Folk-Etymology, and its Influence on Metatron Traditions

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Abstract

This paper takes a new approach to the contentious area of the etymology of Metatron, applying the lessons learnt from biblical folk-etymologies which have been shown to actively influence the writing of narratives. In the first section one such possible folk-etymology is proposed, based around the sequence TTR as a divine name in Metatron, along with some suggestions of how this could have influenced the narratives around the angel, and how this could have become part of the perceived nature of the angel. In the second section, texts from the Hekhalot literature are analysed to show that similar angelic etymologies which integrate a divine name into the angel's name are commonplace during this period.

Keywords

Metatron, etymology, Hekhalot literature, angelology

1. The Folk-Etymology

The Oxford Guide to Etymology defines the “etymological fallacy” as “the idea that knowing about a word’s origin, and particularly its original meaning, gives us the key to understanding its present day use.”¹ Particularly, this is understood prescriptively in that a word should not be used other than its original technical meaning allows. This paper will look at how beliefs about the nature of etymology have influenced ideas about the angel Metatron.

After roughly one hundred years of academic research on the angel Metatron, we are still no closer to explaining the origin of his name. Many

¹ Philip Durkin, *The Oxford Guide to Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 27.

theories have been advanced, each of which has their own merits,² the most important and oft-repeated being that it derives from the Greek *meta-thronos*, implying the one who serves beside the throne. There is some justification for this theory in the Hekhalot literature, which often presents Metatron as enthroned, and the Youth, who is often identified explicitly with Metatron,³ is said to come from behind or beneath the throne.⁴ Possibly the earliest recorded etymology relates the name to the Latin *metator*, this being given by Nachmanides,⁵ as well as Eleazar of Worms.⁶ The most recent candidate for the origin of the angel's name has been developed by Andrei Orlov,⁷ who sees a possible relationship between the (otherwise unattested) term *prometaya*, a title given to Enoch in ch. 43 of the short version of 2 *Enoch*, and the term *praemetitor*, found in Philo's *QG* 4, where it means "measurer." Orlov argues that Metatron thus develops nominally as well as conceptually from the pseudepigraphic character of Enoch.⁸

² See the presentation of nine different theories in Andrei Orlov, *The Enoch-Metatron Tradition* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 92-96. Hugo Odeberg offers a less comprehensive but more detailed analysis of several etymologies in *3 Enoch or the Hebrew Book of Enoch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1928), 125-42. For the sake of completeness, we could add to these those of Robert Graves and Raphael Patai, *Hebrew Myths: The Book of Genesis* (London: Cassell, 1964), 106, who see in it a corruption of *metadromos*, "he who pursues with a vengeance" or *meta ton thronon*, "nearest to the divine throne." The most recent general investigation of the construction of angelic names in Judaism is Saul Olyan, *A Thousand Thousands Served Him: Exegesis and the Naming of Angels in Ancient Judaism* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993). Olyan provides several examples of angels derived from biblical terms, often from hapax legomena and awkward textual constructions which seemingly imply more than the surface meaning. He is silent on the etymology of Metatron, however, and while his thesis is well supported in the examples he provides, a claim to be the exclusive method of angelic name-generation is not his goal and would not be possible.

³ E.g., 3 *En.* 4:1; 4:10; *Sefer Raziel* 241; *Sefer Haqqomah* 160.

⁴ For example in the Cairo Genizah fragment known as the Ozayah text. But see below, n. 44.

⁵ As attested by a student, "I have received from the mouth of the Rabbi that Metatron is a messenger, and is not a separate thing as his name indicates. Every messenger is called *metator* according to the Greek." On the attribution of this text, see Daniel Abrams, "New Manuscripts to the Book of Secrets of R. Shem Tov bar Simha and the Sources He Possessed," *Asufot* 9 (1995): 49-70, here 65-66 [Hebrew].

⁶ MS Paris, BN850, fol. 83B; see p.9 below. On the history of this interpretation in the Kabbalah, see Odeberg, *3 Enoch*, 127-31.

⁷ "The Origin of the Name 'Metatron' and the Text of 2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch," *JSP* 21 (2000): 19-26; cf. Orlov, *Enoch-Metatron*, 176-80.

⁸ This theory is particularly interesting because it ties together not only Enoch and Metatron but also Philo's Logos. The recent discovery of a Coptic fragment of 2 *Enoch* would have

The intention of this paper is not to offer another hypothesis regarding the etymology of Metatron. Rather, I intend to investigate the *effects* of such etymologies on the character of Metatron—that is, the possibility that what audiences have thought the word means could have affected their reading *and writing* of the traditions. We know that explanations for the name Metatron have been given since long before the time of academic analysis—those of Nachmanides and Eleazar of Worms being just two examples.⁹ We also know that folk-etymology has a long history in Jewish thought, apparently shaping even biblical texts and narratives. To give the most famous example, the name Moshe most likely derives from an Egyptian theophorism based around the word *mesu* (“child”), as evidenced also in the name Thutmoses (“child of the god Thoth”). However, in the biblical narrative this information has become lost and we find instead a folk-etymology placed in the mouth of the Pharaoh’s daughter, who names him Moshe because she “drew him out [*meshitihu*] of the water” (Exod 2:10). In a recent study on Noah the biblical text is found to be separable into two distinct etymological strands from different periods, one of which is obviously technically “incorrect” yet has still served to influence the biblical narrative.¹⁰ Given this, we can suppose that interpretations of the name Metatron, probably unrelated to the original meaning (if there was one) may also have been written into the traditions that surround him, influencing the nature of his character as it developed in the texts we now have.

