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Rome Kabbalah Symposium Proceedings Volume Submission

“Mithridates’s Latin Translation of an Anonymous *Sefer Yeşirah*
Commentary in Vat.ebr.191: An Hitherto Unknown Work of
Theosophical Prophetology”

I. Introduction: The Fortunes of the *Sefer Yeşirah* and its Commentarial Tradition

Among Christian Kabbalists

Although the textual history of both the *Sefer Yeşirah* and its commentarial tradition are exceedingly convoluted, the broad outlines of its transmission to and reception among Renaissance Christian Kabbalists are fairly well-established. In the 1480s two Latin translations were produced. The first likely came from the pen of Flavius Mithridates. Although only the three commentaries on the *Sefer Yeşirah* that he translated into Latin survive in Vat.ebr.191, Mithridates seems to have also translated the text itself.¹ This initial translation of the *Sefer Yeşirah* would presumably have taken place sometime in early 1486, since in a letter, dated November 10, 1486, Pico mentions reading the anonymous commentary found in Vat.ebr.191, 39r-43v.² His Jewish friend of Cretan extraction, Elia del Medigo, had also recommended studying the *Sefer Yeşirah*. In a letter dated to September or October of 1485, del Medigo discusses the relationship between Kabbalah and philosophy and provides Pico with a short Kabbalistic bibliography, including several unspecified commentaries on the *Sefer Yeşirah*.³ The second translation, which still survives, is preserved as MS.Add.11416 at the British Library, produced by an otherwise anonymous “Magister Isaac” in Rome sometime in 1488.⁴ Johannes Reuchlin later seems to

¹ See Campanini 2002, 7, 90-96. Campanini & Perani 2008, 49-88. Aside from what Campanini notes, there is also codicological evidence for Mithridates’s missing translation. The opening quire of Vat.ebr.191 is missing its first four leaves. Remaining are the stubs of these leaves with clear indications that they were cleanly cut out of the codex. These missing leaves likely contained Mithridates’s translation of the *Sefer Yeşirah*, which Pico himself might have removed during one of the periods when he was having difficulty accessing the texts.

² Pico 1557, 385.

³ For the text of the letter, see, Kieszkowsky 1964, 15, 41-91. While the letter was traditionally dated to the autumn of 1486, Giulio Busi has argued convincingly for the 1485 date. See Busi 2006, 171-173.

⁴ London, British Library, Add. MS 11416, ff. 11v-8v, “Liber Abraham de creatione Cabalisticus successive filii ore traditus, hinc iam rebus Israel inclinatis ne deficeret per sapientes Hierusalem arcanis et profundissimis sensibus litteris commendatus....” Deleted but legible: “per magistrum Isaac translatus Roma”. Incipit: “Triginta duabus viis scientiae...” Explicit: “Rome translatus anno 1488”. It should be noted that, since this translation postdates Mithridates’s work for Pico

have owned this manuscript, though he produced his own translation when including passages from it in the *De Arte Cabalistica*.⁵ Distinct from these translations was the work of Guillaume Postel, who published his own translation of and commentary on the *Sefer Yeşirah* in 1552.⁶

Given that the *Sefer Yeşirah* is famously a “a text in search of a commentary,” when discussing the text’s transmission into Latin one must inevitably examine the transmission of its commentarial tradition. As with the text itself, the transmission of the commentary tradition can seemingly be divided into those translations coming from Mithridates and from a hodgepodge of other sources. Mithridates translated three commentaries, one penned by Eleazar of Worms, an anonymous commentary in the tradition of Abraham Abulafia, and a third by an unknown author, thought for sometime to be Nahmanides or Azriel of Gerona, all of which survive in the opening folios of Vat.ebr.191.⁷ Roughly contemporaneous to Mithridates’s translation efforts, Ludovico Lazzarelli obtained a translation of Eleazar of Worms’s commentary. Christian Kabbalists seem to have shown most interest, however, in the commentary by the late fourteenth-century Kabbalist Moshe Botarel, which served as the primary source both for the Kabbalistic material in Francesco Giorgi’s *De Harmonia Mundi* and Postel’s own commentary.⁸ Botarel’s commentary was a useful resource for Christian Kabbalists because of its eclectic nature. In it he included a wide variety of lengthy citations,

and Pico’s attempted debate over the *Conclusiones*, it was almost certainly not done for Pico. The translation could, however, be indicative of interest in the *Sefer Yeşirah* generated by Pico’s Kabbalistic theses.

⁵ Campanini 2012, 263.

⁶ See Klein 1994.

⁷ While Richler’s catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts in the Vatican Libraries, following Wirszubski, refers to this commentary as that of Abraham Abulafia, it now seems that the commentary contained in Vat.ebr.191 is perhaps by one of Abulafia’s unnamed followers. For the initial attribution to Abulafia, see Wirszubski 1989, 12-13. See also Richler, Beit-Arié, and Pasternak 2008, 134-135. The Hebrew text corresponding to the Abulafian commentary in Vat.ebr.191 has been published. See Weinstock, 1984.

⁸ Campanini, 1999, 46. Klein 1994, *passim*.

from both real and fictitious works.⁹ He thereby provided later Christian Kabbalists with at least the semblance of an understanding of the commentarial tradition on the *Sefer Yeṣirah*.

While Giorgi and Postel thoroughly studied Botarel's commentary, Pico's use of the *Sefer Yeṣirah*'s commentarial tradition seems to have been much more selective. It is certain that he read the anonymous commentary profitably, since, in a letter to an unknown friend dated November 10, 1486, he mentions its utility. Nevertheless, in his pioneering study of Pico's engagement with Kabbalah, Wirszubski identified only two theses from Pico's various sets of Kabbalistic theses that showed any dependence on the three commentaries found in Vat.ebr.191. Only one of them, 11>4, in which Pico described the relationship between the En-Sof and the Sefirot, was actually drawn from the anonymous commentary.¹⁰

Although that issue is certainly not trivial, Pico's relative disinterest in this particular commentary is notable given the importance that has been attributed to it within Jewish Kabbalah. The Hebrew text upon which it was purportedly based has been attributed to Nahmanides.¹¹ Modern scholars have also identified it as the work of Azriel of Gerona,¹² though acceptance of that ascription is not universal.¹³ Theologically, the commentary has been deemed important as one of the first

⁹ As Campanini has pointed out, not only did Botarel include many quotations from earlier commentaries, both genuine and pseudepigraphal, in his own, but he also wrote it at the behest of a Christian student to demonstrate the compatibility of philosophy and Kabbalah. Hence, the work was explicitly aimed at a Christian audience from the beginning, such that Botarel's interpretations were geared towards making the enigmatic treatise comprehensible and palatable to learned Christians. See Campanini 2012, 266-267.

¹⁰ Farmer 1986, 520-521. Wirszubski 1989, 235-238. Both Farmer and Wirszubski note Pico's 1486 letter to the unnamed friend. Wirszubski further speculates that the commentary indirectly influenced Reuchlin's reading of the En-Sof via his reading of Pico.

¹¹ Scholem's argument for this ascription has been the most widely accepted. See Scholem 1929-1930, 6, 385-419.

¹² Porat 2019. Idel, 1992, 10, 59-112; 2011a, 117-121; 2011b, 471-556; 2017, 1-9.

¹³ For example, in at least one relatively recent work Campanini still ascribes the commentary to Nahmanides. See Campanini 2012, 262.

Kabbalistic works to distinguish ontologically between the sefirot and the En-Sof within the Godhead.¹⁴ Moreover, its discussion of the “turbid waters” has been interpreted as evidence for the early provenance of the doctrine of primordial evil.¹⁵

To understand why the commentary seemingly generated so little interest among Christian Kabbalists during the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, one must understand both what Christian Kabbalists hoped to find in the *Sefer Yeṣirah* and what is contained in the Latin translation that Mithridates prepared, which still survives in Vat.ebr.191 39r-43v. Christian Kabbalists’ interest in the *Sefer Yeṣirah* was similar to their interest in the *Zohar*. They hoped that it would furnish them with proofs of Christian doctrine to provide them with ammunition in their debates with Jews.¹⁶ In the case of the *Sefer Yeṣirah*, it was veiled allusions to the Trinity that they mostly seem to have read into the text. As many scholars have shown, Mithridates not infrequently facilitated Pico’s missionary aspirations by interpolating and altering passages to lay the groundwork for a Christological or Trinitarian interpretation. If these were the concerns of Pico and other Christian readers of the *Sefer Yeṣirah*, the Latin translation found in the barely four folios of text in Vat.ebr.191 had little to offer them. Instead, as this study will show, theological concerns internal to the Jewish tradition decisively and exclusively shaped the text preserved in Mithridates’s translation. I will show that the Latin text contains several sections that correspond to no known Hebrew manuscript witness, and that this additional material dramatically shifts the theological profile of the text. The commentary preserved in most manuscripts focuses primarily on the Sefirot, their emanation and differentiation from the

¹⁴ Valabregue-Perry, 2010.

