

# Judean Onomastic Hermeneutics in Context\*

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## ■ Abstract

The term *Volksetymologie* has frequently been applied to the etiological passages of the Hebrew Bible and occasionally to such passages in Mesopotamian literature that explain the origin of the name of a person, place, or thing. Originating in mid-nineteenth century German *Sprachwissenschaft*, the term generally assumes that the authors of such passages were possessed of a considerable philological ignorance and naïveté. These etymological narratives are thus regularly brushed aside as childish though charming. Alternatively, they are often understood as interesting aesthetic devices, related to paronomasia and punning.

It is becoming increasingly evident, however, that the activity of parsing a name is linked to broader interpretive methods employed by scribes in the ancient Near East. Indeed, our developing understanding of intellectual practices in Mesopotamia and among the Bible's tradents has demonstrated that Babylonian and Judean scribes could employ rather sophisticated hermeneutics. This fact has significance for our evaluation of biblical etymological passages in many ways including, for example, the methods employed by ancient authors to interpret names within narratives and their motivation for doing so.

## ■ Keywords

Etymology, names, hermeneutics, scribalism, Genesis 16:11, Genesis 22:14, Exodus 17:15–16

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## ■ Introduction

In this study I survey the history of the concept of *Volksetymologie* in ancient Near Eastern studies, demonstrating that it is, by and large, an inadequate description of the kind of philological speculation encountered in Judean literature. Similarly, aesthetically oriented approaches to the Bible's etymologies are also heuristically lacking. Taking into consideration recent studies on the craft of writing and ancient Near Eastern hermeneutics, I examine three biblical passages in particular (Gen 16:11; 22:14; Exod 17:15–16). These admittedly limited examples offer possible avenues forward that better situate narrative etymologies firmly within the scope of Judean scribalism.<sup>1</sup>

## ■ The Invention of *Volksetymologie*

In 1852, in a groundbreaking article published in the first issue of the *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung*, the Prussian scholar Ernst Förstemann coined the term *Volksetymologie*.<sup>2</sup> Seeking to help distinguish the methods and conclusions of modern linguistic science from the speculations of previous generations, Förstemann offered a “history of etymology,” which fell, like all good historical categorizations, into three distinct periods and characters: first, the popular (*volksthuemliche*); second, the scholarly (*gelehrte*); and lastly, the scientific (*wissenschaftlich*). “The first,” noted Förstemann, “is the oldest and lowest level; the third is the newest and highest level.”<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, for Förstemann, these three forms of etymology found their origins with different social groups. Popular etymology originated among the ignorant masses who desired to know the origins of words, but did not possess the intellectual apparatus to accurately accomplish the task. This low, populist level of etymologizing could only occur among populations “where the people’s spirit of creative linguistic freedom still moves, because the formation of new expressions and the investigation of the origin of existing ones are in some measure two opposite activities that complement and support each other.”<sup>4</sup> Folk-etymologies arise naturally only in quick and evolving linguistic environments, verbal landscapes in which novel words wildly and thoughtlessly spring forth from verdant and elastic minds. In contrast to this romantic populism, scholarly

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Hebrew Bible at Boston College, as well as the faculty and student members of the Boston College Biblical Studies Colloquium. As well, I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers’ questions and suggestions that have helped refine my argument. Any mistakes are, of course, my own.

<sup>1</sup> I intend to explore the phenomenon of etymology in the Hebrew Bible in light of Judean scribalism more fully in my book, *Names and Knowledge in Ancient Near Eastern Narrative: A Study in Etymology and Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> E. Förstemann, “Ueber deutsche volksetymologie,” *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 1 (1852) 1–25. Translations from the German are my own.

<sup>3</sup> “Die erste ist die älteste und niedrigste, die dritte die neuste und hoechste stufe” (Förstemann, “Ueber deutsche volksetymologie,” 2).

<sup>4</sup> Förstemann, “Ueber deutsche volksetymologie,” 3.

etymologies are offered by a different group—namely Greek, Roman, and later German and Hebrew grammarians—who, uncritically applying a vast knowledge, create a feral assortment of well-informed but haphazard notes, a sort of accordion book of gnarled linkages. Finally, scientific etymology became possible only in the nineteenth century with the discovery of phonetic laws and comparative linguistics. Despite their dreamy ignorance, for Förstemann, in the philological speculations offered by folk-etymologies was the germ of scientific philology, in the sense that their goal was to reveal the genuine origin of the thing to which a word referred.

It took some time for the concept to be picked up in the English-speaking world. When it did, the concept lost none of its intellectually disapproving tenor; the first English monograph on *Volksetymologie* was the curmudgeonly and encyclopedic book entitled *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning, By False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy* by the Rev. A. Smyth Palmer in 1882.<sup>5</sup> For such an empirical and imperial lexicographical obsessive as Smyth Palmer, popular derivations were a “verbal pathology,” the result of “the reluctance generally felt to acknowledge one’s ignorance,” and other types of “infirmities of mind,” typical of “the uneducated” who “shrink from novelties.”<sup>6</sup> Surprisingly, given his clerical credentials, the author even describes examples from the biblical text as the result of “quaint humour of primitive times.”<sup>7</sup>

## ■ The Reception of *Volksetymologie* in Biblical and Assyriological Scholarship

### A. *Volksetymologie* in Biblical Studies

Despite its base characterization, biblical scholars greedily adopted the concept of folk-etymology. Immanuel Casanowicz, in his *Paronomasia in the Old Testament* of 1894, described folk-etymologies as the result of a “spontaneous, psychological process,” while in the same year, J. Benzinger described them as “wild” (*wilden Etymologien*), “naïve or tendentious attempts at etymologizing” (*naïven oder tendenziösen Etymologisierungsversuche*).<sup>8</sup> In short, Förstemann’s terminology and concept carried over into the study of the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>5</sup>A. Smyth Palmer, *Folk-Etymology: A Dictionary of Verbal Corruptions or Words Perverted in Form or Meaning, By False Derivation or Mistaken Analogy* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1882).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Immanuel M. Casanowicz, *Paronomasia in the Old Testament* (Boston: Norwood Press, 1894) 11; see also 17 (on which, in note 40, he cites Förstemann), 40, and 72 n. 115. J. Benzinger, *Hebräische Archäologie* (Grundrisse der Theologischen Wissenschaften 2/1; Freiburg, i. B.: Mohr/Siebeck, 1894) 128 (translations are my own); see also 151 in which he describes the etymologies of Cain (Gen 4:1), Seth (Gen 4:25), Isaac (Gen 21:6), Jacob (Gen 25:26), and those of his sons (Gen 29:32–30:24) as “genuine folk-etymologies” (*ächte Volksetymologien*). For another early use, see H. Hirschfeld, “Remarks on the Etymology of Sabbāth,” *JRAS* (1896) 353–59, esp. 359.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the term found a hearty home in the work of Hermann Gunkel. The father of form-criticism was quick to label the numerous biblical passages that displayed, from the perspective of scientific philology, naïve and childlike ignorance of the factual origins of the names of people, places and things.<sup>9</sup> Gunkel wrote:

Israel was convinced that names must have some relationship to the things named. The ancient people was entirely unable to give the correct explanation in many cases. Both for other peoples and for Israel, names are the oldest material in the language. They stem from vanished peoples or from an earlier phase in one's own language. . . . Because of this very oddity, these words will have attracted the attention of the ancient people. Of course, ancient Israel explains such names, unscientifically, in relation to its current language. It associated the old name with a modern, more or less phonetically similar word, and it recounted a brief narrative to establish why this word was spoken here and then remained as a name. We know such popular etymologies, too. In order to recognize the great naiveté of most of these etymologies, one must consider that . . . very crude assonances often satisfy.<sup>10</sup>

Gunkel was charmed by the innocence and sincerity of the Hebrew folk-etymologies, even if he was not to be convinced by them. They could be described as “very beautiful, when considered aesthetically” (*künstlerisch betrachtet, sehr schön*), and “very childlike” (*sehr kindlich*).<sup>11</sup> In his influential Genesis commentary, Gunkel would turn to this label and concept repeatedly to describe and explain the many accounts of naming included in that biblical text.<sup>12</sup> The desire to know the origin of a name ultimately led to the creation of the corresponding story.

While biblical folk-etymologies contained no factuality, they provided evidence for the spontaneity and orality underlying many biblical accounts. Indeed, the simple, even romantic, nature of folk-etymologies was testimony to the biblical narrative's oral and vibrant roots around Hebrew campfires, where parents naïvely responded to naïve questions posed by their naïve children.<sup>13</sup>

Gunkel's lasting influence in this matter is naturally quite considerable, and led down several interpretive paths.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars, such as Johannes Fichtner and Friedemann W. Golka, adopted Gunkel's form-critical approach and elaborated on it, but hardly addressed the idea that the narratives came about from attempts to

<sup>9</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (HAT 1/1; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1901) 37, 87, 114, 301, 303, 319, 328.

<sup>10</sup> English translation from Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (trans. Mark E. Biddle; Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997) xix–xx.