In particular, there is one such meaning that I would like to investigate. We may note that מִיטְטְרוֹן contains the string טטְר, a sequence which intimates the Greek term *tetra*.¹¹ This is interesting in that *tetra* seems to invoke the most holy name of God, the four-lettered name YHWH which itself is often referred to as the “Tetragrammaton.” One of the most famous dicta

helped clarify its veracity, but for its stopping at 42:3, just short of the passage in question. For translation and analysis of the fragment, see Joost L. Hagen, “No Longer ‘Slavonic’ Only: 2 Enoch Attested in Coptic from Nubia,” in *New Perspectives on 2 Enoch: No Longer Slavonic Only* (ed. Andrei A. Orlov and Gabriele Boccaccini; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 7-34.

⁹ The obtuse nature of Metatron’s name could account for the amount of attempted explanations: there is no single, easily accepted candidate.

¹⁰ Herbert Marks, “Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology,” *JBL* 114 (1995): 21-42.

¹¹ Joseph Dan, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism* (Tel Aviv: MOD, 1993), 110, has also noticed this. He remarks, “It appears that the reference here is to the letters *tetra*, i.e., the number four in Greek, a four letter word in the middle of the name Metatron, but this has not been clarified sufficiently.” However, he concluded that the thesis cannot be explored sufficiently to warrant its validity, and it has not subsequently been taken up by any other scholars.

regarding Metatron is that he shares the name of God, or has God's name "in him."¹² Moreover, Metatron is frequently characterised as being confused with or in some sense exchangeable with God—as in the famous story, recited in both the Bavli and the Hekhalot literature, wherein R. Elisha b. Abuya ascends to heaven, where he sees Metatron and proclaims "Perhaps—heaven forfend—there are two deities!" In response to this heresy he is renamed Aher ("other").¹³

Here then we have, uniquely, a possible connection between the name Metatron and the Talmudic reference of Exod 23:21 to Metatron as the angel who has God's name "in him." The justification for the association of the passage with Metatron has previously only been possible via an identification of Metatron with Yahoel (who clearly does bear the name of God within his), supported by the appearance of Yahoel as a name of Metatron in 3 *En.* 48d.1.¹⁴ There is otherwise no compelling reason, as far as we can perceive, behind the use of Metatron in this debate, or indeed the ascription of the verse to Metatron at all.¹⁵

It therefore seems that the presence of *tetra* in Metatron deserves more analysis than it has so far attracted. I will propose that Metatron has at some point during the writing of his narratives fallen foul of an etymology which focuses on the presence of *tetra* within his name, and endeavour to establish whether this could be the case and, if it is, how it may have affected the Metatron traditions we now have before us.

¹² In *b. Sanh.* 38b, a *min* ("heretic") challenges R. Idi to explain Exod 24:1, where God seems to use the name YHWH of another; Idi replies that the name in this instance refers to Metatron, "whose name is like that of his master," utilising Exod 23:21's claim that the divine name is in the Angel of the Lord.

¹³ This proclamation is seen as a type of the "Two Powers" heresy. See Alan F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports About Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977).

¹⁴ Most famously in Scholem's *Encyclopedia Judaica* article on Metatron, reprinted in *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974). Scholem saw Yahoel as a precursor to Metatron and whose qualities were later absorbed into him; he later claimed that Yahoel is "the oldest name of Metatron." *The Origins of the Kabbalah* (ed. R. J. Werblowsky, trans. Allan Arkush; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 89.

¹⁵ The famous association of Metatron with Shaddai (by gematria both equal 314) is not relevant here, for two reasons: firstly, gematria only really came into prominence in the thirteenth century with the mystical writings of the Ashkenazi Hasidim and Kabbalists, long after the name-sharing tradition emerged; secondly, and more importantly *b. Sanh.* 38b specifically refers to the Tetragrammaton, not Shaddai.

First, we must establish whether TTR itself is used as a divine name in any of the surrounding literature of this period. There is one particular name of God, used repeatedly in the Hekhalot literature, which may have bearing on this: Totrosiai (טטרוסיאי) appears often and throughout *Hekhalot Rabbati*, as well as in *Hekhalot Zutarti* (six times between §414 and §418)¹⁶ and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* (§590 contains several variations including טטרוסי and טטריסי). We find טרטוס at §650 (a passage attested only in N8128). We also find the presumably related form טטריסאל in 3 *En.* 18:8-9, and a few mangled variations in a Cairo Genizah fragment.¹⁷ Finally there is a mention in *The Sword of Moses*, which has so far only been dated between the fourth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁸ Surprisingly little has been written on Totrosiai in the Hekhalot literature: the only dedicated study thus far is Wolfgang Fauth's "Tatrosjah-Totrosjah und Metatron in der Jüdischen Merkabah-Mystik."¹⁹ It is accepted that the name contains the Greek *tetra*, although the rest of its construction is less obvious.²⁰ The transliteration of

¹⁶ Synopse numbers follow those of Peter Schäfer, Margarete Schlüter, and Hans Georg von Mutiu, *Synopse zur Hekhalot Literatur* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1981).

