other element of purpose in Gen 19:9b complicates this apparently straightforward reading, as the mob announces its intention to “דָּרַע נָשָׁתְנוּ לְבֹקֶץ וּלְכָרְשָׁת הַמֶּרֶץ” than to them [the visitors].” If the mob intends to harm Lot in some way, then it seems counterproductive to tell him to “stand back” out of the way. In this case, “come closer and then some more” would seem to fit the context better: the mob wants Lot to get closer so they can inflict physical harm upon him.

The immediate narrative context, therefore, seems to point in both directions. “Stand back” makes better sense if one emphasizes the crowd’s narrated action at the end of the verse, while “come closer” makes better sense if one emphasizes the crowd’s stated intention immediately following their command of “הָדָא וַיֹּאמֶר.” One could perhaps try to reconcile this tension by explaining that “we will do more harm to you than to them” does not contemplate harm against Lot’s person, but rather against his household. But this explanation strains against the narrative facts. The mob appears to have intended physical harm to Lot’s houseguests, so readers most naturally assume that they now state their intention to treat Lot himself more savagely. Moreover, the crowd’s anger flares in response to Lot’s offer of his daughters in place of his houseguests, though the daughters would provide exactly the opportunity to inflict harm on Lot’s household instead of on Lot himself. No easy way to escape this contextual dilemma presents itself. The mob states one intention—to harm Lot—and acts on a different purpose—to break down the door. Depending on which of these actions one emphasizes, each of the two proposed senses of בָּלַע in its turn better fits the passage in which the enigmatic command stands.
5. CONCLUSIONS

How, then, ought הָדוּדָה come be translated in Gen 19:9? The attested patterns in the syntax of וָגוּן suggest that the direction of the motion implied in וָגוּן is usually specified by a phrase explicitly stating the destination or purpose of the act of “approaching.” The closest parallels to the mob’s הָדוּדָה are הָנהִיג וָגוּן and מְלַשֶׁה וָגוּן, but these parallels simply push attention back to the function of הָדוּדָה. The translation “yonder” offered in the lexicons seems to “freeze” the typical spatial result of moving הָדוּדָה, as if the adverb connoted a static position some distance away rather than continued movement along a trajectory defined by collocated words and phrases.

In sum, while Bechtel’s proposal of a judicial sense for וָגוּן in Gen 19:9 flounders on her inattention to the adverb הָדוּדָה, Gunn’s proposal to read הָדוּדָה as “come closer and then some more” does seem to line up rather well with both the usual sense of וָגוּן and the usual adverbial function of הָדוּדָה. Although the case is not airtight, those few interpreters who regard הָדוּדָה in Gen 19:9 not as “Stand back!” but rather as “Come here!” do stand on solid syntactical and semantic ground.

Table 1. Syntax of וָגוּן

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Destination marked by הַֽזָּה</th>
<th>Qal</th>
<th>Niphal</th>
<th>Hiphil</th>
<th>Hophal</th>
<th>Hitpael</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29 times—Gen 27:22; 43:19; 44:17; 45:4aa; Exod 19:15; [24:2aβ]; 24:14; 28:43; 30:20; 34:30; Lev 21:23; Num 8:19; 32:16; Josh 14:6; 21:1; 1 Sam 17:40; 1 Kgs 18:21, 30 (twice); 20:22; 2 Kgs 2:5; 5:13; Isa 50:8; Jer 30:21a; Ezek 44:13 (twice); Ps 91:7; Ezra 4:2; 9:1</td>
<td>7 times—Exod 19:22; 20:21; 24:2aa; 2 Sam 11:20, 21; 1 Kgs 20:13; Jer 30:21b</td>
<td>12 times—Gen 48:10, 13; Exod 21:6 (twice); Lev 2:8; 1 Sam 13:9; 14:34a; 15:32; 1 Sam 30:7b; 2 Sam 13:11; 2 Kgs 4:5, 6</td>
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<tr>
<th>Destination marked by הַֽזָּה</th>
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<tr>
<td>3 times—Num 4:19*; 1 Sam 9:18*; 30:21*</td>
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<td>1 time—Amos 9:13</td>
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<th>6 times—Gen 27:25; 1 Sam 30:7a; 2 Sam 17:29; Amos 5:25; Mal 1:7; 2:12</th>
<th>2 times—2 Sam 3:34; Mal 1:11</th>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose marked by הָ</td>
<td>6 times—Gen 19:9b; Lev 21:21; Judg 20:23; 2 Sam 10:13 // 1 Chron 19:14; Jer 46:3</td>
<td>1 time—1 Sam 7:10</td>
<td>3 times—2 Sam 17:29; 2 Kgs 4:27; Mal 1:8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No preposition or adverb used</td>
<td>22 times—Gen 18:23; 27:21, 26, 27; 29:10; 33:6, 7; 45:4b; [Exod 24:2aβ]; Exod 34:32; Josh 8:11; 1 Sam 17:16; 2 Sam 1:15; 1 Kgs 5:1; 18:36; 20:28; 22:24 // 2 Chron 18:23; Isa 41:1; Jer 42:1; Joel 4:9; 2 Chron 29:31</td>
<td>5 times—Gen 33:7; Exod 34:32; Deut 20:2; 21:25; Isa 29:13</td>
<td>13 times—Gen 27:25; Exod 32:6; Judg 6:19; 1 Sam 14:18, 34b; 23:9; Isa 41:21, 22; 45:21; Amos 6:3; 9:10; Mal 3:3; Job 40:19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Manuscript evidence exists for reading יָ in each case so marked.

**Bold** indicates an imperative form of יָּ.
Table 2. Typical Constructions with הָדָּוִד

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construction</th>
<th>Occurrences</th>
<th>Sense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>סְתָּמִי + temporal reference + הָדָּוִד</td>
<td>5 times—Lev 22:27; Num 15:23; 1 Sam 18:9; Ezek 39:22; 43:27</td>
<td>Trajectory beginning with the temporal reference point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>סְתָּמִי + toponym + הָדָּוִד</td>
<td>6 times—Num 32:19; 1 Sam 10:3; 20:22, 37; Isa 18:2, 7</td>
<td>Trajectory away from the toponym</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>הָדָּוִד + toponym</td>
<td>3 times—Gen 35:21; Jer 22:19; Amos 5:27</td>
<td>Trajectory away from the toponym</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>