<sup>11</sup> Gunkel, *Genesis* (German), 87.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, e.g., 37, 87, 144, 301, 303, 319, 328.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>14</sup> For a brief history and evaluation of folk-etymology in biblical studies, see Herbert Marks, “Biblical Naming and Poetic Etymology,” *JBL* 114 (1995) 21–42, esp. 22–24, which I have found particularly helpful.

explain the names associated with them.<sup>15</sup> Others, such as Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth, readily accepted the label of “popular etymology” together with its necessary socio-linguistic implications.<sup>16</sup>

### *B. Aesthetics and Biblical Etymologies*

Not all critical biblical scholars, however, embraced the heuristic value of the folk-etymology. William F. Albright, though admitting that such popular etymologies do occasionally give rise to stories, was rather skeptical that such a phenomenon could explain the majority of biblical examples, since the result would be, of course, that key pericopes in the biblical accounts of the patriarchs would be useless to a historian. Instead, Albright empowered them historically. They were not merely silly stories told by simple people: “the practice of giving aetiological explanations originated as a mnemonic and didactic aid”; they, thus, had a real historiographic function that could also serve the needs of the modern scholar who sought to reconstruct the real events of the past.<sup>17</sup> Brevard Childs, similarly, maintained that the mythological nature of etiological narratives (he barely mentions etymological narratives in particular) on which Gunkel analogized were fundamentally different from the historical character of the biblical text. Etiologies in the former offered alterations of “the structure of reality” that legitimated “a cultic practice,” while the latter, merely and much more sensibly, “established a precedent which assumed authority for later generations.”<sup>18</sup> For Childs, as it was for many of his contemporaries, Israel had a distinctively historical mindset among (indeed, against) the peoples of the ancient Near East. Therefore, one could not posit the same kind of generative mythical causality within Israelite written narrative as one did for Babylonian narratives.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Johannes Fichtner, “Die etymologische Ätiologie in den Namengebungen der geschichtlichen Bücher des Alten Testaments,” *VT* 6 (1956) 372–96; Burke O. Long, *The Problem of Etiological Narrative in the Old Testament* (BZAW 108; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1968); Freidemann W. Golka, “The Aetiologies in the Old Testament: Part 1,” *VT* 26 (1976) 410–28, and “The Aetiologies in the Old Testament: Part 2,” *VT* 27 (1977) 36–47.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Albrecht Alt, “Josua,” in *Werden und Wesen des Alten Testaments* (ed. P. Volz et al.; BZAW 66; Berlin: Töpelmann, 1936) 13–29; Martin Noth, *Das Buch Josua* (2nd ed; HAT 7; Tübingen: Mohr, 1953).

<sup>17</sup> William F. Albright, “The Israelite Conquest of Canaan in the Light of Archaeology,” *BASOR* 74 (1939) 11–23; nonetheless, Albright used the term quite frequently (as a Google Scholar search including “Albright” and “popular etymology” reveals). In any case, Allen Ross would later develop Albright’s mnemonic model in his unpublished dissertation, “Paronomasia and Popular Etymology in the Naming Narratives of the Old Testament” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> Brevard Childs, “The Etiological Tale Re-Examined,” *VT* 24 (1974) 387–97, at 393.

<sup>19</sup> Childs, “The Etiological Tale Re-Examined,” 395–97. His critique is only valid insofar as we understand Israel’s thought as “historical” in contrast to the “mythopoetic” thought of its neighbors in the ancient Near East. For a recent critique of this perspective, see Jeffrey L. Cooley, *Poetic Astronomy in the Ancient Near East: The Reflexes of Celestial Science in Ancient Mesopotamian, Ugaritic, and Israelite Narrative* (HACL 5; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013) 13–16.

If Childs's critique of Gunkel's approach and its implications was broadly condemning of all etiological narrative, James Barr's critique was much more pointed and was invariably entangled with his response to the etymological methods of the contemporaneous school of Biblical Theology.<sup>20</sup> Barr maintained that the biblical authors did in fact offer popular etymologies, and placed most of their interest on names that were, due to their antiquity or foreign origin, the most opaque.<sup>21</sup> Often, however, the etymologies those writers offered did "not so much seek to 'explain' the name in itself as to link it with some legendary feature already present in the narrative tradition."<sup>22</sup> He writes:

Etymology was a play on word-similarity, rather than a serious analysis of root meanings. . . . the etymology (so-called) of the men of the Bible is more a kind of poetry, a kind of conceit, even a kind of humour, than something comparable with what we today call linguistic study. The appreciation of it may, accordingly, belong rather to literary criticism than to philology or linguistics.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, for Barr, those who composed, redacted, and copied the Hebrew Bible were more artists than they were scholars. They certainly were not linguistic technicians. He thus summarily dismissed the possibility that the Bible's etymologies were evidence that authors were engaged in any sort of serious philological speculation.

In recent decades, a number of approaches to the etymologies of the Hebrew narrative have largely assumed this aesthetic model. Andrzej Strus's monograph focuses entirely on the stylistic use of names in the Pentateuch and, consequently, he rejects the term "folk etymology" (*étymologie populaire*) in his work.<sup>24</sup> Strus considers the term to be too restrictive to describe how such passages function in the biblical text: the authors' etymologies are not merely answering the (naïve) questions of curious readers.<sup>25</sup> Instead, he prefers *étymologisation*, a word that he further qualifies based on the manner in which he perceives the individual etymologies to function stylistically within the overall narrative.<sup>26</sup>

Moshe Garsiel, too, concentrates on aesthetics of names in biblical literature that he deems "midrashic name derivations," which function on a purely aesthetic

<sup>20</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961); "Etymology and the Old Testament," in *Language and Meaning: Studies in Hebrew Language and Biblical Exegesis: Papers Read at the Joint British-Dutch Old Testament Conference Held at London, 1973* (*OtSt* 19; Leiden: Brill, 1974) 1–28; "The Symbolism of Names in the Old Testament," *BJRL* 52 (1969/1970) 11–29.

<sup>21</sup> Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, 109.

<sup>22</sup> Barr, "Etymology and the Old Testament," 24.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>24</sup> Andrzej Strus, *Nomen-omen: La stylistique sonore des noms propres dans le Pentateuque* (AnBib 80; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1978) 46.

<sup>25</sup> Strus, *Nomen-omen*, 48.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

level.<sup>27</sup> Explicit etymologies (he avoids the term “folk” or “popular etymology”) are deliberately outside of his purview.<sup>28</sup> Nonetheless, Garsiel does offer this insight on them:

The explanations [explicit etymologies] function as a literary device and are designed to enrich the literary unit. What we see here is by no means a popular and shallow interpretation based on a lack of knowledge, but rather a deliberate deviation from the linguistic rules and norms of the time applied as a technique by subtle narrators in order to make a point.<sup>29</sup>

In this evaluation, Garsiel is like both Barr and Herbert Marks (below) in claiming that the biblical authors deliberately ignored their own philological knowledge. However, similar to Marks (and unlike Barr), he suggests that this could be done for both aesthetic and rhetorical purposes.

Marks, as well, approaches the Bible’s etymologies aesthetically, but through a more sophisticated contemporary literary lens. Strikingly, he rejects the notion that the Bible’s writers partook of the common ancient assumption that names had the genuine potential of revealing a thing’s origin, character, or fate.<sup>30</sup> Offering instead a kind of Israelite literary exceptionalism, Marks suggests that the biblical authors “seem rather to exploit the myth of true meaning as a generic convention, subject to the most aggressive revision.”<sup>31</sup> In his own analysis, he eschews the term “folk etymology” altogether.<sup>32</sup>

### C. Volksetymology in *Assyriology*

Beginning in the 1880s, *Volksetymologie* and its English language equivalents (“folk-etymology,” or, more commonly, “popular etymology”) were frequently used in Assyriological circles to describe ancient counterfactual philological explanations of names and words. In 1880, the orientalist Archibald Sayce noted

<sup>27</sup> Moshe Garsiel, *Biblical Names: A Literary Study of Midrashic Derivations and Puns* (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1991).

<sup>28</sup> Garsiel, *Biblical Names*, 14.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 18–19.

<sup>30</sup> Marks, “Biblical Naming,” 23–24.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. Marks’s evaluation strikes me as a literary variant of mid-twentieth century biblical theologians’ caricature of Israelite versus heathen culture: other cultures of the ancient Near East believed names were “magical”—but the Hebrew Bible’s authors subvert that anti-rationalist view.

<sup>32</sup> See, as well, Richard S. Hess, *Studies in the Personal Names of Genesis 1–11* (AOAT 234; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993; repr., Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011). Though not important for his primary thesis, Hess occasionally uses “folk etymology,” a term whose larger socio-linguistic significance he does not evaluate, though he seems to equate it with “(explicit) wordplay” (see 5, 109 for “folk-etymology,” and 67, 123, 131 for “explicit wordplay”). Like Albright and Ross, Hess states that the personal names themselves (particularly those in Genesis 1–4 and 6–9) function as mnemonic devices (157). It is worth noting a couple of Hess’s essentially undeveloped comments, namely that “the personal names of the narratives provide an ‘onomastic commentary’ parallel to the events within the narratives,” and that “it is insufficient to suggest that personal names merely refer to their name bearers. . . . The etymology and wordplay of the personal names serve to carry the narrative forward and to provide important clues as to its theme and direction” (158).

that “popular” etymologizing is often the impetus for the creation of a myth.<sup>33</sup> George Smith, in the 1880 edition of *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, uses the term “popular etymology” to describe specific examples of Akkadian and Israelite philological speculation.<sup>34</sup> Clearly, the concept had found a productive home within both biblical studies and Assyriology.