¹⁷ T.-S. K 21.95.G, 1a line 8 (Peter Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente zur Hekhalot-Literatur* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984], 185) gives us טטרוסיסי (the damaged beginning of the line has also kept just טריסי), as does line 20; line 17 has טטריסי.

¹⁸ *Sword of Moses* 1.4 names טטרוסיסי, although here as one of four angels, suggesting that this came significantly after the other texts where the name fairly unequivocally indicates God. We also find טטרוסיסי at 5.26.

¹⁹ *JSJ* 22 (1991): 40-87.

²⁰ David Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Ktav, 1978), 60, translates it as *tetra+ousion*, meaning the essence of the four (lettered name), while Rebecca Lesses, "Speaking with Angels: Jewish, Egyptian and Greek Revelatory Adjurations," *HTR* 89 (1996): 41-60, here 53 has provided *tetras+IAI*, the latter being a reference to the divine name. Neither seems entirely satisfactory, and it is especially clear that IAI should rather be IAO. Fauth ("Tatrosjah-Totrosjah," 41) offered a similar reading to Lesses', though without reference to the Hebrew spelling, only his transliteration as Tatrosjah, which masks the difficulty somewhat. However, the initial *tetra* is corroborated by Philip Alexander ("3 [Hebrew Apocalypse of] Enoch," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (ed. James Charlesworth; 2 vols.; New York: Doubleday, 1983-1985), 1:272; hereafter OTP), Michael Swartz ("Mystical Texts," in *The Literature of the Sages vol. 2: Midrash and Targum, Liturgy, Poetry, Mysticism, Contracts, Inscriptions, Ancient Science and the Languages of Rabbinic Literature* [ed. Shmuel Safrai et al.; Assen: van Gorcum, 2006], 393-420, here 405) and Peter Schäfer (*Origins of Jewish Mysticism* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2009], 272). It is worth mentioning here the suggestion that Abrasax, itself a Greek name of God, refers to the Hebrew 'arba' (four). See A. A. Barb, "Abrasaxstudien," in *Hommages à Waldemar Deonna* (Collection Latomus 28; Brussels: Latomus, 1957), 67-86.

Greek names in the Hekhalot literature is common practice,²¹ so this semi-etymology is very plausible.²² However, as a construct itself, this name falls short of evidencing TTR as a divine name.

Hekhalot Zutarti §357-367 compiles a long list of titles for God which includes his biblical appellations and ends with Gabriel, Raphael, Metatron, and Shaddai. Roughly halfway through one manuscript's recension (New York 8128, §362i), we find the name טטר, which Morray-Jones has interpreted as the Greek *tetra*, four.²³ As we know that a larger version of this sequence is utilised as a divine name almost certainly related to the tetragram, we are safe in assuming that TTR here may operate as either an abbreviation of Totrosiai, or as an intimation of the Tetragrammaton generally. Here then we are able to conclude that the sequence TTR is used, apparently as a name of God, in one manuscript tradition of *Hekhalot Zutarti*.²⁴

²¹ As pointed out initially in Jochanan Hans Lewy's classical study "Remains of Greek Sentences and Names in the Book *Hekhalot Rabbati*," *Tarbiz* 12 (1941): 163-67 [Hebrew]. Most famously, the phrase אבירנהידריהם, given at several places including §230, §301, §415, §417, etc., may be a transliteration from Greek of air-earth-water, although Gideon Bohak, "Remains of Greek Words and Magical Formulae in Hekhalot Literature," *Kabbalah* 6 (2001): 121-34, has cast doubt on this reconstruction, arguing that it could equally be the Greek "air and water" or even a construction using the Hebrew אביר (knight, hero) and הדר (beauty, grace). See also the collection of examples in Daniel Sperber, "Rabbinic Knowledge of Greek," in *Literature of the Sages* vol. 2, 627-40, here 636-38. In fact there are even Hebraic transliterations of Greek versions of familiar Hebrew terms. See Gershom Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkavah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition* (2d ed.; New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), 75-83.

²² The presence of Greek transliterations and loan-words in the Hekhalot literature also supports the possibility of readers interpreting part of the Hebrew name Metatron as a Greek term. Often it seems that the fact that such words are borrowed is forgotten and so a phrase could be interpreted as a Greek term which has become commonly used in Jewish circles of the time.

²³ Christopher Rowland and Christopher R.A. Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God: Early Jewish Mysticism and the New Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 285.

²⁴ Of the nine obvious variants in *Ma'aseh Merkavah* §590, five contain the initial string TTR. It is also worth mentioning that the eighth name of Metatron in the later addition to 3 *Enoch*, chapter 48d:1 is Tatri'el, a name also used much later in an anonymous work from a member of the Ashkenazi Hasidim, which equates it by gematria with *nivreu*, we created, "for everything that was created in heaven and earth and its fullness is borne by him" (MSS Cambridge Heb. Add. 405, fol.301a; Guenzberg 90, fol.126a; Oxford Bodleian 2286 fol.155a). See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Metatron and Shi'ur Qomah in the Writings of the Haside Ashkenaz," in *Mysticism, Magic and Kabbalah in Ashkenazi Judaism: International Symposium Held in Frankfurt a.M. 1991* (ed. Karl Erich Grözinger and Joseph Dan; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 60-92, here 78.

