



**What Can a Student of Jewish Demonology Learn from a Philosophical Book? Some Remarks on the Margins of: Michael T. Miller, *The Name of God in Jewish Thought. A Philosophical Analysis of Mystical Traditions from Apocalyptic to Kabbalah*, (London: Routledge 2016), pp. 188.**

Wojciech KOSIOR

**When a Philosopher Writes...**

The main goal of the present tome is to follow the development of the conception of the divine name through the classical Jewish sources, starting from the Hebrew Bible, through the early rabbinic literature and pre-Zoharic mystical treatises up until the medieval Kabbalistic works. The author, Michael T. Miller, develops his theses relying on earlier scholarship such as: Gershom Scholem's *The Name of God and the Linguistic Theory of the Kabbalah* (1972/1973) Joseph Dan's *The Name of God, the Name of the Rose, and the Concept of Language in Jewish Mysticism* (1996) or Jarl Fossum's *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord* (1985). Yet, what distinguishes Miller's contribution is the methodology which carefully combines textual, historical and philosophical approaches. Furthermore, this methodological stance consequently defines the general structure of each of the main chapters. Firstly, the particular source texts are presented in their historical and cultural context together with the most widespread interpretations of these materials; secondly, the basics of the philosophical frameworks utilised in each case are summarised; thirdly, the given primary source is read from the specific

philosophical stance and juxtaposed with the traditional readings; fourthly, conclusions are drawn and transposed into a broader context. In his endeavours, Miller far transcends what is considered to be classical Jewish literature and examines a broad range of materials: thus one should not be surprised to find “external books” such as Christian or Samaritan writings along with apocrypha and pseudepigrapha. This cultural and religious diversity adds a great deal to the academic value of the dissertation and it is a shame that this variety is not reflected in the title or the book’s summary. Finally, the author definitely needs to be commended for maintaining a disciplined and clear structure while dealing with such varied materials and for demarcating the borders between various expositions without falling into a methodological hodgepodge.

Let me now interject a personal confession: whenever I encounter a book which is supposed to approach what is broadly understood as classical Jewish literature from a philosophical perspective, I become suspicious. The reason is that those scholars who are speculatively inclined tend to ignore the complex multi-sourced and culturally contextualised structure of the analysed materials and invest the primary sources with a meaning which is simply “not there”, at least as far as the historical-textual method is concerned. What is more, these are exactly the philosophical expositions which seem to dominate the academic discourse – suffice it to note the broad variety of philosophical interpretations of the *aqedat Yitzchaq* which have overlooked the richness of meanings present in the composite structure, atypical vocabulary and other inherent features of this narrative.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, when I first learned about *The Name of God...*, I was rather sceptical. Yet, as it soon turned out, my distrust proved ungrounded for the reasons already summarised but worth repeating: Miller explicitly distinguishes between what is found in the primary sources and what the philosophers have to say about it. The book is clearly written; fortunately, the author avoids cryptic jargon and even if one is only moderately amused by the speculative inquiries, the tome is of great value due to the selection of source texts and references to the broad repository of secondary literature. Finally, not without importance is the author’s sense of humour, playfully labelling his research as an “exercise in anachronism”.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. Kosior, “You Have Not Withheld Your Son, Your Only One from Me”. *Some Arguments for the Consummated Sacrifice of Abraham*, p. 61–80.

<sup>2</sup> M.T. Miller, *The Name of God in Jewish Thought. A Philosophical Analysis of Mystical Traditions from Apocalyptic to Kabbalah*, p. 21.



## ...And an Aspiring (Literary) Demonologist Reads

In addition to the above and paraphrasing the Ecclesiastes' utterance *mah yitron?* (Kohelet 3:9) I also asked myself, what benefit could a student of Jewish demonology derive from reading a philosophical treatise on the divine name? As a matter of fact, there are at least several such issues which are indirectly addressed by the present book. The first one concerns the belief that to know the name of a particular demon or angel equals the ability to subjugate and control it. Although this idea is widespread and by no means exclusive to Jewish thought, the question remains, how does this process actually work on a semantic level. An interesting clue emerges in the first chapter (*Presence and Speech: Rosenzweig's ontology and the doctrine of Creation via the Name*), in which Miller deals with the essential nature of language in the cosmogonic context. The names, Miller notes somewhat counterintuitively, do not simply "generate" objects but rather seal them as complete and distinguished from among the rest of reality. In fact, the drawing of these borders and limiting the unavoidable semantic proliferation is the inherent meaning of the verb "to define". In other words, something defined becomes in a way petrified and immobilised. This remark in turn seems to shed light on two other issues. Firstly, this would at least partially explain the rabbinic reluctance of giving name to their deity and their preference for flamboyant yet metaphoric or rather *mashalic* appellations. Secondly, the will to imprison the roaming spirits by means of the semantic seals found on a variety of amulets and other apotropaic paraphernalia becomes even more justified.

