HEBREW UNION COLLEGE - JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
NEW YORK SCHOOL

INSTRUCTIONS FROM AUTHOR TO LIBRARY FOR THESIS

AUTHOR: Dan Judson

TITLE: Hidden Beneath God's Throne: Midrashim on the Deaths of Moses and Aaron

TYPE OF THESIS:

RABBINIC (X) SSM ( ) D.H.L. ( )

D.MIN. ( ) M.A.R.E. ( ) M.A.J.S. ( )

1. (X) May be used without my written permission.

2. ( ) My written permission is required for use during the next ___ years.

Note: The Library shall respect restrictions placed on theses for a period of no more than ten years.

I understand that the Library may make a photocopy of my thesis for security purposes.

3. The Library may sell photocopies of my thesis. X yes ___ no

March 9, 1998
Date

Daniel Judson
Signature of Author

.....

LIBRARY RECORD

Microfilmed: 5.2.00
Date

R Goldberg
Signature of Library Staff Member

March 9, 1998

98-B1204

Dan Judson
March 9, 1998
Advisor: Dr. Norman Cohen

Hidden Beneath God's Throne: Midrashim on the Deaths of Moses and Aaron.

This thesis is a thematic study of midrashim related to the deaths of Moses and Aaron. The focus of the research are two early Medieval extended narratives on their deaths: Midrash Petirat Aharon and Midrash Petirat Moshe. Both of these midrashim are presented and analyzed. In both of these midrashim, a psychological portrayal of Moses is presented, unusual in the degree to which it humanizes him, and his fears. These midrashim also deal with the theological issues of God's relationship with death. Moses' unique death "'al pi Adonai," leads also to a tension in the midrash of whether he really died or was assumed to heaven.

I present much of the earlier midrashim from classic rabbinic texts on this subject, in order to trace the historical development of themes and motifs. Throughout the thesis my goal is also to compare the midrashim on their deaths. The midrashim are clearly intertwined, but no comparative analysis exists.

The material is presented in two parts, the first part is a presentation and analysis of the midrashim. The second part three issues in a more in depth manner, across the spectrum of the material: How the midrashim utilize biblical prooftexts; The question of theodicy and the reasons given for Moses and Aaron's death; and, a comparison of midrashim on Aaron's death with Moses' death. The material is presented in 8 chapters.

HIDDEN BENEATH GOD'S THRONE: MIDRASHIM ON THE DEATHS OF MOSES AND AARON

DAN JUDSON

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for Ordination

Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion
Graduate Rabbinic Program
New York, New York

March 9, 1998
Advisor: Dr. Norman Cohen

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my thesis advisor, Dr. Norman Cohen, for his wisdom and encouragement. Dr. Cohen's classes opened up the world of midrash to me, and in so doing, illuminated the soul of our tradition. The passion which he brings to teaching midrash is an inspiration.

I am indebted to my family: Bob, Robin, Bruce, Nancy D., Nancy, Steven, Andy, and Ellen. My mother, Betty Judson, has been incredibly supportive for the past 5 years, as well as the 22 before she knew she had a Rabbi. This thesis is also written in memory of my father, Morris Judson, z"l.

Finally I would like to thank Sandy Falk, for her love and care.

Introduction

The research for this thesis actually began when I was 15. That is how old I was when my father died. Since then, death, as a subject, has pulled me toward it. I cannot really articulate the impulse. However, when given the opportunity to study any topic for a thesis, it is no surprise that I gravitated towards death, and the stories Jews have told about dying.

A chaplaincy supervisor once remarked to me that some people are driven to working with the terminally ill because they are energized by it. The terminally ill are often desperately engaged in making meaning of their life, and those who work with them feel this intensity. So it is with these texts. These texts about death are engaged in making meaning out of life. In studying them, one necessarily becomes involved in this struggle.

The initial impetus for the study of Moses' and Aaron's deaths, in particular, was Michael Fishbane's The Kiss of God,[1] which examines the mystical connotations associated with death "by the kiss of God" found in Jewish medieval writings. The focus of this research is on midrashic accounts of the deaths of Moses and Aaron from Hellenistic sources to the early Middle Ages.

My first goal is to see how the Rabbis framed the liminal moment of death itself. To accomplish this, I have isolated these moments in the midrash and followed the themes that emerge from them. This moment is complex midrashically. The departure from this world and the journey to the next involves the Rabbis' imagination, theology, biblical interpretation, and first hand experience of dying. From all of these tensions, a rabbinic conception of death emerges.