Having established this, we can now examine what the word Metatron could seem to mean to one who sees in it the divine name TTR. In this case, it would be logical to interpret the name as consisting of the central element TTR, plus a prefix and a suffix. There are two possibilities for the prefix. The prefix, *Mi-* may be a concatenation of *min*, meaning “from”; or it may be the word *mi*, meaning “who,” as in the name Michael.²⁵ The ending *-on* is often found in angels in the Hekhalot literature, e.g., Adiriron, Sandalfon, etc.,²⁶ and it may have diminutive connotations²⁷—either way, its use as a suffix is well established. It is worth noting here that the thirteenth-century Ashkenazi Hasid Eleazar of Worms, in his own attempted etymology, derives *-ron* from RNN, song or praise. He writes:

He is called Metatron, which is *metator* in a foreign language, meaning one who leads, as in *Bereshit Rabbah*, “the Holy One became a *metatron* for them and a leader.” Therefore he is called Metatron because he governs the world. And it says *ron* [i.e., to utter praise] each day . . . The great name is inscribed upon his heart, “for my name is in him.”²⁸

Thus we have two very close possibilities for the name Metatron. It could mean either “from-Tetragrammaton” or “(the one) who is lesser-Tetragrammaton.” I will return shortly to consider the latter meaning, though it is notable that the former interpretation could be related to the Kabbalistic appropriation of the “cutting the shoots” motif. Talmudically this implies heresy generally, the famous usage of this phrase is in the story of Elisha ben Abuya’s fateful journey into heaven whereupon he sees Metatron and

²⁵ Metatron can be spelled either with or without the *yod*. Scholem (*Kabbalah*, 380) notes that the earliest manuscripts evidence the longer, seven lettered variant. Interestingly, the Genizah Hekhalot fragments usually prefer this too, though the Ashkenazi manuscripts have the shorter version in its place.

²⁶ Scholem, in his own speculation on the name Metatron (*Kabbalah*, 378) refused the need to explain the element due to its frequency as a feature of angelic names. This of course does not abrogate any further explanation, but the knowledge of it as a common ending can be assumed for the audience and writers of these traditions.

²⁷ In Ancient Greek, the suffix *-on* can certainly function as a diminutive, for example the word *býblos* (“papyrus”) becoming *biblíon* (“book”), and *xíphos* (“sword”) becoming *xiphídion* (“dagger”). R. David Kimchi, possibly influenced by this feature of Greek, makes the claim that *ishon* (“pupil of the eye”) literally means “small man” (*ish-on*) (*Commentary to Tehillim* 17:8). There is no other precedent I could find in Hebrew sources. Biblically, the suffix usually modifies a verb into a denominative, “one who does x,” e.g., Zebulon, one who dwells, or “the place of x.”

²⁸ MS Paris, BN850, fol. 83B, see Wolfson, “Metatron and Shi‘ur Qomah,” 77.

suggests that there are “Two powers in Heaven.”²⁹ By the time of the first kabbalists however, the phrase came to be used quite specifically, to signify the separation of the sefirot either from each other, or from the source, En Sof. We should note again the previously mentioned student of Nachmanides who wrote, “I have received from the mouth of the Rabbi that Metatron is a messenger, and is not a separate thing *as his name indicates*.”³⁰ Here once again the nature of Metatron—and specifically his continuity with God—is related to an interpretation of his name. The name Metatron is interpreted as specifically designating his non-separation from God.

Scholem had argued that “Yahoel is the oldest name of Metatron”³¹—his reasoning being that Yahoel had the strongest claim to bear God’s name in his own as Yahoel contains the letters YHW of the Tetragrammaton. What then is the relationship between Yahoel and Metatron, and why would a group choose to ascribe the name-angel role of Exod 23:21 to Metatron, rather than the existing and obvious Yahoel? The answer is that Yahoel appears only sparingly in Jewish literature of the time. Other than three very brief uses of the name Yahoel, once as a title of God on an Aramaic incantation bowl, dated between the third and seventh centuries C.E.,³² once in a Cairo Genizah fragment,³³ and once as a name of Metatron in a late addition to *3 Enoch*,³⁴ we find only a single appearance of the angel, this being in the *Apocalypse of Abraham*.³⁵ Here, both God and Yahoel himself associate him with the divine name: God describes him as “Yahoel of the same name” (10:3) and Yahoel claims to bear “His ineffable name in me”

²⁹ *b. Hag.* 14b. For a bibliography of research on the original meaning of the phrase, see Daniel Abrams, “The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead,” *HTR* 87 (1994): 291-321, here 295-96, esp. n. 14.

³⁰ Abrams, “Boundaries,” 313, my emphasis.

³¹ *Origins*, 89.

³² See Philip S. Alexander, “The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch,” *JJS* 28 (1977): 173-80.

³³ As part of long angelic lists in T.-S. K 21.95.P, 2a line 5 (Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente*, 143), T.-S. NS 322.21, 1a line 1 (*ibid.*, 153) and Heb. a.3.25a, line 23 (*ibid.*, 156).

³⁴ *3 En.* 48d.