¹⁵ Idel, 2017, 4-6.

¹⁶ Campanini 2012, 263-265.

En-Sof, along with some remarks on the process of creation. In contrast, the material unique to the Latin text shifts the focus of the commentary towards prophetology, whereby the metaphysics of the *Sefer Yeşirah* provide the ladder by means of which the prophet may ascend to gain access to divine knowledge. I will conclude that it is most likely that the Latin text contained in Vat.ebr.191 preserves a version of the commentary that no longer exists in Hebrew.

II. The Manuscript Witnesses

The Hebrew text of the *Sefer Yeşirah* commentary that is traditionally ascribed to Naḥmanides survives in thirty-eight versions contained in thirty-three manuscripts composed prior to 1600. In his edition of the commentary, published as part of his edition of the works of Naḥmanides, Chavel provides neither a stemma for the surviving manuscripts nor an identification of which manuscript(s) he used as the basis for the text that he produces in his edition.¹⁷ Porat, however, who attributes the text to Azriel, does provide a list of manuscripts that he consulted in preparing a critical edition of the commentary.¹⁸ When quoting a Hebrew version of the commentary in this paper, I have quoted from Porat's edition of the text. Porat, though, was focused on versions of the commentary that would correspond to the purported text of Azriel. A variety of similar *Sefer Yeşirah* commentaries, though, were attributed to Naḥmanides. Therefore, to establish the uniqueness of portions of the Latin translation, I have checked it against every commentary on the *Sefer Yeşirah* existing in manuscript form that has been ascribed to Naḥmanides. These manuscripts are listed below, in roughly the chronological order of their composition:

¹⁷ Chavel 1963, 320-327.

¹⁸ Porat 2019, 150. In preparing the edition of this text, Porat used the following manuscripts, MS Parma 2784; MS Parma 2431; New York, Jewish Theological Society of America, MS 2325; Oxford, Bodleian MS 1534; Oxford, Bodleian MS 1535.

1. Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, *MS.2784*, 39r-43r; 95v-97v
2. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France *MS.hebr.763*, 31v-35r
3. Fulda, Hochschul und Landesbibliothek, *MS A 4*, 8r-3v
4. Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, *Vat.ebr.294*, 10v-1r
5. London, British Library, *Add.MS.15299*, 5r-1v
6. Roma, Biblioteca Angelica, *MS.or 46*, 55r-53r
7. Zürich, Zentralbibliothek Zürich, *MS.Heid.27*, 176v-174v
8. Oxford, Bodleian Library, *MS.Hunt.46*, 15v-15r
9. Città del Vaticano, *Vat.Barb.Or.110*, 204v-199v
10. Moscow, Rossiyskaya Gosudarstvennaya Biblioteka, *MS.Guenzburg 133*, 170v-164v
11. Oxford, Bodleian Library, *Ms.Mich.Add.37*, 16r-1v
12. Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticano, *Vat.ebr.236*, 21r-13r
13. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *MS.hebr.680*, 224v-214r, 214r-209v
14. Cambridge, Cambridge University Library, *MS.Add.647*, 30v-19r
15. Jerusalem, The Schocken Institute for Jewish Research, *Ms. 15637*, 16v-10v
16. Jerusalem, The National Library of Israel, *Ms. Heb. 3°1073*, 45v-38v
17. Oxford, Bodleian Library, *Ms.Laud.Or. 103*, 14v-1v
18. New York, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, *Ms. 2325*, 87v-80v
19. New York, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, *Ms. 2324*, 167r-165v
20. Milano, Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense, *Ms. AD.X.52*, 127v-119v
21. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Ms.hebr.766*, 96v-90v

22. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, *Ms.hebr.776*, 204r-194r
23. Moscow, Rossiyskaya Gosudarstvennaya Biblioteka, *Ms. Guenzburg* 1170, 102r-93v
24. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Library, *Ms.Heb.58*, 93v-92v
25. Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, *MS* 3483, 117r-114v
26. München, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, *Cod.hebr.92*, 220v-217r
27. Parma, Biblioteca Palatina, *MS* 2431, 113v-107r
28. Cambridge University Library, Cambridge, *Ms. Add.* 400, 1, 3v-1v
29. Milano, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, *Ms. ℄* 103 *Sup.*, 39r-35v
30. Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana *Ms.ebr.528*, 74r-72v, 79v-75v
31. Leiden, Universitaire Bibliotheken Leiden, *Ms. Or.4762*, 149v-142r
32. Moscow, Rossiyskaya Gosudarstvennaya Biblioteka, *Ms. Guenzburg* 737, 208v-203r
33. Oxford, Bodleian Library, *Ms. Mich.* 184, 120r-112v

My analysis of the Latin text of the commentary will proceed in three stages. First, I will discuss the textual and conceptual material that it shares with the surviving Hebrew texts, namely the distinction between the Sefirot from the En-Sof and the recapitulation of this relationship in human anatomy. Then I will examine the material that is unique to Mithridates's Latin translation. This analysis will show that the additional material constitutes a coherent whole. The ultimate sources of some of the material are Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* and Joseph Gikatilla's *Sha'are Orah*. The unique material constitutes most of the prophetological sections of the Latin version of the commentary. This material includes descriptions of prophetic ascent, including those of Moses and Isaiah, and a treatment of the *Ma'aseh Merkavah*. My analysis will show that this material attempts to

reconcile a Gikatillan prophetology with a theosophical metaphysics that distinguishes between the En-Sof and Sefirot.

III. The Common Material: Distinguishing the En-Sof from the Sefirot

Theologically and metaphysically, one of the most salient aspects of this commentary is, as has long been recognized, its clear distinction between the En-Sof and the Sefirot. This division is clear from its opening lines:

פירוש בב' רמז אין סוף כי בכח אין סוף מציאות רום מעלה שממנה אצילות החכמה ומן החכמה ל"ב נתיבות נעלמות. ולפי שהן נמשכות בחכמה מרום מעלה מאין סוף נקראים פליאות מלשון כי יפלא דמתרגמין ארי יתכסי. ולפי שיש הפרש בין נתיב לנתיב נקראים כמו כן פלאות שהוא מלשון כי יפליא לנדור שהוא מלשון הפרשה. וכל נתיב ונתיב ימשוך מן החכמה עד שהוא מגיע להראות כל נתיב ונתיב בבינה כד"א ומשך חכמה מפניני.¹⁹

“In thirty-two...” Commentary: By means of the Bet it hints at the En-Sof, for by the power of En-Sof exists the supernal level, from which emanates Ḥokhmah. From Ḥokhmah, thirty-two hidden paths are derived. Since they are drawn into Ḥokhmah from the supernal level [and] from En-Sof, they are called “wonders,” from the term “כי יפלא” (Deuteronomy 17:8) meaning “it will baffle,” as is translated in the Targum Onkelos, “ארי יתכסי”. And since there is a difference between one path and another, they are also thereby called wonders, which comes from the term “כי יפליא”, meaning “it will make it special,” (Numbers 6:2) derived from the word “הפרשה”, meaning “distinction.” And each and every path is drawn from Ḥokhmah until it begins to manifest each and every path in Binah, as it is stated. “And Ḥokhmah is greater than pearls.” (Job 28:18)

The Hebrew commentary interprets the opening preposition ב, which forms part of the initial phrase of the *Sefer Yeṣirah* “in the thirty-two paths of wisdom” as metaphysically salient. That the preposition implies that there is already something to locate or to explain causally the origins of the paths is taken as an indication that a higher reality than the paths must exist. Perhaps implicitly, the reader is asking the reader of the *Sefer Yeṣirah* to be attentive to its opening ב in a manner parallel to how many exegetes have exhorted their readers to importance of the opening ב of Bereshit. While one could argue that the En-Sof is identical to the “רום מעלה,” roughly translated as “supernal level,” the commentary begins to

¹⁹ Porat 2019, 152.

distinguish the two. The fact that the paths are drawn into Ḥokhmah from both the “רום מעלה” and “En-Sof” evidences this distinction. Later in the commentary this distinction becomes even clearer.

The passage that perhaps most clearly distinguishes between the En-Sof and the Sefirot arises when the Hebrew commentary glosses the famous lines of *Sefer Yeṣirah* §4: “The ten Sefirot are the basis: ten and not nine, ten and not eleven.”²⁰ When commenting specifically on the phrase “ten and not eleven” the Hebrew text asserts:

שלא תמנה אין סוף בספירה שאינו נכלל בספירות אע”פ שרום מעלה אינו מושג אנו מונים בכל הספירות שהוא אע”פ שאינו מושג כח המציאות יש בו ולזה הוא שוה להם.²¹
Do not designate the En-Sof as a Sefirah, since it is not included among the Sefirot, even though it is the case that the Supernal Reality is also not understood, yet we count it among the Sefirot, since even though it is not understood the essences are contained in it and for this reason it is among them [i.e. the Sefirot].