The second problem pertains to the so-called hypostatic nominalism in Jewish thought. There has been somewhat of a consensus among the scholars with regard to the Holy Language, which is construed as nominal rather than semantic. Analogically, such language hints rather than communicates because it conveys the isomorphic equivalency with reality. Not surprisingly, in chapters two (*Losing the Name: Derrida's rejection of Logos Theology*) and three (*The Intentional Name: Husserl and the Talmud on phenomenal objects*) Miller concentrates on this aspect of the divine name, which with time becomes gradually anthropomorphised and as such attains some level of individuality. Probably the best known expression of this idea comes from the early Judeo-Christian idea of Jesus being the incarnated Logos. What is more, Miller convincingly shows that this found its realisation in the rabbinic motif of Metatron. He closely reads the variants of Hagiga 15b in order to argue, against the dominating interpretation of this passage as being



a critique of heretics advanced by the forming Orthodoxy, that Elisha ben Avuyah is not punished for attributing divinity to Metatron. After all, Metatron, the bearer of the Name, fully participates in the divine essence. Acher's error lays rather in perceiving Metatron as a separate and independent being, thus challenging the oneness of God.<sup>3</sup> In other words, this problem of "two powers in heaven" emerges from the confusion of the "person" with the "essence". Miller furnishes several other examples including Avoda Zarah 3b and Exodus R. 32:9 to argue that Metatron is in fact a rabbinic way of speaking about the celestial and inherent manifestation of the godhead.<sup>4</sup> Now, although not expressed directly, this hypostatic nominalism goes well with the principles of the cognitive theory of religion according to which humans have the inherent tendency to anthropomorphise reality or, differently phrased, to infer the existence of invisible anthropomorphic agents being responsible for various observable phenomena.<sup>5</sup> From this perspective, the Jewish or rather Semitic inclination to reify and animate ideas would be a special case of a much more general notion.

Finally, the third problem concerns the theoretical conflict between the Jewish monotheism and the presence of numerous semi-divine creatures. This is addressed in chapter four (*The Seventy Faces of God: Kripke on identity and the Angelic Host*) where the author addresses the multiplicity of angels and the blurred lines between God and his messengers in Heikhalot literature. What is more, it is often difficult to know whether a particular theophoric name (and there are plenty) refers to a deity or to some lesser being. This dilemma has already been recognised as "compromised monotheism", yet Miller suggests to construe it as "sophisticated onomatology"<sup>6</sup> according to which the angels as well as the names can be interpreted as the anthropomorphised aspects of one deity. By following the interpretation that the name is the essence and one name cannot denote more than one essence, Miller arrives at the lucid conclusion that the angelic names are not equipped with theophoric suffixes – in fact the angelic names are prefixes to the divine name itself.<sup>7</sup> A rather obvious conclusion would be to consider it as the

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 70–72.

<sup>4</sup> Miller recalls one of the etymological interpretations of Metatron as mi-TTR-on, i.e. originating from the tetragrammaton. Ibidem, p. 89.

<sup>5</sup> For a relatively recent summary of the most important tenets of the cognitive theory of religions see: J. Jong, C. Kavanagh, A. Visala, *Born Idolaters: The Limits of the Philosophical Implications of the Cognitive Science of Religion*, p. 244–266.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 90.



exact description of how the angels and demons are “born” out of the divine actions which become reified and invested with individuality. This, however, does not deplete the interpretational possibilities and one could very well ask – somewhat paraphrasing Douglas Rushkoff’s hypothesis of humanity becoming a neural network and definitely contrary to the historical-textual method – whether the opposite is possible. Is it not so, that numerous lesser and local demons, specialised in particular functions with time have been merged so as to construe one somewhat “artificial” deity?

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### Note about the author

Wojciech KOSIOR – a graduate of Psychology and Religious Studies, adjunct researcher at the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations at the Jagiellonian University. His research involves the Hebrew Bible and the early Rabbinic Literature. He is currently studying Jewish demonology and angelology as well as the apotropaic dimension of the basic Jewish customs and rituals.

E-MAIL: [wojciech.kosior@uj.edu.pl](mailto:wojciech.kosior@uj.edu.pl)