The concept was thus employed in important syntheses of Mesopotamian culture. Fritz Hommel’s 1885 presentation of Mesopotamian history utilizes the term four times.<sup>35</sup> In his 1887 Hibbert Lectures on Babylonian and Assyrian religion, A. H. Sayce mentions eight Akkadian, Hebrew, and Greek “popular etymologies,” while Morris Jastrow’s study of the same topic from a decade later also notes a few.<sup>36</sup> Within twentieth-century Assyriology, there was little hesitation to use the term, as a survey of citations from the *Chicago Assyrian Dictionary* shows: the lexicographers use the term “popular etymology” nineteen times in volumes published in the half-century between 1956 and 2006.<sup>37</sup> A number of similar turns of phrase with similar connotations are also utilized.<sup>38</sup> The term “folk-etymology” is even employed in one of the last published volumes.<sup>39</sup>

While Gunkel found “popular etymologies” in the biblical text enchanting, some early Assyriologists were at least modestly appalled, as one notices when surveying how these same scholars utilize the adjective “popular” more broadly. In Sayce’s work, for example, “popular” is the opposite of “literary.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the “popular medicine” that the grubby Mesopotamian masses practiced was “ignorant and superstitious,” while “Babylonian gentlemen” chose to visit “scientific practitioners”—no doubt to the satisfaction of their Victorian social successors.<sup>41</sup> Jastrow was even more damning of the “popular,” which stood in tension with the

<sup>33</sup> A. H. Sayce, *Introduction to the Science of Language* (2 vols.; London: C. Kegan Paul, 1880) 2:246. This is the earliest reference to the term “popular etymology” as an equivalent to *Volksetymologie* cited in the *OED*. The earliest use of “folk-etymology” cited by the *OED* is in George Stephens, *Prof. S. Bugge’s Studies on Northern Mythology Shortly Examined* (London: Williams and Northgate, 1883) 28–29.

<sup>34</sup> George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (London: Sampson Low and Co.: 1880) 83, 167–68. Smith does not use the phrase, however, in the first edition dated to 1876.

<sup>35</sup> Fritz Hommel, *Geschichte Babyloniens und Assyriens* (Berlin: G. Grote, 1885) 188 n. 2, 270 n. 2, 300–301, 577 n. 2.

<sup>36</sup> A. H. Sayce, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by the Religion of the Ancient Babylonians* (London: Williams and Northgate, 1887) 57–58, 156–57, 168–69, 228, 232, 235, 236, 374; see also 202, where he mentions a Hebrew “false etymology.” Morris Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1897) 121, 589 n. 3; see also 116 n. 1, in which “etymology” appears in scare quotes.

<sup>37</sup> *CAD* A2, 326, 418, 474; *CAD* D, 95; *CAD* H, 165, 185; *CAD* I/J, 118, 274, 302; *CAD* K, 14, 134; *CAD* M2, 176, *CAD* Š1, 169; *CAD* Š3, 128.

<sup>38</sup> *CAD* M1, 365 (“popular interpretation”); *CAD* M2 (“etymologize” in scare quotes; see below); *CAD* S, 112 (“theological explanation”); *CAD* T, 228 (“later etymologized”).

<sup>39</sup> *CAD* U/W, 372.

<sup>40</sup> Sayce, *Lectures*, 417.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

“theological,” “literary,” and “scholastic.”<sup>42</sup> The “popular minds” had “popular beliefs” and “popular notions and fancies” that starkly contrasted with “theological doctrine,” “advanced theological speculations,” and “advanced scientific theories” that were the “product of schools.”<sup>43</sup> As to how he could recognize “popular” thought that, by necessity, was nonetheless recorded and handed down by the scholarly literati, Jastrow pointed to what he perceived as ignorance in any particular instance: “[t]he *naïveté* of the conception justifies us in regarding it as of popular origin, incorporated by the theologians into their system.”<sup>44</sup>

Interestingly, both Sayce and Jastrow recognized that the ancient scholars themselves could be obviously fanciful and erroneous either in the writing or interpretation of names; both Assyriologists referred to such activity as “punning” or even “punning etymology.”<sup>45</sup> By labeling this “punning,” of course, Sayce and Jastrow asserted that the scribes were fully cognizant that they were offering incorrect philology, but were doing so for lighthearted, even playful, purposes. The resulting evaluation of these supposedly oppositional hermeneutics is that “popular” counterfactuality derives from ignorance; “scholarly” counterfactuality is just good, clean Babylonian fun.

“Popular etymology,” then, at least to a certain degree, assumed a pejorative thrust in Assyriological circles.<sup>46</sup> C. H. W. Johns, for example, when describing the development of personal names in Assyrian, noted that “in the process [of their development], some fancied resemblances suggest a popular etymology, and the name is further modified to support it.”<sup>47</sup> The “popular senses” of a particular name pattern identified by Johns might have appealed “to the popular fancy,” but had “no proper meaning,” and were thus a “waste of time” to research.<sup>48</sup> In 1915, Dyneley Prince, in his otherwise positive review of Delitzch’s pioneering *Sumerisches*

<sup>42</sup> Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, 89, 513, 629, 689 (“theological”); 115 (“literary”); 445, 456, 494, 557 (“scholastic”).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 150, 153, 465.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 447 [italics in original].

<sup>45</sup> Sayce, *Lectures*, 106–7, 110, 117, 195, 374; Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, 173, including n. 3. Jastrow even mentioned the idea that in antiquity, “every *nomen*, as constituting the essence of an object, was always and above all an *omen*,” as a “plausible” explanation for such scribal practices, though he ultimately rejected this thought and offered his own rational interpretation for the name in question, one that does not concede to intellectual infelicities.

<sup>46</sup> There are, to be sure, uses of the term without any particular value judgment. Andrew George, for example, repeatedly uses the term “folk-etymology” in his discussion of the name of Babylon (*Babylonian Topographical Texts* [OLA 40; Leuven: Peeters, 1992] 253–55); similarly, see 465 where he discusses the writing of the name of the city of Arbail. It is worth noting that George seems to prefer the term “speculative etymology” (or similar) in his *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See, e.g., *Babylonian Gilgamesh*, 1:88, 140, 452; 2:851; see also, “academic etymological speculation,” in *Babylonian Gilgamesh*, 1:511. George does utilize “folk-etymologies” (*Babylonian Gilgamesh*, 1:453), but only in reference to LKA 75 15, a text which truly does offer a “popular etymology” according to Förstemann’s socio-linguistic standards.

<sup>47</sup> C. H. W. Johns, “Some Secondary Formations among Assyrian Proper Names,” *AJSL* 18 (1902) 149–66, at 149.

<sup>48</sup> Johns, “Some Secondary Formations,” 152.

*Glossar*, reproached the lexicographer himself for popular etymologizing in an attempt to explain a certain Sumerian lemma.<sup>49</sup>

## ■ *Volksetymologie* and the Recovery of Babylonian Scholarly Hermeneutics

### *A. Babylonian Eigenbegrifflichkeit and Learned Etymologies*

Perhaps I am being too harsh on our intellectual forebears for their palpable disdain of ancient counterfactualities. Indeed, the task they set out for themselves was situated in an extremely positivist intellectual climate that privileged a certain kind of analysis. We should not forget that this task was the genesis of modern linguistics, of course, and created a remarkably solid foundation for all of our work since. And despite their discomfort with philological irrationality, the groundwork laid in the nineteenth through most of the twentieth century has ultimately allowed modern scholars to challenge the application of Förstemann's model. Particularly salient in this regard have been Jean Bottéro's exegesis of the 50 names of Marduk as they are presented in the last two tablets of *Enūma Eliš*, as well as Alasdair Livingstone's important publication of a number of ancient commentaries and explanatory texts.<sup>50</sup> Studies like these have demonstrated the sophisticated—though often clearly counterfactual—hermeneutics employed by the scholars of ancient Iraq.

The result is that Assyriologists seem to have become less and less comfortable with employing the term “popular etymology,” though they are sometimes at a loss as to what to label phenomena that take full advantage of both philological as well as graphic ambiguities to interpret names creatively. For example, in his 1999 article on Babylonian scribal hermeneutics, Stefan Maul discusses the particular—and peculiar—orthography used to write the Akkadian word *iartu*, “coral”:

The Sumerian word for the number “5” is /ia/. p a is the Sumerian word for “branch”; the common Akkadian equivalent is *artu*, “branch.” The scribe has thus divided the word *iartu* into the components *ia* and *artu*. For the syllable /ia/ he wrote the numeral 5, which is read in Sumerian í a. The second part of the word, *artu*, he interpreted as the Akkadian word for “branch” and wrote that word with the corresponding Sumerian word sign PA. The spelling 5-PA = *ia-artu* (PA) thus provides not only the phonetic word but also information: the intended object can be designated as “5-branch.” This is most likely

<sup>49</sup> J. Dyneley Prince, “Delitzsch's ‘Sumerisches Glossar,’” *AJSL* 31 (1915) 160–67, at 162. See also the sarcastic use of “etymology,” as indicated by scare quotes in Jastrow, *The Religion of Babylonia and Assyria*, 116 n. 1, and *CAD* M2, 223.