Here the En-Sof is clearly distinguished from the Sefirot. The text even begins to explain why someone might confuse Keter with the En-Sof.²² Neither Keter nor the En-Sof can be understood, so some are liable to conflate or identify the two, a move that must be resisted. While the text’s explanation of how the erroneous conflation arises is clear, the positive reason for numbering Keter among the Sefirot is not. It seems that the text thinks that the diversification of essences (המציאות) in Keter, including the essences of the other Sefirot, also argues for its inclusion among the Sefirot. The unstated but implicit assumption is that En-Sof is radically simple in comparison to Keter, which contains within it some differentiation, perhaps of the essences of creatures or even the essences of the other Sefirot, if the latter can be said to have “essences.”

²⁰ “עשר ספירות בלימה עשר ולא תשע, עשר ולא אחת עשרה” The text of the *Sefer Yeṣirah* upon which generally follows the Short Recension. The Hebrew text and translation that I have used is Hayman’s critical edition. Hayman 2004, 69-70.

²¹ MS Parma 2784, 40r.

²² While the Hebrew text that I am using normally uses “רום מעלה” to refer to the highest Sefirah, I will normally employ the name Keter to refer to it. Aside from simply being a name with which readers might be more familiar, it tracks the Latin translation’s use of the term “corona.”

Mithridates's Latin translation follows the Hebrew text here relatively closely:

Dicitur "decem et non undecim" ad educendum a fonte rem occultam que est in principio corone quia ex eo quod nos videmus ei esse aliquem finem rationem callium inde manantium quia omnes calles veniunt ad unum locum perceptibilem putamus coronam esse principium et causa causarum. Considerantes autem superiora eo dicimus esse rem occultam et inperceptibilem et cogitu difficilem ore quoque inexpressibilem ideo non introducatur hoc respectu in numerationibus.²³

It is said "ten and not eleven" to bring out from the source the hidden thing which is at the beginning the crown, because from the fact that we see that it has some measure of the paths flowing from it, because all paths come to one perceptible place, we think that the crown is the beginning and cause of causes. But considering the above, we say that it is a hidden and imperceptible thing, difficult to think about, and also inexpressible in speech, and therefore it is not included in this respect among the sefirot.

While the thrust of the passage remains the same, there are several philological differences meriting comment. To translate the phrase, "שלא תמנה אין סוף בספירה שאינו נכלל בספירות" Mithridates has opted for Latin that does not grammatically follow the Hebrew syntax as closely as he could have. The Hebrew manuscripts use an imperative followed by a subordinate clause using a Niphal verb, a construction that could easily be reproduced in Latin by using an imperative verb governing a subordinate clause containing a passive verb. Instead, Mithridates has translated the Hebrew phrase using the postclassical construction of "ad" with a gerundive. This construction might more accurately translate the Hebrew construction "ל" combined with an infinitive of some kind to form a purpose clause. His employment of it indicates that the Hebrew text of this passage likely diverged somewhat from the surviving Hebrew manuscripts. This syntactic divergence increases the likelihood that he is working with a very different version of the text, but could also indicate that Mithridates took liberties with the translation. Generally, though, Mithridates strove to fulfill Pico's request that he render a translation as close to the Hebrew as possible, to the point of being literally word for word. There are some passages in which he includes a note for Pico stating that it was simply not possible to translate

²³ *Vat.ebr.* 191, 41v-42r.

literally in a given instance, despite having tried to do so. It seems likely, then, that here Pico is working with a Hebrew text that diverges slightly from the surviving Hebrew manuscripts.

These more fine-grained syntactical divergences are compounded when one notes that Latin text's discussion of the paths and of the perceptible Sefirot, issues not addressed in the Hebrew text, and the absence of certain statements found in Hebrew. Specifically, the absence in the Latin text of the clear assertion that the "En-Sof is not included among the Sefirot" obscures the point made in the Hebrew text. Indeed, the lack of such an explicit statement might explain why Wirszubski thought that Mithridates's text did not posit the En-Sof as ontologically distinct from the Sefirot, but merely that it was the mentally abstracted unity of the ten Sefirot.²⁴ Despite the unclarity of Mithridates's translation of the opening sentence of this lemma, there remain two reasons for thinking that he was translating a text that stated that the En-Sof was really distinct from the Sefirot. First, there is a matter of diction. The verb "educere" has the literal sense of "to bring out" or "to lead away." In medieval Latin the word also commonly had the sense of lifting up something to separate it from something else.²⁵ Thus, even though the phrase is somewhat compressed, one could translate Mithridates's Latin as "To separate the hidden thing from the source...." The "rem occultam" here is Keter, while the "fons" from which it is being separated is the En-Sof. Second, the wider context of the passage indicates that the Latin text still wishes to separate Keter from the En-Sof, since Mithridates clearly includes the discussion about why the En-Sof has remained unknown and Keter has been assumed to be the highest reality within the Godhead because Keter is where all of the perceptible paths meet in a hidden way. Thus, on the one

²⁴ Wirszubski 1989, 236-237.

²⁵ "Educo" in <https://alatius.com/ls/index/educio>. Accessed March 13, 2025. <<https://alatius.com/ls/>>. Pico himself uses "educere" in just this way in *Conclusio 11*>4.

hand, despite some syntactical differences, here Mithridates's Latin follows the sense of the received Hebrew text on this vexed issue of Kabbalistic metaphysics. On the other hand, these syntactical and phraseological differences support the possibility that Mithridates based his translation on a different textual tradition than the one that survives in the Hebrew manuscripts.

Mithridates's Latin translation also follows the Hebrew text in using human anatomy as an exemplar by which to clarify the relationship between the En-Sof and the thirty-two paths of wisdom.

Porat's edition of the Hebrew text is:

הלשון דוגמת עשר והוא המכריע בין עשר אצבעות הידים. ובו כלולים כ"ב אותיות ויש בו כח עשר אצבעות וזהו שאמר שהברית מכוון בלשון, וזהו שאמר כמלת לשון וכמלת המעור שיש בו אות ברית קודש, ומכריע בין י' אצבעות הרגלים ומוליד תולדה שהיא מצטיירת בעשרים [ושתיים] אותיות ע"כ יש לך להתבונן מן הגלוי על הנסתר.²⁶

The tongue is like ten and is the decisive one among the ten fingers of the hands. And it contains twenty-two letters and it has ten fingers. This is what it said, that the covenant refers to the tongue, and this is what he said as the circumcision of the tongue and the circumcision of the flesh that has in it the sign of a holy covenant, and it divides among the ten toes of the feet and engenders an offspring that is formed by means of twenty-two letters. Therefore, you have to contemplate on the basis of that which is revealed about that which is hidden.

This passage is commenting on §3 of the *Sefer Yeṣirah* that compares the relationship between the Sefirot to the fingers on the hand. The Hebrew text of the commentary shifts the focus to the relationship between the Sefirot and the letters on the one hand and the En-Sof on the other. Just as the fingers are all distinct from each other, but all have the same source, namely the hand, so too all of the paths have their source in the En-Sof and do not imply any kind of entities distinct from God himself.²⁷

²⁶ Porat 2019, 153.

²⁷ Moshe Idel in fact claims that this commentary, which he attributes to Nahmanides when making this argument, is the earliest recorded source for this analogy. Given the current lack of a certain attribution and date of composition for this commentary his argument does not hold, though it might still serve as evidence for why Mithridates thought that this commentary was worth translating. Idel, however, claims that this commentary's reference to the decad found on the feet, i.e. the ten toes, evidences that it has a doctrine of a lower, evil decad found in the depths, which mirrors the upper, good decad of the fingers on the hand. Neither the Hebrew nor the Latin text of the commentary gives any support to such a

The Latin text found in *Vat.ebr.*191 parallels the Hebrew text quite closely here. Mithridates's Latin translation of this section is as follows:

Et omnia manamina ab uno et eodem fonte et loco et nihil a fonte ut nostro loco separatur pro forme digiti in manu quam manant ab eadem manu. Et ob per funditatem subtilitatis positum est quam sunt oculte et mirabiles qua mirabilia videntur per eas nec est. Ibi separatio et divisio sapientiae, quae est finis eius quam homo sua cognitiva intelliget primum. Nihil enim sapientiam sapientiam [sic] comprehendit primum, quae est Corona Superna benedicta et excelsa plena de eo qua cor neque considerare nec excogitare gloriam suam.²⁸

And all the emanations are from one and the same source and place and nothing is separated from the source as in our place pro forma the fingers on the hand all flow from the same hand. And due to the depth of subtlety this is how they are hidden, and the marvels by which marvels are seen. Through them there is neither separation nor division of Ḥokhmah, which is the end that the human being understands first by his own cognition. For nothing comprehends Ḥokhmah except that which is the blessed Supernal Crown and its exceeding fullness, for which reason the heart is not [able] to consider or to cognize its glory.