³⁵ There are also possible variants of Yahoel in the Greek *Life of Adam and Eve* 29:4 (M. D. Johnson, “Life of Adam and Eve,” in *OTP* 2:249-95, see 285, n. 29b), *Apoc. Mos.* 29:4, 33:5, 43:5, *Lad. Jac.* 2:18 and *Sepher Ha-Razim* 2:140 (trans. Michael A. Morgan, Chico: Scholars Press, 1983, 56). In one manuscript of *Ma’aseh Merkavah* §562 (O1531) we find יהוהאל, but this is almost certainly a scribal error for יהוה אל (compare D436 which preserves the spacing). Yahoel is definitely present in the *Sword of Moses* (4.18) but as mentioned this text is virtually undatable to any useful degree.

(10:8). Although we cannot be certain about the chronology, *Apocalypse of Abraham* is accepted as late first or second century C.E.,³⁶ and therefore this tradition of Yahoel likely pre-dates the mentioned borrowing of the name as title for God or Metatron (as well, we shall soon see, as the first appearance of the name Metatron). This does not mean that the groups responsible for the bowl or *3 Enoch* had any knowledge of the former: it is possible that Yahoel was originally designated, by one group, as the obvious candidate for the role of an angel who bears the name of God, but as the tradition was absorbed into Metatron by a later group, the name Yahoel also became attached to him. Whatever the case, we are safe to conclude that Yahoel was not an extremely common or popular angel around the time of the Talmud and Hekhalot literature, so could easily have been passed over in favour of another angel who appeared to bear the name of God.

We have seen already that there is a possible connection between the name Metatron and the Bavli use of Exod 23:21's name-angel. Above I gave two possible meanings based on the presence of TTR in Metatron's name, the second being "(One) who is the lesser-Tetragrammaton." According to this variation, we have—also for the first time—a possible ground for the statement in *3 Enoch* that Metatron is called the "little YHWH" (*3 En.* 12:5). This appellation has previously been taken for granted, requiring no explanation other than that of Metatron's nature as the grandest angel. Scholem claimed that the use of "lesser YHWH" is "undoubtedly puzzling" and "was almost certainly current before the figure of Metatron crystallized"; he also found the explanation given within *3 En.* 12 "far from satisfactory . . . it is obvious that they are an attempt to clarify an earlier tradition, then no longer properly understood."³⁷ Thus we have here a justification for the emergence of an important feature in the Metatron mythology which has previously been unexplained. According to the arguments made herein, *YHWH ha-qatan* appears to be an explanation of—in fact an extrapolation from—the name Metatron.³⁸

After suggesting his original etymology, Joseph Dan decided that the thesis could not be explored sufficiently to warrant its validity. Given that

³⁶ R. Rubinkiewicz, "Apocalypse of Abraham," in *OTP* 1:680-705.

³⁷ *Kabbalah*, 378; cf. *Jewish Gnosticism*, 51.

³⁸ Fossum notes that the Greek equivalent, Little Iao, appears in the third-century Gnostic text *Pistis Sophia*, ch. 7, which presumably pre-dates *3 Enoch* (Jarl E. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origins of Gnosticism* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985], 301).

the phrase *tetra* has been used within the Hekhalot literature as an appellation of God, likely connected to Totrosiai, and that the name Metatron can be interpreted accordingly in a way that helps to explain two of the most striking traditions in the literature, it seems highly plausible that other groups earlier in the history of Metatron came to similar—or even somewhat stronger—conclusions.

2. Angelic Name-Sharing in the Hekhalot Literature

The etymological theory as I have presented it above provides some connections between the name of Metatron and two of the most central defining traditions in the literature surrounding the angel. Not only is there a possible connection between the name Metatron and the Bavli reference to Exod 23:21 and the angel who had God's name "within him"; but also according to the second variation of the name's meaning, we have—for the first time—a possible ground for the statement in 3 *Enoch* that Metatron is called the "little YHWH" (3 *En.* 12:5).

The motif of Metatron somehow sharing in the name of God is so often repeated as to be an integral part of his characterisation and possibly even his defining feature³⁹—by the time of the medieval mystics it is cited by almost everyone who mentions Metatron, including R. Asher ben David, who quotes his grandfather Abraham ben David, calling Metatron "the Prince of the Countenance whose name is like the name of his master,"⁴⁰ and by R. Eleazar of Worms, who gematrially equates "that is Metatron" and "for my name is in him."⁴¹ In fact Metatron is more commonly referred to as the angel who shares in God's name than as the Prince of the Presence, or any other qualification.

The two earliest datable references to Metatron, apparently from the fourth century, both associate Metatron with the divine name: *The Visions of Ezekiel*⁴² lists several names for a mysterious "Heavenly Prince," giving

³⁹ Odeberg writes that "The most important element or complex of elements which gave life and endurance to the conception [of Metatron] was the notion of the 'angel of YHUH, who bears the divine name' and the 'angel of the Face, the Divine Presence'" (3 *Enoch*, 144).

⁴⁰ *Otzar Nehmad* 4:37; see Scholem, *Origins*, 212.

⁴¹ MS Paris BN772, fol. 110b, see Wolfson, "Metatron and Shi'ur Qomah," 71.