<sup>50</sup> Jean Bottéro, “Les noms de Marduk, l'écriture et la ‘logique’ en Mesopotamie ancienne,” in *Essays on the Ancient Near East in Memory of Jacob Joel Finkelstein* (ed. Maria De Jong Ellis; *Memoirs of the Connecticut Academy of Arts and Sciences* 19; Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977) 5–28; Alasdair Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works of Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). See also, Alasdair Livingstone, *Court Poetry and Literary Miscellanea* (SAA 3; Helsinki: Helsinki University Press, 1989).

playing on the branches of a coral. Such an explanation of the word *iartu* in a modern scientific sense is certainly not an etymology, but merely folk etymology. However, it is nevertheless etymology in the truest sense of the word: the Greek ἔτυμος initially means merely “according to the essence of the thing,” “true.” And with the orthography presented here, the learned scribe tried to show that the essence of “coral” was contained in the word for “coral.”<sup>51</sup>

Here, Maul employs *Volksetymologie*, but primarily to indicate that the writing offered by the ancient scribe is erroneous in terms of what it reveals about the scientific derivation of the word *iartu* (or, really, what its orthography reveals). Clearly, however, Maul does not mean “ignorant” or “naïve,” and certainly not “childlike.” The definition of the term and its own etymology force him to qualify his use of *Volksetymologie*, such that it no longer jibes with the term’s socio-linguistic aspects—aspects that have been definitional facets of its character since its conception in the mid-nineteenth century.

Gebhard Selz, moving forward with the current intellectual momentum within Assyriology, offers the neologism “Babilism” (*Babilismus*) to refer to this kind of native hermeneutics in general.<sup>52</sup> Unlike Maul, Selz consciously engages the term *Volksetymologie*, together with its broader implications: “‘folk etymology’ . . . [is] often applied in order to dismiss Mesopotamian scholarly explanations as ‘obsolete.’ . . . Generally speaking, we would be well advised to hesitate to evaluate the ‘correctness’ of our sources from a purely modern point of view.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, counterfactuality from the perspective of modern scientific linguistics, Selz notes, is utterly beside the point: “And even when we accept the notion of incorrectness, such folk etymologies, which in our documents are mostly ‘learned

<sup>51</sup> Das sumerische Zahlwort “5” lautet /ia/. p a ist das sumerische Wort für “Ast”; die gängige akkadische Entsprechung dazu lautet *artu*, “Ast”. Der Schreiber hatte also das Wort *jartu* in die Bestandteile *ia-* und *artu* zerlegt. Für die Silbe /ia/ schrieb er das Zahlzeichen 5, das im Sumerischen i a gelesen wird. Den zweiten Bestandteil des Wortes, *artu*, deutete er als das akkadische Wort für “Ast” und schrieb dieses Wort mit dem entsprechenden sumerischen Wortzeichen PA. Die Schreibung 5-PA = *ia-artu*(PA) liefert also neben der Lautung des Wortes auch die Information: das gemeinte Objekt kann als “5-Ast” bezeichnet werden. Angespielt ist hier wohl sicher auf das Geäst einer Koralle. Eine solche Erklärung des Wortes *jartu* ist in modernem wissenschaftlichem Sinne freilich keine Etymologie, sondern nur *Volksetymologie*. Etymologie ist es gleichwohl im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes: den griechisches ἔτυμος bedeutet zunächst nur “dem Wesen der Sache entsprechend”, “wahr”. Und mit der hier vorgestellten Orthographie versuchte der gelehrte Schreiberin der Tat zu zeigen, daß das Wesen der “Koralle” im Wort für “Koralle” enthalten sei. (Stefan M. Maul, “Das Wort im Worte. Orthographie und Etymologie als hermeneutische Verfahren babylonischer Gelehrter,” in *Commentaries/Kommentare* (ed. G. W. Most; Aporemata 4; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999) 1–18, at 6–7.

<sup>52</sup> Gebhard J. Selz, “‘Babilismus’ und die Gottheit <sup>4</sup>Nindagar,” in *Ex Mesopotamia et Syria Lux: Festschrift für Manfred Dietrich zu seinem 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Oswald Loretz et al.; AOAT 281; Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2002) 247–84. See also Gebhard J. Selz, “Remarks on the Empirical Foundation and Scholastic Traditions of Early Mesopotamian Acquisition of Knowledge,” in *The Empirical Dimension of Ancient Near Eastern Studies/Die empirische Dimension altorientalischer Forschungen* (ed. Gebhard J. Selz; WOO 6; Wien: Lit, 2011) 49–70.

<sup>53</sup> Selz, “Remarks on the Empirical Foundation and Scholastic Traditions,” 54.

etymologies,' are indispensable for the reconstruction of the Mesopotamian epistemic world."<sup>54</sup> Selz's use of "learned etymologies" to a certain degree mirrors Förstemann's second etymological category, the scholarly (*gelehrte*).<sup>55</sup> In any case, native philological speculation from ancient Iraq, however specious, rarely bothers modern Assyriologists, who are finally embraced by ancient Mesopotamia's *Eigenbegrifflichkeit* when it comes to the hermeneutics offered by the heaps of dusty tablets.<sup>56</sup> Undoubtedly, the culmination of this new respect for the native etymological speculation of Babylonian scholars is the recent survey by Eckhart Frahm and the synthesis by Marc van de Mieroop.<sup>57</sup>

Frahm categorizes and analyzes the entire spectrum of textual interpretation documented in the cuneiform record, broadly situating Mesopotamian explanatory practices into two categories, "literal and non-literal."<sup>58</sup> Such a characterization aligns Babylonian hermeneutics with interpretive trajectories documented in other cultures from antiquity, including both Jewish and Christian. Frahm discusses etymology as a basic tool for ancient "commentators to arrive at non-literal interpretations of a given text."<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, while he points to analogs in other interpretive models from the ancient world, Frahm nonetheless lets Babylonian praxis define its own categories. Closely paralleling etymological interpretation, Frahm suggests an adjacent category of *etymographical* interpretation in which it is not the sound of a particular word that is parsed for deeper meaning, but rather the manner in which a word is written.<sup>60</sup> In both cases, the deeper meanings of

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 54 n. 23.

<sup>55</sup> Förstemann, "Ueber deutsche volksetymologie," 2; see discussion above.

<sup>56</sup> *Volksetymologien* do seem to still perturb some semitists, particularly when modern lexicographers are duped by them; see Leonid Kogan, "Popular Etymology in the Semitic Languages," *Studia Semitica* 3 (2003) 120–40. For *Eigenbegrifflichkeit*, see Benno Landsberger, "Die Eigenbegrifflichkeit der babylonischen Welt," *Islamica* 2 (1926) 355–72; also, Benno Landsberger, *The Conceptual Autonomy of the Babylonian World* (trans. Thorkild Jacobsen et al.; MANE 1/4; Malibu: Undena Publications, 1976).

<sup>57</sup> Eckhart Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries: Origins of Interpretation* (GMTR 5; Münster: Ugarit Verlag, 2011); Marc van de Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>58</sup> Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, 37–41. Though he offers this binary heuristic, Frahm recognizes that, even though the ancient scholars were clearly aware of these two approaches, the line separating them is often ill-defined in practice. For the problem of these categories when applied to Mesopotamian documents, see Uri Gabbay, "Deciphering Cuneiform Texts through Ancient and Modern Conceptions of Literal Meaning," in *Le sens littéral des Écritures* (ed. Olivier-Thomas Venard; Paris: Cerf, 2009) 161–69.

<sup>59</sup> Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, 70; for his discussion of etymology and etymography, as well as gematria, see 70–79.

<sup>60</sup> Frahm (*Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, 70 n. 337) borrows this concept from Jan Assmann, "Etymographie: Zeichen im Jenseits der Sprache," in *Hieroglyphen: Stationen einer anderen abendländischen Grammatologie* (eds. Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann; Munich: Fink, 2003) 37–63. See also, Maul's understanding of the orthography of the Akkadian *iartu* (5-PA), discussed earlier. See also my understanding of the peculiar orthography of the אִשׁוּרָא in Ps 19:13 (Jeffrey L. Cooley, "Psalm 19: A Sabbath Song," *VT* 64 [2014] 177–95, esp. 192–93).

a particular word were considered to be revealed by etymology/etymography, rather than created by the scribe who offered it. Importantly for my purpose here, he synthesizes Babylonian etymological speculation, both philological and orthographic, without ever employing the problematic term *Volksetymologie* or its English equivalents.<sup>61</sup>

Capitalizing on the same published data that allowed Frahm's survey, van de Mieroop understands the epistemological enterprise in ancient Babylonian as essentially documentary. He resurrects the concept of "grammatology," a term employed in the mid-twentieth century by Ignace Gelb—and later Jacques Derrida—to highlight the fact that the technology of writing is its own medium of communication that is not simply a mechanical proxy for verbal speech.<sup>62</sup> For van de Mieroop, the cuneiform writing system was not invented to record verbal language and, though it ultimately took on the ability to do so, Babylonian scribes never really lost sight of the written word's semantic independence from speech.<sup>63</sup> Notably, his synthesis goes far beyond the expected targets of Mesopotamian epistemology (e.g., lexical lists, mantic texts, sapiential literature, commentaries), even wrangling the legal tradition into a singular documentary knowledge-building model.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, he posits a point of origin for the rise of this model that hinges on the emergence of mantic texts and the eclipsing of law codes.<sup>65</sup>

Whether van de Mieroop's specific model in all its facets is convincing, he has nonetheless brought into form the emerging consensus regarding the epistemology of the scribes of ancient Iraq. As Selz states, "[m]ost scholars (not only Assyriologists) and scientists are today well aware that any specific knowledge is part of an epistemic world embedded in a given world-view. Any acquisition of knowledge takes place in such a framework."<sup>66</sup> Mesopotamian scribal culture was its own epistemic culture, and the etymologies (and etymographies) exposed by scribes, however erroneous from a modern scientific perspective, constituted

<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, there remain some terminological tensions. Nurullin, in explaining one of the several orthographies for the name Gilgamesh, describes it as deriving from "a kind of popular (or rather, learned) 'Sumerianizing' etymology" (Rim Nurullin, "The Name of Gilgameš in the Light of Line 47 of the First Tablet of the Standard Babylonian Gilgameš Epic," *Babel und Bibel* 6 [2012] 209–24, at 220]). Similarly, Rubio, also discussing one of the Sumerian writings of the name Gilgamesh (bil<sub>2</sub>-ga-mes, which could be translated as "the old one is a young man"), suggests that if "it were a pun, it would simply be a *learned folk etymology*, an example of the phenomenon Selz (2002) has called 'Babilism'" (Gonzalo Rubio, "Reading Sumerian Names II: Gilgameš," *JCS* 64 [2012] 3–16, at 8 [italics added]).