Mithridates clearly translated from a Hebrew text that sustained the comparison between the fingers and the hand and the Sefirot and the En-Sof. Here, though, begins to appear material emphasizing the difficulties involved in understanding the Godhead. His text makes clear that while we can comprehend Ḥokhmah (i.e., "Sapientia"), we cannot comprehend Keter (Corona Suprema), let alone the En-Sof. While these shared passages show the Latin and the Hebrew texts both distinguishing the En-Sof from the Sefirot, the Latin text emphasizes more the epistemological challenge of knowing the En-Sof, and its unique passages will go further by connecting this epistemological issue to prophetology.

IV. The Additional Prophetological Material

The material unique to the Latin text of the commentary deals almost exclusively with prophetology.

Although interspersed among material present in the Hebrew text, it constitutes a coherent whole

view. Rather, it seems that the commentary asserts a more basic point: both the fingers' relationship to the hand and the toes' relationship to the foot can be used to understand the relationship between the Sefirot and the En-Sof. See Idel 2020, 90.

²⁸ *Vat.ebr.*191, 39r.

explaining how prophetic ascent works within the commentary's theosophical metaphysics. In the process, these passages incorporate both philosophical material and reworked Rabbinic traditions. The Latin text of the commentary signals its shift in focus through the presence of additional material near the beginning of the commentary that serves almost as a thesis statement or guide for reading the rest of the text. This particular section of material unique to the Latin text is:

...Semitā est lata et honorabilis super ei compita²⁹ aliquis situs et aspectus oculorum unde quesitusque locum finalem ad quem tendit quod non est sit in via ob nimia angustiam suam et testem dici prima callis. Dicit quis scribitur stare super semitas et videre et perire calles orbis et pro attribuuntur visio et callibus petitio ocula prout, quamvis scribitur in occultationem, fuerit esse et hoc dicitur mirabile. Sine separatione et hoc est quam calles exeunt a viis, prophetantibus et separantur ab eis non absolute...³⁰
 ...The path is wide and honorable, on it someone is situated at the meeting point of the paths and there is a sight for the eyes, whence he seeks the final place to which it tends, which is not on the way because of its great narrowness and earthiness. It is called the first path. It says who is decreed to stand on the paths and see and to go forth from the paths of the world and as the vision are bestowed as, although it is written in concealment, it was to be, and this is said to be wonderful. Also, without separation this is how the paths go out from the ways to those who are prophesying and are separated from them not absolutely....

Having described the emanation of the paths from Keter and then Ḥokhmah, the commentary speaks about a person “aliquis,” who has reached the meeting point of the paths, the “compita.” This person looks above it to that towards which the paths lead and from which they emanate. On account of the narrowness and simplicity of this source it cannot itself be included in the paths. The class of people under discussion here turns out to be those who are prophesying. Thus, this additional material asserts at the outset of the commentary that those who can glean knowledge of this level of the Godhead, and to whom the paths will flow, are prophets. Together with the lemma explaining the meaning of the phrase “ten and not eleven” this passage deals with the hiddenness of the En-Sof. Here the text informs the reader that there is a region of the God, which is not on the path leading up to the highest Sefirah,

²⁹ “Compita” is an archaic term for “crossroads.”

³⁰ *Vat.ebr.* 191, 39r.

but rather is distinct from it, though here it goes unnamed. Despite its supernal status, however, this highest region of the Godhead was not unknown to the prophets. In fact, it was from this highest reality that prophetic knowledge flowed. As will become clear in the following sections, the prophets themselves never ascended to that specific level of the Godhead. They instead gain awareness of this region by “looking up” from the sefirotic level to which they were able to ascend. Thus, while the En-Sof should not be numbered among the Sefirot, it is not separated absolutely from them (*separantur ab eis non absolute*). This passage evidences that the version of the commentary preserved in the Latin translation was concerned with articulating a prophetology harmonizable with a distinction between the En-Sof and the Sefirot. Placing this material near the beginning of the commentary, which contains its interpretation of the opening line of the *Sefer Yeşirah*, serves to indicate a key objective. The need for such explanations also intimates that the commentary preserved in Mithridates’s translation was introducing the concept of the En-Sof as a new doctrine.

After flagging its own thematic concern with prophetology, the relevant additional material proceeds in a roughly coherent way. The first such passage does not explicitly address prophetic ascent, but by establishing the association between certain theonyms and a specific Sefirotic level, which will later be identified as the one to which prophets ascend and the theonyms that he must comprehend to reach that level. At this point the commentary is explaining the emanation of the Sefirot Neşah and Hod. In the Latin this passage is as follows:

Scilicet in qualitate dominus deus Israel recte fluit et provehantur fontes vite et operantur gloriam quae dicatur dii vini [sic; read: divini] qui sunt eternitas et decor qui ambo provehantur in diffusionem fontis quae dicitur omnipotens, quod est fundamentum seculi iusti. Omnipotens animus ideo datur qua robustus est et fortis ut rex in exemplo et dat quo textus datur unum ex quibus motus quod intelligitur dominus ex potestate quo destruit inimicos. Dat quod quidem potestate datur doctores numquam ideo

dicitur omnipotens vero nomine Sadai qua dixit seculo suo ‘sufficiens’ et hoc intellexerunt qua finis callium in ea potestate est, nam 70 numerus coniungitur cum eo.³¹

Namely into this quality the Lord God of Israel rightly flows and the sources of life are drawn forth and celebrate his glory, which are called the divine things, which are Neṣaḥ and Hod, who both are drawn forth in the diffusion of the source which is called omnipotent, which is the foundation of the just age. The almighty mind therefore is given which is robust and strong as a king, for example, and he gives that by which the text is given one from which death is understood as the Lord from the power by which he destroys enemies. He gives what is indeed given by power, but the teachers never call him omnipotent, but by the name of Sadai, which he said suffices for his age, and they understood this, which is the end of the paths in that power, for the number 70 is united with it.

The passage correlates God’s omnipotence with the name El Shaddai, which “in this age,” indicates that God is “sufficiens.” The commentary also intriguingly describes “the number 70” as united with the name El Shaddai. Here Mithridates is using a gematria value to stand in for a theonym, a frequent practice of his.³² In gematria, seventy is the equivalent of the theonym Adonai. Thus, the end of this lemma asserts that the name Adonai is united to the name El Shaddai, perhaps implying that God’s lordship over creation is derived from God’s self-sufficiency, i.e. his omnipotence. The connection of the theonym El Shaddai with God’s sufficiency stems from the Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed*

I.63. In Pines’s English translation of the Guide the relevant passage reads:

The name *Yah* refers similarly to the notion of the eternity of existence, whereas *Shaddai* derives from שׁ, meaning a sufficiency. Thus: “For the stuff they had was sufficient [*dayam*].” The letter shin [occurring at the beginning of *Shaddai*] has the meaning who, as in *shekbar*. Accordingly the meaning [of *Shaddai*] is He who is sufficient; the intention here being to signify that He does not need other than himself with reference to the existence of that which He has brought into existence or with reference to prolonging the latter’s existence, but that His existence, may He be exalted, suffices for that.³³

Maimonides’s etymological interpretation of the theonym conceives of it as a compressed way of conveying that God’s existence is dependent on no other entity and that concomitantly his power is unlimited, enabling him to do whatever he wills. While Maimonides’s connection of “אֵל שֶׁדַּי” with

³¹ *Vat.ebr.*191, 40v.

³² Wirszubski 1989, 70-71. Wirszubski terms this Mithridates’s “isopsephic style.”

³³ Pines 1963, 155. The bracketed words are in Pines’s, not mine. Having given this English translation of the passage in question, I will not provide additional translations of the Hebrew and Latin versions of the passage that will be quoted below.

“די” has its roots in the rabbinic tradition, he significantly transforms the Rabbinic tradition. The relevant rabbinic background is Genesis Rabbah 46:3, wherein the theonym El Shaddai is connected with “די” because God tells Abraham that it is enough for him to cut off only his foreskin, and that creation was complete when God told the universe “Enough!”³⁴ It is Maimonides, however, who makes explicit the connection with God’s omnipotence and the sufficiency of his power to ground his mastery over creation.