⁴² Scholem (*Kabbalah*, 379; cf. *Jewish Gnosticism*, 44-45) and Alexander ("The Historical Setting of the Hebrew Book of Enoch," 164) agree on this as the earliest text. On the dating of *Visions*, see David J. Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 268-77.

the fifth name as, "Metatron, like the name of the Power. Those who make use of the name say: *shns* is his name, *qs bs bs qbs* is his name, like the name of the creator of the world" (emphasis mine). The other is the famous passage described above from *b. Sanh.* 38b, which is ascribed to the fourth-century sage R. Idi.

Standing at the opposite end of the Hekhalot literature's development, *3 Enoch* is quite different. Although Metatron sharing God's name is important to the text, the meaning herein is different to the other, earlier, references. Whereas the earlier texts mention that Metatron has God's name in him, or his name is "like his master's," in *3 Enoch* the quality is likened to the seventy angelic princes who rule the nations, the text seeming ambivalent as to whether these are ruled by Metatron, or are subsumed within him.⁴³ Presumably by this point the original meaning of the angelic name-sharing has been forgotten, and Odeberg's frequent assertion may be correct, that in this text divine name-sharing means nothing more than the use of the letters of the Tetragrammaton appended to the angel's own name.⁴⁴

Although crucial to the figure of Metatron this name-sharing is never explained, and the reason for it has been left to generations of readers to speculate. However, there is evidence in the Hekhalot literature which suggests that the literal integration of a divine name into an angel's name is common practice.

Divine name-sharing generally is a common feature of angels in the Hekhalot literature: in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, we learn that "Anafiel the Prince is a servant who is called by his master's name" (§244). We also find several

⁴³ *3 En.* 3:2, where Metatron has "seventy names corresponding to the seventy nations of the world," and 4:1, where Ishmael asks "Why are you called by the name of your Creator with 70 names?" At 10:4 we meet "the eight great, honored and terrible princes who are called YHWH by the name of their king" (cf. 30:1) and at 17:8, the "72 princes of kingdoms in the height, corresponding to the 72 nations in the world." Likewise the Watchers have "seventy names corresponding to the seventy languages that are in the world, and all of them are based on the name of the Holy One, blessed be he." (29:1). This tradition is also found in *Hekhalot Rabbati*: "as for the door-keepers of the seventh palace, by the sound of their names is a man terrified and is not able to touch them, inasmuch as the name of them is called according to the name of the king of the world." (§240) In fact, even in the Bavli we find mention of Akatriel Yah YHWH Tzvaot, who is sighted enthroned in the holy of holies by R Ishmael (*b. Ber.* 7a), although it is unclear whether this being is an angel or God Himself.

⁴⁴ See especially Odeberg, *3 Enoch*, 104 n. 1, where he states, "It seems to have been a general assumption, that the highest circle of angels were marked out from the other angels by the common distinction of the Tetragrammaton as part of their name, whereby their names were 'based upon the name of the Holy One.'"

times the formula applied to the Youth, who may or may not be automatically subsumable within the figure of Metatron:⁴⁵ the Sar Torah text §396, applies Exod 23:21 to the Youth before identifying him with Metatron at §397. At §400 he is the “servant who is named after his master,” and the two *Shi'ur Qomah* texts preserve a passage that says “The name of the Youth is like the name of his Master, as it is written: ‘for my name is in him’ (Exod 23:21).”⁴⁶

In two separate texts we meet the angel MGYHŠH,⁴⁷ who is labelled second in rank after God, their names being one.⁴⁸ It is difficult at first to fathom why this figure is claimed to share in the name—the Tetragrammaton is not appended to him, and nor is any further etymologi-

⁴⁵ Morray-Jones (in Rowland and Morray-Jones, *The Mystery of God*, 518-27) argues for the initial separation of the Youth and Metatron, although their argument is based on the absence of Metatron from a single text (*Siddur Rabbah*) which, on the basis of that absence, they assume to be prior to the identification and therefore to pre-date the other texts. The circularity of this argument works against it, and in absence of any other evidence we are left unable to decide the point at all. In basic agreement though, see also James Davila, who argues that the Youth may in fact descend from Melchizedek, “Melchizedek, the ‘Youth’, and Jesus,” in *The Dead Sea Scrolls as Background to Postbiblical Judaism and Early Christianity: Papers from an International Conference at St. Andrews in 2001* (ed. J. R. Davila; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 248-74. In favour of their initial identification are Orlov (*Enoch-Metatron*, 222-26), who sees Youth as a title which evolved from its use in 2 *Enoch*, and Daniel Boyarin, “Beyond Judaisms: Metatron and the Divine Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism,” *JSJ* 41 (2010): 323-65, who sees Metatron as developing from the matrix of late Second Temple figures of which the Youth was a potent aspect.

⁴⁶ From two manuscripts of *Sefer Raziel* and four of *Sefer Haqqomah*, as noted by Morray-Jones, *Mystery of God*, 523. A similar implication is also made in *Siddur Rabbah* 14-33. See Martin Samuel Cohen, *The Shi'ur Qomah: Texts and Recensions* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1985), 39-41. A curious feature of some Hekhalot texts, most notably *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, are lists of descriptions or attributes of God which are repeated and inverted, often including reference to “his name,” such as “he is his name and his name is he.” It is usual to interpret these as being circular descriptions of God. However, in the light of the present discussion it appears to me that there are two different “he”s being discussed here: God, and an angel. Read in this way, the passages become: “his name is like His might and His might is like his name. He is His power and His power is him and his name is like His name” (§557); “He is His name and His name is him. He is in him and His name is in his name” (§588). The phrases “his name is like his name” and “he is in him and his name is in his name” otherwise are extremely useless and not even in the same spirit or formula as the preceding claims.