<sup>62</sup> van de Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks*, 77–84.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 143–55.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>66</sup> Selz, "Remarks on the Empirical Foundation and Scholastic Traditions," 64. For the sociology of knowledge concepts of "cultures of knowledge" frequently noted by Selz, see also Niek Veldhuis, "The Theory of Knowledge and the Practice of Celestial Divination," in *Divination and the Interpretation of Signs in the Ancient World* (ed. Amar Annus; OIS 6; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 77–91.

a method of acquiring culturally legitimate data.<sup>67</sup> These data were considered a form of acceptable knowledge that allowed scribes not only to derive and ascribe meaning to the documents they inherited (via written commentaries) but also to build meaningful explanatory models of the world around themselves (via novel compositions).

### *B. Babylonian Learned Etymology in Action: Enlil's Weapon*

In this section, I offer an example of the kind of speculation that Babylonian scribes produced that capitalized on the distinctive character of their writing system, their professional expertise in it, and their confidence in exploiting it. Babylonian scribes took great advantage of the polyvalent nature of the signs in the cuneiform writing system in order to reveal the potential meanings of a name. Most cuneiform signs have a value or values in the Sumerian language. These values might be logographic or merely phonetic.<sup>68</sup> For example, the AN sign indicates the sound /an/ in Sumerian, but it can also indicate the Sumerian word AN (“sky”).<sup>69</sup> The same sign can also have the Sumerian logographic value DINGIR, “god.” These same signs, as well, have Akkadian values derived from their Sumerian uses. Thus, AN can act phonetically, indicating the sound /an/ in Akkadian. But the Akkadian reading of AN can also be derived from the logographic Sumerian uses; thus, the AN sign can denote the Akkadian word *šamû*, “sky.” Or, reading the logograph AN as DINGIR, it can be read in Akkadian as *ilum*, “god.” As this single example demonstrates, the signs of the writing system can be quite polyvalent, and this polyvalence generates an ambiguity that is usually limited naturally by textual context.

Nevertheless, when they wished to do so, the scribes exploited this graphic flexibility. There are numerous examples of this practice in the literature from ancient Iraq. In the so-called Weapon Name Exposition, a Babylonian scribe reveals meanings of the names of various divine weapons.<sup>70</sup> For instance, one of these bludgeons bears the impressive Sumerian moniker <sup>g</sup>is<sup>3</sup>tukul.saĝ.50, literally “50-Headed Weapon.” As if this were not impressive enough, the Akkadian-speaking scribe, though fully aware of the basic meaning of the Sumerian name, decides to interpret this name by reading alternate logographic values of the Sumerian signs:

<sup>67</sup> For the term “epistemic culture,” see Karin Knorr Cetina, *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) esp. 1–11.

<sup>68</sup> There is a third use of signs in cuneiform called the determinative, in which a sign is placed in front of a word to indicate that word’s conceptual category; thus, the DINGIR sign is regularly placed in front of the names of deities.

<sup>69</sup> Rykle Borger, *Mesopotamische Zeichenlexikon* (2nd ed.; AOAT 305; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2010) no. 10., 248–50.

<sup>70</sup> For text and commentary, see Livingstone, *Mystical and Mythological Explanatory Works*, 54–61. For <sup>g</sup>is<sup>3</sup>tukul.saĝ.50 and its explication, see 54–55, lines 13–16.

13	<sup>giš</sup> tukul.saĝ. 50	<i>kak-ku reš-tu-u</i> <i>šá</i> <sup>d</sup> 50	50-Headed Weapon	Enlil's main weapon
14	<sup>giš</sup> tukul	<i>kak-ku</i>	<sup>giš</sup> tukul	weapon
15	saĝ	<i>reš-tu-ú</i>	saĝ	main
16	50	<sup>d</sup> <i>en-lil</i>	50	Enlil

In line 13, the scribe writes the name of the weapon in Sumerian and, in the column next to it, how he is choosing to interpret it in Akkadian; the three lines that follow show just how he arrives at this Akkadian interpretation. First (line 14), the Sumerian word <sup>giš</sup>tukul is read as it was intended by the creator of the name of the weapon, and is interpreted with one of the basic Akkadian equivalents that means the same thing as the Sumerian: *kakku*, “weapon.” In the next line (15), the scribe chooses to read the Sumerian word saĝ, “head,” not as its most basic Akkadian equivalent, *rēšu*, “head,” but rather as a related Akkadian word that can also be written orthographically with the same Sumerian sign: *rēštū*, “main, prime, preeminent.” In the last line, the scribe does not interpret the number 50 as the Akkadian cardinal *ḥamšā*, “fifty.” Instead, he interprets the number as one of the well-attested numerical orthographies assigned to the names of members of the Mesopotamian pantheon, in this case Enlil. In reading the Sumerian name <sup>giš</sup>tukul.saĝ.50 as *kakku rēštū ša Enlil*, the scribe, who by virtue of the fact that he is copying this text indicates that he is well trained in Sumerian, is not indicating that he is unaware of its basic Sumerian meaning, nor is he arguing that that meaning is wrong. On the contrary, he is maintaining that the orthography of the Sumerian name for the weapon simultaneously bears multiple meanings that, when properly explicated, can expose the deeper reality that characterizes the thing to which the name refers.

It is important to note a number of aspects of this hermeneutic. First, the scribes who composed and copied such commentaries believed that a word in one language, Sumerian, could be interpreted by means of another language, Akkadian. Second, the deeper reality of the word was only accessed by the scribe by means of *visual inspection* of the name in question. Simply verbalizing the Sumerian <sup>giš</sup>tukul.saĝ.50 and then translating it into Akkadian would not allow this kind of non-literal exegesis. In short, the scribe took full advantage of the writing system's remarkable flexibility and was completely confident in its potential to yield otherwise inaccessible knowledge to his expert skills.

Before I move on to a number of biblical etymologies that I contend demonstrate an analogous learned speculation, I want to note that, by discussing Babylonian hermeneutics here alongside Judean, I am neither equating Judean scribal practice with Babylonian scribal practice, nor am I suggesting that Judean methods were

reliant on Babylonian ones (though some sort of influence is certainly possible).<sup>71</sup> It is admittedly unclear just how the Judean scribal elite became familiar with Babylonian intellectual traditions. Nonetheless, it is clear that significant portions of the Hebrew Bible were composed and/or edited in Babylon, and the recently published cuneiform documents originating with the Judean community in Babylonian exile demonstrate that Judean elites were exposed to some level, at least, to the professional cuneiform scribal craft.<sup>72</sup> Still, my discussion is not meant to argue for any sort of intellectual dependence of one culture on the other. Rather, I am highlighting interpretive strategies that were employed among the contemporary intellectual equivalents of Judean literati as a means of demonstrating the potential ways in which non-scientific etymologizing operated among practitioners of craft scribalism.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>71</sup> For the Babylonian hermeneutics and primarily later Jewish exegesis, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, "An Early Technique of Aggadic Exegesis," in *History, Historiography and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures* (ed. Hayim Tadmor and Moshe Weinfeld; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983) 169–89.

<sup>72</sup> Laurie Pearce and Cornelia Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* (CUSAS 28; Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2014). Though I consider the period and place of the Babylonian exile as most probable, there are, of course, other avenues. For the use of Assyro-Babylonian cuneiform within the boundaries of ancient Judah, see Wayne Horowitz, Takayoshi Oshima, and Seth Sanders, *Cuneiform in Canaan: Cuneiform Sources from the Land of Israel in Ancient Times* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2006) and Shaun Zelig Aster, "Transmission of Neo-Assyrian Claims of Empire to Judah in the Late Eighth Century B.C.E." *HUCA* 78 (2007) 1–44.

<sup>73</sup> The question might be asked as to why I am pressing the comparison with Mesopotamian rather than Greek scribes, since the latter, too, were contemporaneously productive in the middle of the first millennium B.C.E. (for similar ancient scholarly etymological speculation in Egypt, see Assmann, "Etyomographie"). Van Seters, for example, has made a fairly convincing argument that Judean historiographical practices bear important, probably genetic, similarities to those employed by contemporaneous Greek writers, such as Hesiod and Herodotus (e.g., John Van Seters, *Prologue to History: The Yahwist as Historian in Genesis* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992]). Indeed, the etymologizing of traditional names is one of the methods these authors employ to derive knowledge of the past (e.g., *Odyssey* 19.406–9; *Iliad* 1.403–4; Hesiod, *Theogony* 144–45; Herodotus, *Histories* 4.155).