There is a difficulty in trying to make a generalization about the entire rabbinic corpus' attitude about death, from only Moses' and Aaron's deaths. This difficulty is increased by the unique nature of the their deaths. This study is both about the rabbinic view of death, and the rabbinic view of Moses and Aaron.

---

[1]Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1994).

A. The Midrashim

The center of the research is on Midrash Petirat Moshe and Midrash Petirat Aharon. Both of these midrashim are extended narratives on the deaths of Moses and Aaron. Both midrashim are dated between the seventh and eleventh century, C.E. They were printed first in Constantinople in 1516, then in Venice 1544.[2]

There are five extant versions, all of which are reprinted in Ozar Midrashim, Vol. II.[3] I will be using as the primary source:

> "Midrash Petirat Moshe Rabbenu "(version B) as printed in Notes on the Commentary to the Pentateuch, Abu Manzur Al-Damari, edited by A. Kohut, New York, 1892.

and also referring to:

> "Petirat Moshe Rabbenu" found in Bet Ha-Midrash, Vol II, A. Jellinek, Leipzig, 1870, known as the Jellinek-A version.

The version of "Midrash Petirat Aharon" I analyze is:

> "Midrash Petirat Aharon" found in Bet Ha-Midrash, Vol II, A. Jellinek, Leipzig, 1870. Reprinted in Ozar Midrashim, Vol. 1, pp. 368-371.

Both midrashim have little critical literature on them, although with the recent appearance of Moses and the Angel of Death by Rella Kushelevsky,[4] a book devoted to a "thematological" study of midrash on Moses' death, this may change. Both midrashim appear to mix earlier sources with original motifs, and part of this study is to lay out the historical development of motifs.

---

[2]H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 362.

[3]Judah Eisenstein, *Ozar Midrashim* (New York: J.D. Eisenstein, 1915).

[4]Rella Kushelevsky, *Moses and The Angel of Death* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).

B. Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is divided into two parts. The first part of the thesis is devoted to a presentation and analysis of the midrashim. The second part of the thesis takes three particular issues and addresses each of them in a more indepth manner.

In Part I, Chapter 1 reviews the biblical backgrounds of the death scenes, paying special attention to a comparison of Moses' and Aaron's deaths. Chapter 2 is an examination of Midrash Petirat Aharon, and the portrayal of both brothers. In Chapter 3, I analyze the development of midrashim on Aaron's death. Chapter 4 contains an analysis of Midrash Petirat Aharon, looking closely at Moses' struggle with the Angel of Death, and the tension between Moses' possible assumption to heaven versus his death. Chapter 5 continues the analysis of these themes through the development of midrashim on Moses' death.

Part Two begins with a focus in Chapter 6 on the particular question of how biblical prooftexts are used in these midrashim, specifically examining the use of prooftexts from Job 28 in one section of Midrash Tannaim. Chapter 7 looks at the range of explanations given in the midrashim for Aaron and Moses' death. This chapter examines the Rabbis' understanding of theodicy prismed through the Moses and Aaron midrashim. Chapter 8 compares Moses' death with Aaron's to see what can be learned from the contrast. This comparison is crucially important for understanding the midrashim. Even though the characters are so intertwined, there is no comparitive study of their death scenes. Kushelevsky, for example, in an entire book on midrash related to Moses' death, does not mention Aaron's name even once. There is though material in the midrashim which can only be understood by comparing the death scenes. For example, a common midrashic motif is Moses seeing Aaron die. In Midrash Petirat Aharon, he says he wants a death just like Aaron's. When he does die in Midrash Petirat Moshe it looks exactly like Aaron's death from Midrash Petirat Aharon. Thus, the need exists for a comparitive approach to the midrashim.