⁴⁷ §420. This name varies across the manuscripts (מְיָהֶשֶׁה [D436] or מְיָהֶשֶׁה [N8128]), but מְיָהֶשֶׁה is the most common. In a Genizah fragment which duplicates this section (8. T.-S. K 21.95.C 2b, Schäfer, *Geniza-Fragmente*, 105) it is given as מְיָהֶשֶׁה (line 37), and מְיָהֶשֶׁה (line 38).

⁴⁸ This part of the tradition extant only in the Genizah fragment.

cal explanation given. The answer may be provided by a similar case in *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, where we find the character "ŠQDHWZYH Your servant . . . Whose name is exalted because of the name of his creator."⁴⁹ This angel is not appended with the Tetragrammaton, but has the letters of the name integrated into its own. There is also the far more common ZHWB-DYH, found in various forms in the Genizah fragments, the *Shi'ur Qomah* texts, *Hekhalot Rabbati* and *Merkavah Rabbah*, which contains the letters YHWH. Although this name is not explicitly combined with a claim of divine name-sharing, it is often ascribed to the Youth or to Metatron, who as we know are themselves frequently held to carry the divine name.⁵⁰ This presents the possibility that the former name MGYHŠH also incorporated the letters YHWH, but has since become corrupted. One candidate would be MWYHŠH, ו and י not being extremely different, and with the remaining letters being, rather logically, ŠM: "name."

Here we have three different examples of angelic names in the Hekhalot literature which appear to be constructed as convoluted theophorisms which incorporate the divine name YHWH. This offers strong support for the possibility of interpreting Metatron in a similar way, i.e., as a theophorism which incorporates a textual string which is, or indicates, a divine name.⁵¹

If, as I have suggested, the attribution of the divine name to Metatron is nothing more than an accidental (mis)reading of his own name, how did this tradition come to be writ large across the Hekhalot literature and from

⁴⁹ §562; also given as שקדהוואי (ŠQDHWZAI); שקדאוויה (ŠQDAWZYH); שקראוויה (ŠQRAWZYH).

⁵⁰ Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (London: Continuum, 2009), 141-44, argues that this name is a theophorism based on YHWH and ZBD; however, compare Morray-Jones' different reconstruction of the name as "this is the shoot/stalk of God" (*Mystery of God*, 524-25).

⁵¹ Further, Gideon Bohak, *Ancient Jewish Magic: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 252, has claimed that the Hebrew transliteration of Helios, HLYWS, contains the three letters of the Tetragrammaton, and therefore can be seen as containing the name of God. Thus, he writes, "some ancient Jews may have identified the figure of Helios with God's famous promise to send an angel to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land, and His insistence that they must obey this angel and not rebel against him, 'for My name is within him.'" Although beyond the scope of this paper, this should be seen in the light of Jodi Magness, "Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 59 (2005): 1-52, who claims that Helios and Metatron are identified in an ancient synagogue mosaic. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer of *JSJ* for drawing my attention to this article.

there so powerfully influential on the Kabbalah? Of course, the angel who bears the name of God is an established tradition from the Torah.⁵² The name of God also is held in special regard in the Torah as well as in the Ancient Near East generally, where the name is understood as “going proxy” for the being named.⁵³ Recent research has also found that this tradition of name-sharing played a role in early Christianity, where Jesus was often seen as bearing the name of God, or even being the manifest name.⁵⁴

Although the etymologies given in biblical narratives have been subjected to intensive analysis in order to disentangle the different threads of tradition, little of the work done in that field has been used to inform the discussion of etymology in the angelological traditions of late antique Judaism. Usually the approach to angelic etymology has been to focus on the form of the name as expressing the initial concept of the angel. This indicates a concealed belief in the primacy of the name, that the name is originally coeval with the concept of the angel—in other words, that the name began as a description of the angel, capturing and communicating its essential nature. From this nominal description, the traditions and narratives are then assumed to have developed in increasingly loose association as new material is accumulated into the description: for example, Scholem argues that Metatron absorbed the character of Yahoel after the initial emergence of both as separate figures.⁵⁵ The new material being incorporated would expand and reshape the figure’s identity, until the name became worn down into a label, devoid of input due to its eventual “achievement” of simply conventional status, and at which point the traditions surrounding the angel have become more crucial than any new interpretation based on a suspected etymology. Thus, we find a curious mirroring of the texts’ own essentialist approach to etymology in modern scholarly analysis.⁵⁶ The

⁵²) For a deep and comprehensive analysis of this see Fossum, *Name of God*.

⁵³) For a recent investigation of this, including an analysis of current debates, see Michael Hundley, “To Be or Not to Be: A Reexamination of Name Language in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History,” *VT* 59 (2009): 533-55. Hundley’s conclusion is that the “name” in the Ancient Near East is used as “part of the complex nexus that constitutes a person” which “can denote presence, even at times functioning as a full, substitute presence” (550).