Though it is difficult to characterize Greek etymologizing as a whole, what we do not see (at least as far as I am aware) is the *visual/graphic* component in Greek etymologizing that I am presenting here (for early Greek etymologizing as a facet of hermeneutics, see Ineke Sluiter, "The Greek Tradition," in *The Emergence of Semantics in Four Linguistic Traditions: Hebrew, Sanskrit, Greek, Arabic* [ed. Wout van Bekkum, et al.; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997] 147–224). There are many potential reasons for this. The most obvious is the fact that the classical Greeks were keenly aware that the alphabetic writing system they utilized to document their own language did not originate with Greek speakers (Herodotus, *Histories* 5.58; see also, Hekataios of Miletos [Jacoby, *FrGrH* 1 #20]), and thus there was no potential for an etymological relationship between a word's verbalization and its graphic crafting in the manner we see in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Indeed, the classical speculation regarding the origins of Greek writing is embedded in historiographical narratives that are ethnological in nature and do not feature the gods in the creative process. (Later Greek and Latin historians were more willing to consider divine involvement in the invention of writing; see, e.g., the mythographer Hyginus, *Fabulae* 277, as well as Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca* 1.16.1.)

The classical ontological separation between writing and language is underscored in *The*

## ■ Judean Learned Etymologies

If the etymologies suggested by Babylonian commentators need to be qualified as “learned” as opposed to “popular,” then it needs to be stated as well that, similarly, neither the biblical authors nor the etymologies they offer can be simply characterized as naïve or ignorant. The Judean scribes demonstrate significant philological knowledge: they were quite capable of inventing neologisms based on existing roots with whose fundamental meanings they were clearly familiar. They could formulate names out of whole cloth for narrative purposes, such as מחלון and כליון (Ruth 1:2, 5; 4:9–10). Indeed, quasi-names such as מפישת בעל, i.e., מריב בעל (2 Sam 4:4; 1 Chr 8:34), and איש בשת, i.e., אשבעל (2 Sam 2:8; 1 Chr 8:33) show that they were quite cognizant of a word’s religio-cultural significance as well. That the authors knew their exegesis of a name could be obviously counterintuitive is evinced by the etymology offered for the name ירבעל (Judg 6:32; see also 2 Sam 11:21, which records the name as ירבשת). All of this indicates that the individuals who composed these narratives, rather than advancing an ignorant and populist folk-etymology, consciously submitted to their readers interpretations that could actually run counter to a name’s socio-linguistically popular understanding. Assuming that the Judean scribes, analogous to their Babylonian counterparts, were in fact engaged in learned exegesis when they interpreted names allows us to pose different questions regarding these etymologies. If they were learned rather than popular, what were the rules employed by the scribes to unlock the data contained in words? In short, what were their onomastic hermeneutics? In what follows, I will offer a handful of examples that presume sophisticated interpretation and that take into account a scribe’s level of linguistic and graphic sophistication.

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*Cratylus*, the Socratic dialog composed by Plato regarding the etymological interpretation of names. The participants in the dialog all emphasize the verbalization of names rather than their writing; see *Cratylus* 424 in which the discussion hinges on the potential of sounds and pronunciation. For discussions and commentary on *The Cratylus*, see Timothy M. S. Baxter, *The Cratylus: Plato’s Critique of Naming* (PhA 58; Leiden: Brill, 1992); C. D. C. Reeve, *Cratylus: Translated with Introduction & Notes* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1998); Rachel Barney, *Names and Nature in Plato’s Cratylus* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and for a refreshingly radical take, see David Sedley, *Plato’s Cratylus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Related to the lack of examples of Greek graphic etymologizing, no doubt, is the wildly different sociological status that the Greek-language scribe possessed vis-à-vis his Near Eastern counterpart. The latter in the first millennium were part of the administrative, political, and religious elite. In marked contrast, the former were often slaves and servants, and were not the creators or intellectual tradents of the texts they copied. As Carr has noted, Greek literate education of the mid-first millennium B.C.E. “served to form an aristocratic elite of Greek citizens, defined in part by their ability to orally perform the cultural tradition” (David M. Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005] 106–107). That is to say, the visual inspection of the Greek text was to a large degree separated from its idealized (oral) performance and interpretation among its elite consumers. Writing, at least in the Platonic presentation of the Socratic perspective, was a counter-productive *aide mémoire*, rather than the mark of an erudite sophisticate (cf., Plato, *Phaedrus* 274c–275c).

### A. Synonymy: Genesis 16:11

The kind of etymologies offered by the biblical writers that have historically been the least troublesome to modern commentators are those derived from the basic constituent parts of a name and, most crucially, do not appear to conflict with modern scientific philological analysis. In Gen 16:11, for example, the messenger of Yahweh explains to Hagar that the child she will bear to Abram will be named *יִשְׁמַעֵאל* (“Ishmael,” literally, “El has heard” or “May El hear”), *כִּי־שָׁמַע יְהוָה אֶל־עֲנָנָה* (“for Yahweh has heard your affliction”). The conspicuous parts of the name, the subject and the verbal predicate, are transparently reflected in the narrative’s explanatory statement: *אל = יהוה* and *שמע = ישמע*.

While not overly complicated, the exegesis is not necessarily as literal as it might appear. First, the author equates the *שמע* of the name (as it stands, an ambiguous prefixing form) with the perfect form *שמע*; presumably, he is working from the (correct) assumption that the perfect can sometimes indicate the same temporality as the preterite, which seems to be how he is understanding *שמע*.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the author considers the *אל* of the name as a synonym to the personal name of the Judean god *יהוה*. Of course, *אל* is a generic word for “god,” and as such is fairly ambiguous. But it is also the name of the high Canaanite god El. Without further discussing the religious history of the southern Levant by means of personal names,<sup>75</sup> we should remember that equating *אל* and *יהוה* is not necessarily a straightforward act without agenda. By reading the name *ישמעאל* as *שמע יהוה* (as opposed to *ישמע בעל*, “may Baal hear,” for example) the biblical author has tightly limited the patriarch’s religious (and possibly ethnic) identity in a way that is not inherent in a strictly literal interpretation.<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, his understanding of the name *ישמעאל* is a plausible one in that he has chosen to interpret the name from a spectrum of

<sup>74</sup> For a recent discussion of the perfect, including current bibliography, see Michael Mattlock, “The Perfect (*qatal*),” in “Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?” *A Grammatical Tribute to Stephen A. Kaufman* (ed. Hélène Dallaire, Benjamin J. Noonan, and Jennifer E. Noonan; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2017) 127–37 (esp. 131–32 for temporal overlap with the preterite). Noth understood the prefixing form in personal names to indicate a wish or desire (in contrast to names that employ the suffixing form; see Martin Noth, *Die israelitischen Personennamen im Rahmen der gemeinemitischen Namengebung* [BWANT III/10; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1928] 195–213). This is *contra* Rechenmacher who argues that the prefixing conjugation in names refers to past events (i.e., ultimately conforming to many of the Bible’s etymologizing interpretations of them), though he does not entirely reject the idea that some of them might express a wish or even habitual action (Hans Rechenmacher, *Personennamen als theologische Aussagen: Die syntaktischen und semantischen Strukturen der satzhaften theophoren Personennamen in der hebräischen Bibel* [ATSAT 50; St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1997] 47–53).

<sup>75</sup> For this most recently, see Stig Norin, *Personennamen und Religion im alten Israel: untersucht mit besonderer Berücksichtigung der Namen auf El und Ba’al* (ConBOT 60; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013).

<sup>76</sup> A Babylonian scribe might do something similar, of course, but instead of specifying which *אל* he understood to be denoted by the generic term, would instead choose from the multiple possible Akkadian values of a Sumerian logogram.

plausible synonyms. Examples of synonymic exegesis in Babylonian hermeneutics are quite common as well.<sup>77</sup>

### B. Homography: Genesis 22:14

While the West Semitic alphabet does not have the kind of robust polyvalency inherent in Sumero-Akkadian cuneiform, it does in fact possess a certain degree of polyvalency in that most vowels are not (indeed, cannot be) indicated in the script. While I am not willing to go as far as labeling the consonantal script of ancient Canaan a syllabary, as Gelb did, the script's intrinsic equivocality meant that even the most explicit orthography offered the reader a variety of potential vocalizations.<sup>78</sup> Just as in the case of cuneiform, or any writing system for that matter, context normally constrains potential readings. The biblical authors, however, do appear to take advantage of even this modest ambiguity in their etymologizing.

