...The Lord of all the worlds warned Moses that he should beware of his face. So it is written, ‘Beware of his face’... This is the prince who is called... Metatron.

Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur §§396–397.

Introduction

One of the important compendiums of Jewish mystical lore, a composition known to scholars as 3 Enoch or the Book of the Heavenly Palaces (Sefer Hekhalot) offers a striking re-interpretation of the canonical account of Moses’ reception of Torah. In this text the supreme angel Metatron, also associated in Sefer Hekhalot with the seventh antediluvian patriarch Enoch, is depicted as the one who reveals Torah to the Israelite prophet by bringing it out of his heavenly storehouses.¹ The account portrays Moses passing the revelation received from Enoch-Metatron to Joshua and other characters of Israelite history representing the honorable chain of transmissions of the oral law, known to us also from the mishnaic Pirke Avot, the Sayings of the Fathers. The Hekhalot writer, however, revises the traditional mishnaic arrangement of prophets, rabbis, and sages by placing at the beginning of the chain the figure of Enoch-Metatron, viewed as the initial revealer. This choice of the primordial mediator competing with the primacy of Moses is not

coincidental and in many ways serves as an important landmark in the long-lasting theological tradition that began many centuries earlier when the Second Temple was still standing. This development points to the theological competition between two heroes, the son of Jared and the son of Amram, which had ancient roots traced to the sacerdotal debates of the second temple era.

Recent scholarship has become increasingly cognizant of the complexity of the social, political, and theological climate of the late second temple period when the various sacerdotal groups and clans were competing for the primacy and authority of their priestly legacy. This competitive environment created a whole range of ideal mediatorial figures that, along with traditional mediators like Moses, also included other characters of primeval and Israelite history, such as Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, Shem, Melchizedek, and Abraham. Scholars now are well aware that in the late Second Temple period the sacerdotal legacy of Mosaic revelation came under fierce attack from various mediatorial trends that sought to offer a viable ideological alternative to the Mosaic stream through speculation on the pre-Mosaic protological traditions. One such development, which has its roots in the early Enochic materials, tried to portray the seventh antediluvian patriarch as the custodian of the more ancient cultic revelation that had existed long before Moses. In this rival paradigm, Enoch was depicted as an ancient mediator who received from God revelations superior to those received many centuries later by the son of Amram in the wilderness.

The use of such a protological figure as Enoch does not seem coincidental, since this primeval hero had been endowed with divine disclosures long before the Israelite prophet received his revelation and sacerdotal prescriptions on Mount Sinai. It is apparent that the circumstances surrounding the patriarch’s reception of revelation described in the second temple Enochic booklets were much loftier than the circumstances of the Mosaic encounter in the biblical narrative. While Moses received Torah from the Lord on earth, the Enochic hero acquired his revelation in the celestial realm, instructed there by angels and God. In the biblical account the Lord descends to Moses’ realm to convey his revelation to the seer, while Enoch is able to ascend to the divine abode and behold the Throne of Glory. The advantage here is clearly on the side of the Enochic hero.

Within the context of an ongoing competition, such a challenge could not remain unanswered by custodians of the Mosaic tradition. The non-biblical Mosaic lore demonstrates clear intentions of enhancing the exalted profile of its hero. This tendency detectable in the non-