Pines’s translation parallels the Tibbhoneide Hebrew version of this passage relatively closely:

וכן שם 'יה' הוא מענין נצחיות המציאה. ו'שד' – בו גזרה מן 'די': "והמלאכה היתה דים"; וה'שין' – בענין 'אשר', כמו "שכבר"; ויהיה ענינו: 'אשר די' – הכונה בזה: שהוא לא יצטרך במציאות מה שהמציא ולא בהתמידו, לזולתו, אבל מציאותו מספקת בו. וכן שם 'חסין' נגזר מן הכח: "וחסון הוא כאלונים". וכן 'צור' הוא שם משותף כמו שבארנו.³⁵

This Tibbhoneide version foregrounds the term “די” to drive home Maimonides’s point, and it is this term that Pines translates as “sufficient” and its cognates. The semantic field of “די” includes notions of fullness and satiety as well as sufficiency. The early Latin translation, known as the *Dux Neutrorum*, tracks this semantic field accurately, phrasing its translation of the passage thus:

Similiter nomen duarum litterarum, quod est sumptum a nomine quatuor litterarum, est de ratione firmitudinis essentie. Et 'Saday' est decusum a 'day,' quod est sufficientia, et 'sin,' quod est 's' et ponitur pro quo. Et ratio 'Saday' hoc est: 'qui sufficit', hoc est dicere non eget essentia alicuius entis, nec eget alio extra se ad firmitatem essentie sue, sed sua essentia sufficit sibi.³⁶

Here we have an example of a Latin translator before Mithridates rendering the contended root of the theonym Shaddai, ‘די,’ as ‘sufficiens’ and its cognates. While this by no means proves that Mithridates had in mind the *Dux Neutrorum* when he translated this passage, it does show that “sufficiens” was an

³⁴ Genesis Rabbah 46:3. See Freedman and Simon, 1983.

³⁵ Even-Shemuel 1987, 338-339.

³⁶ di Segni 2019, I.62, 196-197. The Latin translation of the Book I of the *Guide* is numbered one chapter behind the Hebrew version due to the merging and splitting of various chapters.

established Latin equivalent for 'ד' and its Hebrew cognates. This fact increases the likelihood that this passage has its roots in the Hebrew text from which Mithridates was translating and is not his original interpolation. The presence of this passage in the Hebrew original would indicate that this version of the commentary had added material derived from the *Guide for the Perplexed* to elaborate on its interpretation of the *Sefer Yeşirah*.

Maimonides's interpretation of the theonym is, however, only the ultimate source of the ideas found in this section of additional material. The most likely proximate source seems to be Joseph Gikatilla's Kabbalistic writings, specifically his *Sha'are Orah*, provided the proximate source from which this interpretation was grafted into the commentary. The additional material in the Latin translation of the commentary correlates the theonym El Shaddai with the emanation of Neşah and Hod and with Adonai's dependence on the theonym El Shaddai. Such a cluster of relationships accruing to El Shaddai is found in Gikatilla's discussion of the third and fourth gates in *Sha'arei Orah*:

ודע כי שני שמות הללו שהם נצח והוד הם מקום יניקת הנביאים, ומן המקום הזה שואבים הנביאים כל מיני הנבואות, כל אחד מהם כפי כוחו וכפי השגתו...
 ...לא נתגליתי אליהם בשם יהו"ה שיראו אותי באספקלריאה מצוחצחת, אלא באל שד"י. וכבר ידעת כי שד"י הוא סוד אדנ"י, כמו שהודענוך כבר בסוף שער ראשון.³⁷
 Know that the two names Neşah and Hod form the place of nurture for the Prophets and it is from there that the Prophets draw their prophecies, each prophet according to his own power and grasp. ... In other words, I did not reveal myself to you in the name of YHWH so that you should see me as a polished reflection, but rather as El Shaddai. For you already know that El Shaddai is the essence of the Name Adonai....

This cluster of associations lends some credence to the notion that in the very least a Kabbalistic interpretation of the Maimonidean source material shaped how the Maimonidean interpretation was incorporated into the text preserved by the Latin translation, even if it was not taken directly from Gikatilla. Although this particular section of the material unique to the Latin text does not explicitly

³⁷ Gikatilla 1975, 109.

treat prophetology, the connections that it forges between various theonyms provides the framework within which the more explicit prophetology will function. That Neṣaḥ and Hod are correlated with Adonai and El Shaddai will later be used to identify which theonym all prophets, with the important exception of Moses, must understand so as to ascend and receive prophetic inspiration.³⁸ More specifically, the fact that Adonai is associated with the order of the cosmos has significant ramifications for the prophetological material that follows. In the additional material discussed below, various prophetic ascents are described each involving the comprehension of the theonym Adonai. Since the name Adonai correlates with the order of the creation, comprehending it corresponds to comprehending the order of creation. Thus, identifying the comprehension of this name as one of the prerequisites, perhaps even the sufficient condition, for prophetic ascent represents a Kabbalistic transformation of the Maimonidean account of prophecy in which intellectual perfection was a prerequisite for prophetic ascent.³⁹ The Latin version of the commentary's inclusion of this material thus indicates that its prophetological elements are articulating a distinctly Kabbalistic notion of prophecy, and one that can moreover be identified with Gikatilla's own prophetology. Where the commentary diverges from Gikatilla is its strong distinction between the En-Sof and the Sefirot. An underlying concern seems to be to show both how prophets could know of the En-Sof despite not ascending to a higher Sefirah.

³⁸ It is true that Gikatilla was not the only medieval Kabbalist to correlate the level to which a prophet ascends with Neṣaḥ and Hod. In at least one text, namely the *Sheqel haQodesh*, Moses de Leon identified these two Sefirot as the level to which the prophet ascends. I still maintain that Gikatilla's *Sha'are Orab* is the most likely source for this view precisely because the commentary further connects these two Sefirot with the theonym El Shaddai, comprehension of which forms part of prophetic ascent. The relevant passage from *Sheqel haQodesh* does not make a similar connection. See de Leon 1996.

³⁹ See *MTI*.7; *GP*, II.32.

Following this section comes yet more material unique to the version of the commentary preserved in the Latin text, which is explicitly concerned with prophetology. It is here that the commentary exploits its connection of Adonai with Neṣaḥ and Hod to begin giving an account of prophetic ascent. In the passage just discussed, El Shaddai was connected with another theonym, Adonai, indicated using its gematria value of seventy. The commentary then uses this connection to discuss particular examples of prophetic ascent, namely those of Isaiah and Moses:

Inde namquam pertrahitur fons et creantur gloria excelsa et vero limis et sic scribitur “Vidi Dominum sedentem super sedem excelsam.” [Isaiah 6:1] et vero limen quod dicitur habitator eternitatis et sanctum nomen eius quod est numerus 70 benedictus. Et ipse numerus 70 · super orbem est · et hec potestas quod dicitur 70 est quam vidit Esayas et doctores numerorum domini. Quod Manasses interfecit Esayam ex quo duorum vidit EYH dominum mihi inscribatur non videbit me homo et vivet ut habet alium. Ipse anima Manasses ignoravit distinguere potestates qua in veritate dixit, “Esayas vidi EYH dominum. Potestas EYH est numerus 70. Moyses vero quando dixit non videbit me homo et vivet nequaquam de numero 70 intellexit secundum dimidium speculo lucente quod est numerus 800. Et hunc numerum petiit videre quando dixit “Ostende mihi nunc gloriam tuam” nec exauditus est. Secundum bonum responsum fuit ei, “videbis EYH posteriora mea.” et est [sic] summo doctore monte dicitur quod ostenditur ei modum phylacteriorum et est numerus 70 in quo omnes numeri connectuntur et propter hoc datur sponsa quod unius salvata est ex omnibus.⁴⁰

For from there is drawn the source and the exalted glory and the true threshold are created, and thus it is written “I saw the Lord sitting on the throne on high.” [Isaiah 6:1]. Moreover, the true threshold, which is called the inhabitant of eternity, and his holy name, which is the blessed number 70. And the number 70 itself is over the world and this power, which is called 70, is what Isaiah and the teachers of the Sefirot of the LORD saw. It is the case that Manasseh killed Isaiah because, of the two of them, he saw EYH the Lord, as is written, “No man shall see me and live as he has another.” [Exodus 33:20] The soul of Manasseh himself did not know to distinguish the powers by which in truth he said, “I, Isaiah, saw EYH the LORD.” The power of EYH is the number 70. But when Moses said, “He shall not see me and live” [Exodus 33:20] by no means did he understand by means the number 70, but that which is after it, in a shining mirror, which is the number 800. And he asked to see this number when he said “Show me now your glory” [Exodus 33:18] and was not heeded. According to the good answer that was [given] to him, “You shall see EYH my back.” [Exodus 33:20] and for this reason he is called the highest teacher on the mountain because the manner of the phylacteries is shown to him and it is the number 70 in which all numbers are connected and for this reason the bride is given because she is the only one saved from all.