For instance, Gen 22:14 etymologizes two things: the geographical name *יְהוָה יֵרָאֶה* (“Yahweh sees”) and the common expression, *בְּהַר יְהוָה יֵרָאֶה* (“on the mountain of Yahweh he appears,” which was perhaps added by a later commentator),<sup>79</sup> both of which are derived from Abraham's answer to Isaac, that *אֱלֹהִים יֵרָאֶה לּוֹ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלֶה* “God will see/find for himself the sheep for the burnt offering, my son” (Gen 22:8).<sup>80</sup> While the first name related in Gen 22:14, *יְהוָה יֵרָאֶה*, agrees with the verb in Gen 22:8 (both *qal* imperfect, 3ms), the verb in the second phrase does not—it is a *niphal* imperfect 3ms. While one could argue that this second phrase refers to the story itself rather than Abraham's utterance in verse 8, it should be noted that the pericope does not indicate that Yahweh actually appeared on the mountain, only his messenger.<sup>81</sup> Furthermore, the author makes clear that the second phrase is related to the first: *וַיִּקְרָא אַבְרָהָם שֵׁם הַמִּקְוֹם הַהוּא יְהוָה וַיִּרְאֶה אֶשֶׁר יֵאמַר הַיּוֹם בְּהַר יְהוָה יֵרָאֶה* (“Abraham called the name of that place ‘Yahweh-Sees,’ of which it is said currently, ‘On the mountain of Yahweh he appears’”).<sup>82</sup> The second phrase seems to be offering a contemporary reading of Abraham's utterance. In any case, the incompatibility of the vocalization of the name of the place *יְהוָה יֵרָאֶה* with the

<sup>77</sup> Frahm, *Babylonian and Assyrian Text Commentaries*, 60–62. See also Ivan Hruša, *Die akkadische Synonymenliste malku = šarru* (AOAT 50; Münster, Ugarit-Verlag, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> Ignace J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing* (rev. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) 122–53.

<sup>79</sup> See, e.g., Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) 83.

<sup>80</sup> For a discussion of the passage and its history of interpretation, see Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) 114–24; and, more recently, *Inheriting Abraham*, 66–112.

<sup>81</sup> One could even point to the name of the place provided in 22:2, *אֶרֶץ הַמִּרְיָה*, which the reader is clearly meant to parse as *יְהוָה (יהוה) יֵרָאֶה (אֶה)*, “appearance of Yahweh”; thus, the name amounts to an example of notarikon.

<sup>82</sup> Or, “On a mountain Yahweh appears.” See also Levenson, “And Abraham named that site Adonai-yireh, whence the present saying, ‘On the mount of the LORD he is seen/appears,’” (*Inheriting Abraham*, 82).

vocalization of the phrase יהוה יראָה is one that only exists when the words are actually vocalized—not when they are written. Like a kind of ethnophilological Schrödinger’s Cat, the polyvalent orthography bears both readings simultaneously. As in the reading of Enlil’s weapon, <sup>618</sup>tukul.saġ.50, the writer has taken advantage of the writing system to reveal deeper, polyphonic associations.

### C. *Homoigraphy: Exodus 17:15–16*

Highlighted in my discussion of Gen 22:14 is the important role that the orthographic, indeed the graphic, aspect of a word can contribute to a writer’s onomastic exegesis. And this leads to another potential avenue for Judean etymologizing. It is well recognized that several of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are very similar in appearance (with different letters similar in appearance at different times), and their confusion by scribes in the later copying of texts has produced no small number of textual variations. Surely the composers of the biblical narratives made similar mistakes in copying manuscripts and were aware of the potential these similarities had for etymologizing. If similar sounds have the potential to reveal deeper philological knowledge, so do similar sights. We might, as a matter of heuristic convenience, refer to similarly written words as *homoigraphs*. Recognizing this as a phenomenon, I believe, can solve a number of previously unexplainable etymologies described by the biblical authors.

For example, after the conflict with the Amalekites at Rephidim, in which Moses’s raised arms determined the course of the battle, the Israelite leader builds and dedicates an altar to the god who granted him victory (Exod 17:15–16):

וַיִּבֶן מֹשֶׁה מִזְבֵּחַ וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יְהוָהוּ נָסִי׃ Moses built an altar, and he named it  
“Yahweh-is-my-banner,”

וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי־יָד עַל־כַּסּוֹ הָיָה מִלְחָמָה לַיהוָה בְּעַמְלֵק מִדָּר׃ and he said, “because a hand was on the  
seat of Yah, Yahweh will have conflict in  
Amalek from generation to generation.”

It appears that the author is deriving the name of the altar יהוה נָסִי from יָהּ, itself embedded in what appears to be an older text that has been utilized by the author of the overarching narrative as an epitome of Israel’s perpetual antagonism with the Amalekites.<sup>83</sup> Clearly, the יהוה of the altar’s name corresponds to יה of Moses’s explanatory utterance, and the *hireq-yod* ending of נָסִי is a possessive suffix (that, importantly, obscures the altar’s character; see below). This means that somehow נָס is supposed to derive from כָּס; the two words rhyme, of course, but that is usually not enough to allow for etymologizing. More importantly, though they rhyme, they do not appear to bear similar or related meanings. The words,

<sup>83</sup> Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967) 206; see also Nahum Sarna, *Exodus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991) 96.

however, are homoiographic.<sup>84</sup> Indeed, in some of the ancient Hebrew scripts of both the Iron Age as well as in a number of post-exilic Aramaic scripts attested in Jewish use, the *kaph* and *nun* are quite similar in appearance.<sup>85</sup> As in Gen 22:14, in which the simultaneous etymology of יהוה יראֶה from יהוה יראֶה only works when the operative phrase is seen but not uttered, in Exod 17:15-16 נס can only said to be derived from כס when the words are inspected and positively compared visually while their actual verbalizations are suspended from philological consideration.

The passage is tucked in at the end of a larger etiological tale explaining the origin of the animosity between the Israelites and Amalekites. The fact that, other than the final *samekh*, there is so very little resemblance between the words כס and נס from a modern philological perspective has meant that the etymology has long been especially vexing to commentators.<sup>86</sup> Scholars usually concentrate on one of two approaches that cause no small amount of trauma to the text, either in terms of its integrity or meaning.<sup>87</sup> The first approach has been to modify the consonantal text of verse 16, changing the *kaph* in כס into a *nun*, thus aligning the etymology philologically with the name of the altar offered in verse 15.<sup>88</sup> The problem with this solution is that there is essentially no support from the versions to undergird

<sup>84</sup> Cornelis Houtman in his 1996 Exodus commentary remarks, in a footnote, that כס is a “pun” on נס, but does little to elaborate (*Exodus* [4 vols.; trans. Sierd Woudstra; HCOT; Kampen: Kok Publishing, 1996] 2:391 n. 64).

<sup>85</sup> Johannes Renz and Wolfgang Röllig, *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik* (3 vols.; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1995) II/2: 158–59, 176–77. For post-exilic Aramaic scripts, see Frank Moore Cross, “The Development of the Jewish Scripts,” in *Leaves from an Epigrapher’s Notebook: Collected Papers in Hebrew and West Semitic Palaeography and Epigraphy* (HSS 51; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003) 3–43 (7, figure 1.1, line 1 = “classical Aramaic cursive of the late Persian Empire, ca. 400”; line 3 = 4Q530 “dating to 100–50 B.C.E.”). See also Yardeni, whose charts do a good job of indicating individual stroke marks, which show in certain instances that the *kaph* and *nun* were not merely similar in appearance, but were also actually crafted very similarly by the scribes (Ada Yardeni, *The Book of Hebrew Script: History, Palaeography, Script Styles, Calligraphy & Design* [Jerusalem: Carta, 2002], 165 [chart 1, 4QSam<sup>b</sup> = late 3rd century, B.C.E.], 175 [chart 5, the War Scroll = early Herodian], 177 [chart 7, *Hodayot* = late Herodian], 181 [chart 9, 4Q212/Enoch<sup>a</sup> = Herodian], 183 [chart 10, Wadi Murabba’at Genesis = post-Herodian], 191 [chart 13, Wadi Murabba’at 30 = post-Herodian]).

<sup>86</sup> By far, the best discussion of the history of interpretation of this passage by both ancient and modern commentators is Cornelis Houtman, “‘Yahweh is my Banner’—‘A ‘Hand’ on the ‘Throne’ of Yh’: Exodus xvii 15b, 16a and their Interpretation,” in *New Avenues in the Study of the Old Testament: A Collection of Old Testament Studies Published on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap and the Retirement of Prof. Dr. M. J. Mulder* (ed. A. S. van der Woude; *OtSt* 25; Leiden: Brill, 1989) 110–20.

<sup>87</sup> There are, of course, a few scholars who do not ascribe to either of these explanations; e.g., Cassuto, *Book of Exodus*, 206; Houtman, “Yahweh is my Banner,” 116–20; Hans Andreas Tanner, *Amalek. Der Feind Israels und der Feind Jahwes: Eine Studie zu den Amalektexten im Alten Testament* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 2005) 57–62, at 58.