⁵⁴) Charles A. Gieschen, “The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology,” *VC* 57 (2003): 115-58.

⁵⁵) *Kabbalah*, 378.

⁵⁶) Suggested by the remark in *b. Hag.* 14a, that “From every utterance that goes forth from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He, an angel is created.” However, *Gen. Rab.* 78.4 seems to contradict this identity, asserting that “there is no [permanent] name, but a [continuous] change, the present name [of an angel] not being the same as it may be later on.”

question “what does the name Metatron mean?” has been seen as a question which could in principle be given a single definitive answer.

However, it is unlikely that influence fans out as neatly as this. Rather, we should expect the same kind of development as in the biblical narratives, so the different textual strata would exhibit an ongoing process of revision and reappraisal of the significance of the name. Those in later periods who have inherited the name and some traditions of the angel, but no explanation of the name, find themselves in the same position as modern scholars in attempting to piece back together the essential nature of the angel—presumably, as revealed in the name. Thus, we find folk etymologies in the texts which propose particular theories as to the meaning of angelic names: for example in *Hekhalot Rabbati* the name Anafiel (which would literally appear to mean “branch of God”) is explained as referring to God’s crown, “covering and veiling all the chambers of the palace of *arevot raqia*” (§244);⁵⁷ Dumiel (“silence of God”) is implicitly related to silence (§229), and in 3 *Enoch* we find the name Soterasiel, which appears to mean “who stirs up the fire of God,”⁵⁸ explained as “because he is appointed to serve in the Divine Presence over the four heads of the river of fire . . . he stirs up the fire of the river of fire.”⁵⁹ It is highly likely then, that the *perceived* reason for the name of an angel will also affect the concept of the being in question and therefore the way that traditions are developed. An angel could in fact take on entirely new attributes when one person or generation comes to a new conclusion about the meaning of the name in question. Therefore, the conspicuous absence of an explicit etymology for the name Metatron could be accounted for by the two traditions, “My name is in him” and “The lesser YHWH,” both being etymological inferences.

This fascination with etymological explanation continues throughout Jewish literature: in the Talmud, Epicurus is derived from the Aramaic PQR, meaning “to be free from restraint,” i.e., one not bound by God’s commandments (*b. Sanh.* 38b) and the Hebrew word *hen*, is interpreted as the Greek *hen*, i.e., one (*Lev. Rab.* 27:7); we also find that the popular image of child-like cherubim stems from a rabbinic interpretation which derives the word

⁵⁷ Cf. 3 *En.* 18:18, which although clearly related is a little more obtuse: “Why is his name called Anafiel? Because the bough of his majesty, glory, crown, brilliance, and splendor overshadows all the chambers of ‘Arabot, the highest heaven, like the glory of the Creator of the World” (Alexander, 3 *Enoch*, 273).

⁵⁸ From the units סתר (“upset”), שש (“fire”), and אל (“God”); see Odeberg, 3 *Enoch*, 60.

⁵⁹ 3 *En.* 18:19. Alexander, 3 *Enoch*, 273.

from the Aramaic *ravia*, meaning “a child,” (*b. Sukkah* 5b; *b. Hag.* 13b) as well as many other examples throughout the literature.⁶⁰

Conclusions

This study has analysed the nature of etymological concern over the name of Metatron, attempting to place it in the same light as biblical etymology. I have attempted to show that the perspectives applied by scholars to the etymology of the name often make the same mistake as ancient interpreters, a mistake known as the “etymological fallacy.” However, the important difference is that the ancient interpreters were also involved in transmitting and to a large extent, rewriting the traditions they received. Thus, the influence of their etymological interpretations could have actively altered the traditions as we now have them. In the first section I proposed one such etymology of the name Metatron, and presented a theory as to how this could have become part of the perceived nature of the angel. In the second section, I attempted to show that this technique, of writing a divine name into the name of an angel, was a common and accepted one during the period of the Talmud and Hekhalot literature.

It has been the argument of this paper that there is an etymological theory behind some of the uses of Metatron in the Hekhalot literature, one which is not made explicit but which helps to explain some of the most important traditions with which Metatron is linked. It is not my intention to claim here that there is any evidence for the genesis of the name Metatron, this being an altogether different matter; and one which may well be impossibly obfuscated by contradictory threads of evidence. If the theory herein is correct, then competing etymological theories could have shaped (and possibly even rewritten) the traditions surrounding Metatron such that finding an “original” etymology from the many possibilities so far presented may now be impossible. Instead, I recommend that we replace the question “what does the name Metatron mean?” with one which is more historically sensitive: “what has the name Metatron meant, at different times and to different people?”

⁶⁰ James Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 45, writes that in rabbinic literature “Etymologizing interpretation . . . though found particularly in connexion with personal names, is to be found in all sorts of other connexions also.” My gratitude extends, again, to my reviewer who provided the first two examples.

This study has implications for the understanding of how literary or mythological characters—not just angels—may develop in conjunction with their name. It demonstrates the problems with the common assumption that a name has only a single meaning which determines the character's literary nature from the outset, and that these problems are not limited to biblical characters. Therefore instead of pursuing a single etymology, we are wise to analyse different possibilities in order to find how and at what point meanings may have emerged and helped to influence the characterisation.