Chapter I: Death Scenes in the Torah

A. Moses' Death

"And Moses, the servant of God, died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of God. And he buried him in the valley of in the land of Moab, over against Bet-Peor, and no man knows his grave to this day" [Dt. 34:6-7]. These two verses, which on the surface appear to describe in a straightforward manner Moses death, carry within them a great deal of ambiguity as to the circumstances and nature of Moses death. An example of this ambiguity is the phrase, "And he buried him." The pronoun is not identified which opens up the question of who is the "he" being referred to? Traditional commentators have differed, Rashi noting that God buried him, while Ibn Ezra suggests that Moses buried himself. Modern commentators raise a third possibility: Moses was buried by unnamed others. Von Raad, for example, comments, "Since Moses is not likely to have climbed the mountain without companions, it is more natural in v. 6 to translate 'as he was buried,' [since] in the preceding sentence, Yahweh was not the subject either."[5]

The ambiguity of the scene, though, extends beyond certain textual difficulties to the whole context of Moses' death. Lowenstamm asks simply, "How could it be imagined that the man of God was mortal - the very man to whom God spoke face-to-face, as a man would to his neighbor...Is it conceivable that he was subject to death like all flesh and blood?"[6] In answering this question, Lowenstamm believes the Torah mediates between two constructs: mythic Moses and human Moses. The text neither wants us to read that Moses was "assumed" thus establishing a myth of Mosaic divinity based on his assumption, nor does it want us to believe that Moses died an ordinary death of flesh-and-blood human beings. Looking at the text closely, we see that Moses died on the top of the mountain, yet he was buried in the valley like a common person. "However, at the same

---

[5]Gerhard Von Raad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1966), p. 210.
[6]Samuel Loewenstamm, "The Death of Moses," in *From Babylonia to Canaan: Studies in the Bible and its Oriental Background.* eds. Y. Avishur and J. Blau (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1992), pp. 136-137.

time, the Torah makes it clear that this [Moses' burial in the valley] entails no belittling of Moses, for the man of God died at the command of the Lord and God, Himself, undertook his burial."[7]

Loewenstamm argues that the text is highly conscious of creating this balance. Moses does not die like ordinary human beings. His death is unique among the death scenes in the Torah since he is taken by God's word, and vanishes alone on the top of a mountain. However, his death by the word of God does not imply an assumption. Elijah's assumption proves that the concept was not foreign to biblical authors, so the death of Moses could have been written in this manner, but is explicitly not.

Even the physical description of Moses at this moment furthers this tension. The text in Deteronomy 34:7 describes him at his death with the following words, "His eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated." "Natural force" is an unusual expression since the word *lehoh* refers to green wood in Genesis 30:37 and newly made green cords in Judges 16:7. In related Semitic languages it means "fresh" or "moist." In Ugaritic it means "life force" in contrast to death. "Hence, the term, seems to denote, in a metaphorical sense, 'vigor', 'life-force', or 'energy'. The picture would seem to be a typical Eastern expression where the facts are idealized."[8] The sense of the expression is either a type of hyperbole of how fit he was at his age, or more likely, a sense that his death was not due to physical impairment, but that God wanted him. However, this later view must be balanced with Deuteronomy 31:2, where it says Moses is old and can no longer go out and come in. Thus, the possibility of his being assumed by God is balanced with his simply dying.

Even the question itself of why Moses was punished at Meribat Kadesh in Numbers 20:1-13 is ambiguous. The story of Moses hitting the rock is part of a biblical motif of God splitting rocks to produce water. Psalm 114:7- 8 reads, "Tremble earth, at

---

[7]Ibid, p. 151.
[8]J. A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary* (U.S.: Inter-varsity Press, 1974), pp. 319-320.

the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob; who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a fountain of waters." Psalm 78, where the general motif of God splitting rocks to make water is applied specifically to the wilderness wanderings, reads, "He split rocks in the wilderness; and gave them drink abundantly as out of the depths. He brought streams out of the rock, and caused water to run down like rivers."

This motif also took the form of a trial of the people. For example, in Ps. 81:8 we read, "You called in trouble, and I rescued you; I answered you in the secret place of thunder; I proved you at the waters of Meribah." Loewenstamm comments that:

> The intention of the historical allusion is sufficiently clear. The psalm was composed at a time when enemies oppressed the people (v. 15) to such a degree that part of them abandoned hope of being rescued by God and turned to other gods (v. 10). Hence, it is understandable why this motif sometimes assumed the alternative form of a trial in which the people put their God to test. The time of calamity is also the time of a crisis of belief.[9]

In the scenes at Meribat Kadesh and its parallel in Exodus 17:1-17, Moses replaces God striking the rock, but God is still being tested. Ex. 17:7 states, "And he called the name of the place Massa and Meribah because the people strove with God and tested God, saying, 'Is God among us or not?'" The Exodus story also creates a strong connection between Moses and God. In Ex. 17:2, Moses asks the people, "Why do you strive with me? Why do you test God?" God also tells Moses the Divine will stand before Moses on the rock while Moses hits the rock. The close relationship between God and Moses sets up the parallel scene in Numbers 20:1-13, where that relationship will be broken.