<sup>88</sup> Thus, e.g., Georg Beer, *Exodus* (HAT 3; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1939) 92; Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 311–12; Doezman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) 392, 397–98.

such an emendation.<sup>89</sup> The alternative explanation, following traditional Jewish interpretation, is Yahweh's utterance in verse 16 does not, in fact, elucidate the name of the altar, but is rather the utterance of an oath made by the deity on his own throne.<sup>90</sup> However, Childs has shown, drawing on the form-critical work on the Hebrew Bible's etiologies by Fichtner and Long, that Exod 17:15–16 cannot be an oath and is undoubtedly an etymology, formally aligning with many other similarly phrased examples.<sup>91</sup>

The non-literal, learned etymology I have suggested above, of course, obviates the need for either textual emendation or reading against the etiological form. However, the question remains as to why the biblical author would choose to read the name in such a way. Why would he have Moses name the place יהוה נסי? And why does the explanation include what seems to be the archaic name נסי? I suggest that the archaic name and/or the etymology offered in verse 16 had some genuine antiquity to it—and the name of the altar in question, located somewhere in the Sinai was, in fact, נסי. As many have noted, variations of *that* name, such as נסי יהוה, are not unusual in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>92</sup> Normally, if the location of Yahweh's throne is identified, it is in Jerusalem (Jer 3:17; 14:21 [presumably]; 17:12; Lam 5:19 [Mount Zion specifically]); occasionally, authors mention it as being in Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem specifically (Isa 6:1; Ezek 43:7), and a number of times it is located in the sky (Pss 11:4; 103:19; Isa 66:1; Ezek 1:26; 10:1).<sup>93</sup>

Here lies the motivation for the use of the learned etymology in Exod 17:15–16: Yahweh's throne cannot be said to be outside of his one temple, and the idea that Moses established such an explicitly identified altar to the god was theologically problematic, since it indicates Yahweh's cultic presence. The apparent antiquity of the name, handed down (perhaps within a fragment of poetry as both Cassuto and Sarna suggested)<sup>94</sup> by way of previous scribes meant that it had an authority and could not be altered.<sup>95</sup> The theological problem could nonetheless be exegeted into religious conformity. A learned scribe could plainly see that נסי and נסי were related to one another, such that נסי need not be understood as such, but as the much more

<sup>89</sup> Sarna, *Exodus*, 250 n. 18; William C. Propp, *Exodus 1–18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 2; New York: Random House, 1998) 620.

<sup>90</sup> John I. Durham, *Exodus* (WBC 3; Waco: Word Books, 1987) 237; Sarna, *Exodus*, 96; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 620.

<sup>91</sup> Fichtner, “Die etymologische Ätiologie”; Long, *The Problem of Etiological Narrative*; Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, 311–12.

<sup>92</sup> See, e.g., Houtman, “Yahweh is my Banner,” 118.

<sup>93</sup> In these two places, it is above the רקיע. In only one place is Yahweh's throne said to be neither in Jerusalem nor in the sky: in Jeremiah's oracle against Elam, where Yahweh states he will set up his own throne, demolishing the native dynasties (Jer 49:38).

<sup>94</sup> Cassuto, *Book of Exodus*, 206; Sarna, *Exodus* 96.

<sup>95</sup> Such philologically-grounded problem solving should not surprise us, since, for example, this is the normal explanation of the counterfactual native exegesis of ירבעל in Judg 6:32. Though it should mean something like “may Baal plead (for me),” or “may Baal prove himself great” (see *HALOT*, 434 for bibliography); ירבעל is interpreted by the biblical author as ירבעל (“let Baal contend with him”). See also 2 Sam 11:21, which records the name as ירבעל.

palpable  $\text{נֶסֶךְ}$ . A banner is a much more ambiguous symbol, and Moses's naming of that altar in verse 15 ( $\text{יְהוָה נֶסֶךְ}$ , "Yahweh is my banner") does not imply Yahweh's perpetual locality but merely Moses's proclamation regarding his experience with the god. Indeed, in the explanation implied in the naming, the  $\text{נֶסֶךְ}$  no longer even belongs to Yahweh (as the  $\text{יְהוָה נֶסֶךְ}$  would). Instead, it (as a metaphor for the deity) belongs to the human commemorator, Moses.

## ■ Conclusion: The Epistemic Culture of Judean Scribes and Biblical Etymologies as Learned Etymologies

It is clear enough that the authors of the biblical text offered learned etymologies and incorporated them into the narratives they composed, edited, and commented upon. The question remains, what did they think they were accomplishing by including such material in their texts? The answer lies, I maintain, in the role played by philological analysis within the intellectual culture of the Judean scribes.

While issues of the precise nature and social locus of scribes in ancient Judah are unlikely ever to be completely settled,<sup>96</sup> what is clear is that there was a more-or-less defined set of practices and conventions employed by a limited group of people. These practices and conventions (both mental and instrumental) can be referred to as a scribal culture.<sup>97</sup> At its most basic level, this would have included the manufacture and maintenance of the physical tools of the craft, such as pens and ink, but also customary practices, including a more-or-less uniform script, as well as certain orthographic and stylistic standards.<sup>98</sup> In short, Judean scribal culture is, like its Mesopotamian counterpart, its own professional, technical culture.<sup>99</sup>

Within scribal culture certain sources of knowledge were prioritized. The biblical authors are most explicit about oracular knowledge ( $\text{תּוֹרָה}$ ,  $\text{דָּבָר}$ ,  $\text{חֻזוֹן}$ , etc.) obtained through "legitimate" mantics (prophets, oneiromantics, cleromantics, the priests

<sup>96</sup> For recent discussions, see Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998); Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart*; Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Seth L. Sanders, *The Invention of Hebrew* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).

<sup>97</sup> Some, such as Fishbane, even maintain that there is evidence for several scribal sub-cultures in the biblical material (Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985] 23–88).

<sup>98</sup> For these, see Emile Puech, "Les Écoles dans l'Israël préexilique: données épigraphiques," in *Congress Volume: Jerusalem 1986* (ed. J. A. Emerton; VTSup 40; Leiden: Brill, 1988) 189–203, at 201–2; more recently, Christopher A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010) 91–113. See also van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture*, 8. See also Fishbane, who argues for standardized hermeneutical conventions (Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation*, esp. 525–43).

<sup>99</sup> For a thorough discussion of Judean scribes as a so-called "knowledge culture," see Jeffrey L. Cooley, "Judean Scribalism, Documentary Epistemology, and the Name  $\text{יִשְׂרָאֵל}$ ," in *The Scaffolding of Our Thoughts: Essays on Assyriology and the History of Science in Honor of Francesca Rochberg* (ed. C. Jay Crisostomo, Eduardo A. Escobar, Terri Tanaka, and Niek Veldhuis; Leiden: Brill, 2018) 207–52.

who mediate this oracular data; e.g., Mal 2:7). Such oracles were clearly worthy of recording, and, in later generations, revisiting and reapplying to novel situations that begged for divine guidance.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the scribes considered themselves and the product of their craft a source of epistemic authority, regardless of specific speculation on that craft or its textual product's relationship or origin with Yahweh. For the authors of Proverbs, pious behavior and attitude (יראת יהוה, Prov 1:7; 1:29; 9:10; cf. 22:12; Isa 11:2) is a prerequisite for receiving knowledge (דעת) in the form of traditional sage counsel, but is not necessarily identical to the knowledge itself (Prov 2:5–6; see also, 10:14; 11:9; 15:2, 7, 14; 17:27; 18:15; 21:11; 22:17).<sup>100</sup> Such knowledge, of course, could be tradited in writing (Prov 22:20). That the biblical authors admittedly drew upon (or at least cited) other texts indicates that the produce of other scribes carried some weight of epistemic authority, regardless of those texts' perceived relationship with the deity (e.g., Num 21:14; Josh 10:13; 2 Sam 1:18; 1 Kgs 11:41; 1 Chr 29:29; 2 Chr 35:27). Indeed, works such as Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings make no special claim to divine authority. It seems, rather, that they are epistemically authoritative by virtue of their being scribal productions.

The etymologies in the biblical narrative, I have maintained, were the product of this scribal culture. As such, they served a deliberate, functional role in the narratives composed and handed down by the scribes themselves, for the scribes themselves. As the product of their philological training, how, then, did their etymologies actually function within the narratives they composed? The biblical authors included in their works etymologies that clearly served as epistemically legitimate data that, in turn, supported the narrative's rhetoric. But in what specific ways?

Etymologies, as a source of epistemic authority among the makers and consumers of Judean documents, were utilized, it seems, for a number of rhetorical purposes. Among these, I suggest: etymologies verify geographical claims, cultural/religious identity, or divine involvement with important people and places. There may be more possibilities, of course, but these are the ones that seem rather evident in most narratives and I intend to explore them more fully in later research. However, within the immediate context of this study, I would also suggest that etymologies can provide solutions to theological problems, as seen in my earlier discussion of Exod 17:15–16.

My conclusion is that we should not assume that the etymologies offered by the biblical writers are folk-etymologies. While they are in many cases counterfactual, this does not mean that they originated among the illiterate masses. Looking at the Babylonian material helps us understand the multiple, often non-literal, ways in which ancient scholars might parse a word or name. I am suggesting that

<sup>100</sup> In the later Second Temple period, יראת יהוה will come to be equated with תורה, thus coopting sapiential claims of intellectual authority (e.g., Ps 19:8–10, in which יראת יהוה is used as one of several synonyms to תורת יהוה). See Alexandra Grund, "Die Himmel erzählen die Herrlichkeit Gottes": Psalm 19 im Kontext der nachexilischen Toraweisheit (WMANT 103; Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2004) 220–22, 247–48, 338–52.

Judean scribes as well derived meaning from the *written* forms of names and that this process of interpretation should be understood within an intellectual rather than popular framework. Just as among modern philologists, ancient etymology, regardless of its method, was a source of knowledge. These etymologies were an epistemological resource created by and discernible to the educated, those skilled in philology and hermeneutics, that is, the trained scribes. Within this intellectual and epistemic context, the interpretation of names in narratives had enormous rhetorical potential, and could promote any number of narrative agendas. In short, the Hebrew Bible's etymologies are, like their Babylonian counterparts, learned etymologies and should be treated as such.