Here the comprehension of the theonyms is more explicitly connected to Moses and Isaiah’s prophetic visions. When receiving their visions the prophets gaze upon Ehyeh and Adonai. The

⁴⁰ *Vat.ebr.* 191, 40v-41r.

prophets' visions are also shared by the "teachers of the Sefirot of the LORD," i.e. the masters of Kabbalah. The tradition of Manasseh killing Isaiah has its roots in the Talmud.⁴¹ The commentary references the version in the Babylonian Talmud, according to which Manasseh tries to convict Isaiah of blasphemy after the prophet claims to have seen the LORD (i.e. Isaiah 6:1), but glosses it Kabbalistically. Since Manasseh did not know how to distinguish the Sefirot from each other and from the En-Sof, he mistakenly thought that Isaiah was blaspheming. Thus, this story is deployed to differentiate prophetic knowledge of God, which is equated with Kabbalistic knowledge of the Sefirot, from more quotidian understandings of God.

If the Gikatillan background is in fact that proximate source, then this passage even further nuances the commentary's prophetology. In the *Sha'are Orah*, Ehyeh and Adonai are connected with the order of the created universe. For Maimonides, when a prophet united with the Agent Intellect he grasped the totality of this world order simultaneously and instantaneously, which provided him with prophetic insight.⁴² Locating prophecy at the level of these theonyms allowed Gikatilla to give Maimonides's prophetology a Kabbalistic inflection. The reproduction of this account of prophecy here furnishes the commentary with the basis of an account of what the prophet knows that begins to relate it to a major theme of the *Sefer Yeşirah*, namely the process and structure of creation. The height within creation that a prophet attains and what he beholds at that level is delineated. Understanding the structure of creation, which the commentary treats as grasping the meaning of the theonyms Adonai and EHYH, in turn facilitates grasping a higher realm within the divine.

⁴¹ Slightly different versions of the story are preserved in the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds, but it does not seem possible to determine which version is being reworked by the author of this commentary. See *BT* Yevamot 49b; *BY* Sanhedrin 10a.

⁴² *GP*, II.32. For thorough treatments of this issue in Maimonides, see Altmann 1978, Gruenwald 1991.

In the transcribed passage reproduced above, understanding Adonai and EHYH are connected with a mirror, which is “the number 800.” Although this number is not a standard gematria, it is nonetheless decipherable. It almost certainly stands for Tiferet. Mithridates most likely saw a Tiferet abbreviated “תת,” and then translated these two letters as 800, which is a possible gematria value of these two letters together. Importantly, the introduction of Tiferet elucidates what is distinctive about Moses’s prophecy. Whereas other prophets derived their prophecy from sefirot Neṣaḥ and Hod, Moses’s prophecy derives from the Sefirah Tiferet. Knowledge gleaned from the level of Tiferet explains why his prophetic utterances are clearer than other prophets, since to behold Tiferet is to look into an “illuminated mirror” (“speculo lucente”). Asserting that Mosaic prophecy derives from Tiferet strengthens the connection between this anonymous commentary and Gikatilla’s prophetology in the *Sha’arei Orab*. There Gikatilla also maintains that Moses alone derives his prophecies from Tiferet, in contrast to prophecies deriving from Neṣaḥ and Hod. Furthermore, verbal resonances between the Latin of the commentary and the Hebrew text of *Sha’arei Orab* support this connection. In *Sha’arei Orab* Mosaic prophecy is clearer than other prophetic pronouncements because he is looking in a shining mirror, a term mirrored in the Latin text. The Latin term “speculo lucente” is in fact likely a translation of the same Hebrew phrase, “אספקלריאה מאירה,” that Gikatilla employs.⁴³

The commentary makes clear that the prophet does not ascend as far as Keter, Ḥokhmah, and likely Binah as well, which fits with the contours of Gikatillan prophetology. There remains a tension, however, between the seeming assertion that prophecy involves some kind of comprehensive knowledge of the essences of created things, which are contained at the level of Keter. One possible

⁴³ Gikatilla 1975, 110.

resolution of this tension could be derived from the fact that, as discussed above, Ḥokhmah is identified with the paths only from the comparatively simpler and more unified Keter, whereas it appears as a Sefirah to the levels below. Thus, from the prophet's perspective, the source of the paths might appear to be Ḥokhmah. While this raises the further issue of how knowledge of Keter, let alone the En-Sof, is possible, the matter must be left here for now.

The prophetological profile of the commentary is gradually coming into focus. While the additions surveyed thus far have identified whither the prophet ascends and what he sees, what remains unexplained is how the prophet ascends. Here the *Sefer Yeṣirah*, with its extensive discussions of the supernal Hebrew letters, provides ample resources for the commentary's additional material. The Latin text's additional material explains how ascent is achieved both via a further description of Moses's ascent and a discussion of Ezekiel's prophetic ascent. Treating the shorter discussion of Moses first, Mithridates's translation gives a further reason for the preeminent character of Mosaic prophecy:

Verumtamen Moyses doctor noster meruit videre plus quam omnes prophete quod cognovit intrinsecus enim totam concatenationem et depedentiam mutuam. Et virtus 800, verumtamen meus lucens quod est speculum lucens quem est adytus [read: aditus] ipsius 800 non meruit Moyses videre. Inscibitur, "et faciem meum non videbis," seu "et facies mei non videbuntur." Et de hoc dicitur "non videbit me homo" [Exodus 33:20] neque alium, nisi per tres numerationes quod dominus numerationis numerare et numerabile, qua uniuntur ipse in his tribus locis per numeratum sine libris quod dicitur sapientia · 5 · 20 · 5 ·⁴⁴ et pro numeratione quae est benedictio. Et pro mirabilibus quae sunt cetere uniones quas uniuntur in unitate una decem numerationum sine aliquo. Hec animae propositio, tamquam declarativa 32 callium, quae sunt decem numerationes et viginti due litterae. Et decem numerationes domini sine aliquo dicit quas debet homo observare os suum ne loquitur et animum suum ne cogitet quod "sum magis intrinsice quam littere." Hec namquam tantum in lege scribuntur.⁴⁵

Nevertheless our teacher Moses deserved to see more than all the prophets because he indeed knew intrinsically the whole concatenation and mutual dependence. And the power of 800, which is my light because it is the shining mirror that is the gate of 800, Moses did not deserve to see. It is written, "and

⁴⁴ This particular gematria likely stands for "החוכמה," using the numerical equivalents of the first, middle, and last letters. This reading is supported by the Latin "sapientia" that immediately precedes the numbers. Since the numbers most likely stand for "החוכמה" rather "חוכמה," I have translated "sapientia" with the definite article rather than without it.

⁴⁵ *Vat.ebr.* 191, 41r.

you shall not see my face,” or “and my faces shall not be seen.” And about this it is said, “no man will see me,” [Exodus 33:20] nor any other, except by three numerations which the Lord of numeration number and countable, by which he is united in these three places by the numbered without books which is called the wisdom · 5 · 20 · 5 · and for the numeration which is a benediction. And for the wonderful things that are the rest of the unions, which are united in one unity of ten immaterial⁴⁶ numerations. This is the subject of the soul, the explanation, so to speak, of the 32 Paths, which are ten Sefirot and twenty-two letters. And it speaks of the ten immaterial numerations of the Lord, which a man ought to guard his mouth lest he speak and his mind lest he think, “I have more in me than the letters.” For these are only written in the law.

Notice first that the additional material repeats the assertion that Mosaic prophecy derives from Tiferet (i.e., 800). The superiority of Moses’s prophecy, though, is also connected with what seems to be his linguistic mastery of the connections between the letters themselves and between the Sefirot and the letters, which merits his seeing more than any other prophet. There are a number of reasons to think this. The term “concatenatio” here has a linguistic valence, as it is used both for chains of thoughts and chains of letters and words in rhetorical compositions.⁴⁷ It is likely a translation for the Hebrew term “השתלשלות,” which has a similar sense of linguistic composition. Moreover, the end of the passage makes this connection more explicit, urging the reader to guard his speech lest he think that he could surpass the noetic level of the letters because the letters that he must master are those found in the Torah.

The necessary role of the letters in facilitating prophetic ascent is underscored even more strongly in the additional material that discusses Ezekiel’s vision. This section effectively constitutes the

⁴⁶ Both here and in the line below “sine aliquo” must be rendering the Hebrew “בלי מֵה,” which I am translating as “immaterial,” following Giulio Busi. See Busi 2007, 1-11. That Mithridates translates this phrase as a phrase, i.e. as two separate words, is significant, and might indicate something about the nature of the Hebrew text that he used in his translation. As Hayman noted in his critical edition of the *Sefer Yesirah*, most manuscripts treat the phrase as a single word, “בלי־מֵה,” a practice that he follows in his critical edition of the text. The four short recension manuscripts (L, R, B², and D) that keep the words separate are, according to Hayman, attempting to make the allusion to Job 26:7 (נֶטָהּ צִפּוֹן עַל־תּוֹהוּ תִלְהֶה) (אֶרֶץ עַל־בְּלִי־מֵה) explicit. That Mithridates renders the phrase literally as “sine aliquo,” using two separate words, rather than “immaterialis,” might very well track the Hebrew commentary that does the same. See Hayman 2004, 65-66.

⁴⁷ <https://alatius.com/ls/index.php?id=9762> “concatenatio” Accessed March 13, 2025. <<https://alatius.com/ls/>>

commentary's discussion of the Account of the Chariot. It comes immediately prior to the section delimiting the prophet's ascent to the level of Neṣaḥ and Hod, and stipulates that the letters must be discussed before the Sefirot can be discussed. It states:

...ideo speculetur primo modo unus quisque has numerationes eo modo quo speculatum est Ezechiel in visione aurigae, ubi dixit quod aspectus earum est in fulgur fulgur [sic] namque prope numerum 70 situm est. Ideo propheta quando speculabatur et quod meruisset nomen episcopi⁴⁸ ut speculatoris plus debebat speculari et futura prodicere ex revela esse numerus 70, quem inspiciebat ut fulgur. De inde speculabatur ipsum numerum 70, et sic Ezechiel vidit et speculatus est ab inferiori ad suum superius. Vidit enim ventum turbinem nubem ignem flam[m]am splendorem et colorem animalis igniti loquentis et aspectus quattuor animalium habentium colorem igne quasi colorem fulminis fulgitis quod dicitur Bazaoth et hoc est quod primo debet quisquam videre et speculari in nivea superiore. Inde animus procedat superius per omnes numerationes perceptibiles, quare finis est infinitum ratione loci, unde incipiunt procedere quod equidem est super coronam et ibi nec finis nec terminus est, nec cogitatio comprehendere valet nec imaginativa primum ibi et minimum ponere nam verbum eius in eis est voluntas fomatoris ab infinito procedens, et finis in eis est proire et redire, enim quod influxus ille influens a causa ratione ad numerationes ad verbum suum rursum qui Turbo et verbum quidem est numerus 70 Currens quidem in turbo per decem numerationes quas vidit Ezechiel in nivea et adorantes secundum coram sede sua quae est sedes glorie pro cento et est numerus 70, quod se habent in sedes Salomonis de qua scribitur, "Sedit quo Salomon super sedem domini" [possibly 1 Chronicles 29:23] et qua est finis."⁴⁹

...Let each one speculate in the first way on these Sefirot in the way that Ezekiel speculated in the vision of the charioteer, where he said that their appearance is like flashing lightning, for it is situated near the number 70. Therefore, when the prophet was speculating, and because he merited the name of the overseer as a speculator, he would have speculated more and predicted the future from the revelation of the number 70, which he beheld as if in a flash of lightning. From there he contemplated the number 70, and thus Ezekiel saw and contemplated from the lower to his higher. For he saw wind, whirlwind, cloud, fire, flame, splendor, and the color of a fiery speaking animal, and the appearance of four animals having a covering of fire like the color of lightning flashes, which is called Bazaoth⁵⁰, and this is what anyone should first see and contemplate in the upper snow. From there the mind proceeds above through all perceptible Sefirot, wherefore the end is infinite by reason of its place, whence they begin to proceed because truly it is above the crown and there is neither end nor limit, neither is thought able to comprehend nor the imaginative faculty to place the first there and the least, for his word in them is the will of the formator proceeding from the infinite, and the end in them is to go forth and return, for that flow flowing from the cause by reason to the Sefirot to his word again which is the whirlwind and the word indeed is the number 70. Running indeed in the whirlwind through the ten sefirot which Ezekiel saw in the snow and adoring according to before his seat which is the seat of glory for one hundred and is

⁴⁸ I remain unsure as to the exact sense of "episcopi" here. It is clearly written in the Latin text but what the Hebrew word that Mithridates was translating is not clear, nor why he would use such a loaded word.

⁴⁹ *Vat.ebr.* 191, 42r-42v.

⁵⁰ There are three possibilities for the Hebrew word transliterated here. It is either a form of "בזרה," which can refer to bolts of lightning, but is not used in Ezekiel 1, or it is "בצבאות" but this theonym is also not employed in Ezekiel 1 or it is a permutation or misreading of "בזק," which appears in Ezekiel 1:14. The third option is most likely.

the number 70, which relate to the seat of Solomon of which it is written, “Where Solomon sits, upon the seat of the Lord” and which is the end.

This passage once again emphasizes that prophetic ascent culminates in beholding the theonym Adonai and in so doing coming to grasp the order and structure of creation, which provides prophetic insight. It emphasizes the importance of comprehending the theonym Adonai in a way that no surviving Hebrew text of the commentary does. This passage also contains a Kabbalistic representation of Maimonides’s limits on prophetic knowledge. For Maimonides the prophet unified with the Agent Intellect, not God, and thereby gained comprehensive knowledge of the world-order but not of the divine essence. The commentary’s prophetology might initially seem at odds with Maimonidean prophetology, given that the prophet noetically ascends up into the Sefirot. It affirms, however, that neither the prophet’s intellective nor imaginative faculties can comprehend the upper Sefirot. The references to both faculties echoes the Maimonidean discussion of prophecy. For Maimonides the prophet unifies with the Agent Intellect and his own intellective faculty comprehends the order of creation, if not the divine essence. To be a prophet, however, he must also have a perfected imaginative faculty to communicate what his intellect comprehends. By emphasizing the failure of both the intellective and the imaginative faculties, the commentary may be explaining why the En-Sof has been unknown for so long. Even if the prophet can noetically ascend as far as Neṣaḥ and Hod, he cannot comprehend the En-Sof, despite “gazing at” it from a lower sefirotic level. In turn, there is nothing in his intellect that could overflow into his imagination to be then communicated via images and parables.

The lack of any explicit mention of the letters might lead one to conclude that this passage is not, in fact arguing for the necessity of mastering the letters for prophetic ascent. Several aspects of the

passage forestall such an interpretation. First, the passage asserts at its beginning that something must be discussed prior to the “upper ten,” i.e. the Sefirot. Then it states that the mind proceeds up towards the Sefirot by means of the “perceptible Sefirot.” These perceptible Sefirot are most likely the Sefirot insofar as they are perceptible in the letters. Ezekiel’s ascent is thereby dependent on his mastery of the Hebrew language and the Torah.

The final paragraph of the Latin text of the commentary in fact begins with a reference to Moses’s prophetic ascent:

Ipsa anima quod dixit ad Moysen, “Ascende ad dominum!” Est potestas clementie scilicet numerus 800, quod dixit Moysi “Ascende ad numerum 70” quod vocatur potestas noctis⁵¹ et est angelus de quo dicitur “nomen meus est in medio.”⁵²

The soul itself is what said to Moses, “Ascend to the Lord!” There is the power of Ḥesed, that is to say, Tiferet, which said to Moses “Ascend to the name Adonai!” which is called the power of Night and is an angel, about which is said, “My name is in your midst.” (Exodus 23:21)

This passage comes after the commentary has just completed a discussion of the prophet’s ascent to Neṣaḥ and Hod to gaze upon the higher Sefirot. It seems to be saying that both divine mercy and the soul itself urge the prophet to ascend. One is even tempted to claim that here the commentary is speaking to the reader, urging him to begin his own process of ascent. The fact that now both the beginning and concluding paragraphs of the commentary contain references to prophecy is significant. They may be read as thematic statements indicating to the reader both the subject of the commentary that follows and reminding the reader of the concerns and inventions of the commentary that he has

⁵¹ This reference to “potestas noctis” is puzzling. In Pico’s *Conclusiones* on the Orphic material, he aligns En-Sof with the goddess Night found in the Orphic Hymns. Here, though, Night seems to denote a level of the Godhead lower than the En-Sof, which would militate against its being a source for Pico’s correlation of the two terms. It is possible, though, that the phrase here means that Adonai is called the “power of night” only insofar as it contains the power of the En-Sof, but there is little textual support for such a view. See Farmer 1986, 510-511.

⁵² Vat.ebr.191, 43r.

just finished reading. Furthermore, that the commentary in fact ends here is also significant. In the version of the commentary ascribed to Nahmanides, the commentary continues. It notably includes some speculation on the supernal androgyne. None of this material is found in the Latin text. Not only does it lack such material, but the commentary also does not simply end abruptly in the manner that one might expect if Mithridates were translating a damaged Hebrew base text, whose ending had been lost. Instead, this concluding exhortation is found, which lends credence that the commentary was being deliberately reshaped to address prophetological concerns.

V. Conclusion

There are three possible explanations for the presence this material found only in the Latin text of the commentary. On the one hand, this material could be the result of Mithridates effectively rewriting large portions of the commentary, inserting additional material to give it a different theological profile. On the other hand, Mithridates could have translated a version of the commentary that no longer survives among the Hebrew manuscript witnesses. There are two major reasons for thinking that the latter is more plausible. First, since the pioneering work of Wirszubski scholars have noted that, though Mithridates did not shirk from interpolating phrases into the text, his interventions were far subtler and relatively smaller in terms of the number of words added or changed.⁵³ Campanini goes so far as to say that Mithridates's translation notes are merely "a kind of mechanical interlinear interpretation, a less edited, almost mechanical rendition of the Hebrew original."⁵⁴ He would insert short Latin phrases or change which Hebrew letter had mystical significance in a given text, but does not seem to have

⁵³ Wirszubski 1989, 106-118. Campanini 2008, 436-443. Copenhagen 2019, 156-159.

⁵⁴ Campanini 2005, 77.

added whole paragraphs of text. This practice makes much sense. For his interpolations, glosses, and outright forgeries to have plausibly stemmed from the Hebrew originals they needed to be subtle and unobtrusive. Large blocks of text not found in the Hebrew originals would have raised suspicion amongst the Jewish interlocutors with whom Pico hoped to engage. Thus, the sheer amount of material unique to the Latin translation counsels against attributing this unique material to Mithridates's own creativity. Second, the theological concerns betrayed by this additional material do not resonate with the theological agenda driving most of Mithridates's other interpolations, glosses, and forgeries. Mithridates's interventions in the Hebrew texts that he did translate were generally aimed at facilitating a Christological or Trinitarian reading of a given text, thereby giving Pico grist for his missionary mill. In contrast, the material unique to the Latin text seeks to resolve issues internal to Kabbalah.

If, however, the material unique to the Latin translation was present in the Hebrew text used by Mithridates when translating, there are different ways in which this additional material could have existed in the Hebrew manuscript(s). It could well have been the case that the text arose through a deliberate process of inserting various thematically Gikatillan passages into the preexisting anonymous commentary to produce a new text. There is another option that would not, *strictu sensu*, involve the deliberate composition of a new commentary. Scholars have long documented the presence of extensive glosses that survive in Hebrew manuscripts on Kabbalistic texts. These glosses range from the simple interlinear presence of alternative readings and biblical citations to detailed marginal commentaries. It could have been the case that a series of marginal comments were composed on a manuscript containing this commentary, and then copied into the body of the commentary at a later

stage. This could have happened in two different circumstances. First, a Jewish scribe could have copied in the comments while making another Hebrew copy. Second, it has been demonstrated that Mithridates copied into his Latin translations the glosses that accompanied the Kabbalistic texts that he translated for Pico.⁵⁵ Hence, it is possible that the material unique to the Latin text originated in a series of glosses on the Hebrew base text that Mithridates copied into the body of the text. Of these scenarios, the likeliest would have involved the material unique to the Latin translation having already been present in the Hebrew text used by Mithridates to complete his translation. While he both freely altered his translations and sometimes prudently noted when the Hebrew text had alternative readings, the sheer amount of the additional Hebrew material militates against attributing it to his own editorial activity. Thus, it is most likely that Mithridates's Latin translation witnesses text that is no longer preserved among the existing Hebrew manuscripts.

The extent of these prophetological passages raises the question of whether it would be proper to speak of the Latin translation as in fact a translation of the anonymous commentaries on the *Sefer Yeṣirah* attributed to Nahmanides and to Azriel of Gerona. Not only is a substantial amount of material preserved in the Latin that has left no traces in the Hebrew manuscripts, but they also reorient the focus of the commentary. The new material transforms the commentary into a treatise illustrating how Gikatillan prophetic ascent works within a theosophical framework that distinguishes between the En-Sof and the Sefirot. It builds upon the fact that the text not only distinguishes between En-Sof and Keter but seeks to explain why En-Sof remained unknown for so long and why some Kabbalists failed to distinguish between it and Keter. Then it proceeds to outline the Sefirotic level to which a

⁵⁵ Campanini 2019, 21-22.

prophet ascends before explaining how he might succeed or fail to gain knowledge of the higher Sefirotic levels.

One further possibility is that this commentary represents a composite work, composed by deliberately combining elements from various Kabbalistic writings to create a coherent, or roughly coherent, whole. If this were the case, it would help explain why the text contains seemingly competing assertions about what a prophet can know. There are, however, multiple ways that this composite text could have arisen. It could well have been the case that the text arose through a deliberate process of inserting various thematically Gikatillan passages into the preexisting anonymous commentary to produce a new text. There is another option that would not, *stricto sensu*, involve the deliberate composition of a new commentary. Scholars have long documented the presence of extensive glosses that survive in Hebrew manuscripts on Kabbalistic texts. These glosses range from the simple interlinear presence of alternative readings and biblical citations to detailed marginal commentaries. It could have been the case that a series of marginal comments were composed on a manuscript containing this commentary, and then copied into the body of the commentary at a later stage. This could have happened in two different circumstances. First, a Jewish scribe could have copied in the comments while making another Hebrew copy. Second, as he is known to have done in several instances, Mithridates could have copied into his Latin translations the glosses accompanying the Kabbalistic texts that he translated for Pico. Hence, it is possible that the material unique to the Latin text originated in a series of glosses on the Hebrew base text that Mithridates copied into the body of the text. Of these scenarios, the likeliest would have involved the material unique to the Latin translation having already been present in the Hebrew text used by Mithridates to complete his

translation. Once again, while he both freely altered his translations and sometimes prudently noted when the Hebrew text had alternative readings, the amount of the additional material seems to preclude an instance of Mithridates's interpolating. Another aspect of Mithridates's approach to the *Sefer Yeşirah* tradition as a whole suggests that he was simply translating the commentary more or less as he found it. At one point, the Latin text refers to the "auctor Sepher Iesire."⁵⁶ As Campanini has shown, Mithridates often went so far as to alter a text in translation that referred simply to an unnamed author of the *Sefer Yeşirah* to an explicit attribution to Abraham.⁵⁷ That he does not do so here could further indicate that when completing this particular translation Mithridates was tampering relatively little with the base text. Given the fact, however, that the manuscript that Mithridates used for his translation has not been identified, such speculation must, unlike that on the Sefirot themselves, be left here.

The prophetological focus of the commentary helps to explain the lack of interest in it on the part of Christian Kabbalists. Lacking any interpolated Trinitarian clues for Pico or the later perusers of his library to unravel, it did not fit into their own theological projects. Yet if the commentary does not fit into the project of Christian Kabbalah, it still fits into Kabbalistic debates internal to the Jewish tradition. As I have shown, it represents an effort to articulate how accounts of prophecy developed prior to the positing of the En-Sof could be reconciled with this theosophical innovation. Nevertheless, its prophetological focus actually evinces a reason why Mithridates might have thought that Pico would have found it interesting. As has been well-documented, Pico's *Conclusiones* and *Oration*

⁵⁶ Vat.ebr.191, 42r. "[...]et est substantia vere subtilis pura et intrinseca incorporea quod dicitur verbum, de qua dicit auctor Sepher Iesire quod stantes tres: vox spiritus et verbum."

⁵⁷ Campanini 2019, 28-29.

contained an anthropology according to which human perfection involved ascending to the level of the Sefirot and angelifying one's nature.⁵⁸ A commentary that devotes much of its attention to prophetic ascent might easily seem to be of interest to a thinker with such an account of human perfection. That Pico did not attend to its full potential was his loss.

Even if Pico did not make much use of the commentary, this study does reveal the relevance of Latin Kabbalah for the study of the Hebrew Kabbalah. By attending to the Latin archive, a new commentary on the *Sefer Yeşirah* has been identified. This commentary shows Gikatilla's deep influence on later Kabbalists. Furthermore, it gives evidence for a late medieval Kabbalistic debate about how prophecy worked within a theosophy that distinguished between the En-Sof and the Sefirot. The commentary resolved this tension by emphasizing Gikatilla's prophetology, in which the prophet ascended to the sefirot Neşah and Hod, or Tiferet in the unique case of Moses, on the basis of his knowledge of the primordial letters and their combinations in the Torah, but no further. Like the distinctively Kabbalistic concerns of this commentary on the *Sefer Yeşirah*, the prophet's inability both to comprehend and to imagine the En-Sof contributed to its remaining unknown for so long.

⁵⁸ Copenhaver 2019, 441ff.

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