The story in Numbers still contains the idea that the people are testing God, however, the story undergoes a dramatic change between Exodus and Numbers: Moses goes from God's representative to profaning God. Loewenstamm outlines the reason for this shift:

> This involved narrative reflects theological criticism applied to an early tradition. A warrior deity, who rules after defeating mighty forces, uses a weapon, as it is appropriate for him. Likewise, it is befitting that his

[9]Lowenstamm, "The Death," p. 140.

> servant use this instrument at the deity's bidding. However, this does not befit God, Who created the world purely by His word. His messenger should work wonders by the power of the word which God has put into his mouth. If this messenger does not believe in the omnipotence of God's word, and because of the weakness of his faith, requires a material instrument, he is considered as though he had refused to sanctify God's name in public. The story, therefore, indicates a crisis in religious thinking. An ancient tradition related that Moses caused the waters to come forth with a blow, whereas the late religious consciousness urgently postulated the flowing by means of the word. The present version reflects both the early narrative and its censure in later theology. It acknowledges as a fact that Moses was ordered to take the rod, and that he struck the rock with it and caused the waters to flow, but it reinterprets this act as a transgression.[10]

The death of Moses by God's word is thus highly ironic. Not speaking God's words was the cause of his punishment, and he is being taken with words. The Torah narrative is also brought full circle. Genesis begins with God who creates the world through speech, and Deuteronomy ends with God taking God's prophet through speech.

The question of Moses' guilt though is not completely accepted throughout the Tanach. Psalm 106: 32-33 reads in this regard, "They angered him at the waters of Meribah, and it went ill with Moses because of them; for they embittered his spirit, and he spoke rashly with his lips." In this intertextual midrash of the Meribah scene, the people are blamed for goading Moses into his actions, thus raising questions about whether Moses' punishment fit his actions. And in Deuteronomy 1:37, after the scene with the spies, there is a completely different etiology given for Moses' punishment, "Also God was angry with me on account of you [the people] saying also you will not go into the land." In Deuteronomy 3:26, the charge is repeated, Moses asks to go into the Land, "But God was angry with me for your sakes, and would not listen to me, and God said to me, 'Speak no more of this matter.'" The reason given here for Moses not being allowed into the Land is simply his being a part of the people. This seems to be a separate tradition where Moses' punishment is still a given, but this tradition does not recognize the incident of Meribat Kadesh. The differing traditions about Moses' "sin" will be picked up and expanded upon in midrashic literature.

---

[10]Ibid, pp. 142-143.

In either version, though, of his sin and punishment, the punishment is not simply that he will not be allowed to enter into the Land, but that he must die. In Numbers 27:13-14, we read, "And when you have seen it, you will be gathered to your people, as Aaron, your brother, was gathered. Because you rebelled against my word at the Wilderness of Sin, in the strife of the congregation, to sanctify me at the water before their eyes that is the water of Meribat Kadesh in the Wilderness of Sin." However, God's punishment is also a gift of sorts in that Moses dies by the word of God directly, and is buried by God. The tension between God being the punisher as well as the bestower of gifts, God's sense of justice versus God's mercy, will as well be expanded upon in the midrashic accounts of his death.

B. Aaron's Death

Although both Aaron and Moses ascend a mountain to die, their death scenes are relatively different. Moses ascends the mountain explicitly to see the land, (as in Dt. 3: 27), whereas Aaron's purpose in ascending the mountain is solely to add solemnity to the scene.[11] Moses dies alone, while Aaron dies accompanied by Moses and Eleazer, and through these two, Aaron's death scene is connected with the passing on of the priestly lineage. Moses' burial is mentioned where Aaron's is not, almost as if to restate the point that the concern of the scene is not Aaron's death, but the handing over of the mantle of the priesthood.[12]

Both scenes are connected with a leitmotif of "seeing," but their connection implies different things about their deaths. In Aaron's scene, Moses, Aaron, and Eleazer go up the mountain, "in the sight of all the people."[13] When only Moses and Eleazer come down

[11]Ibid, p. 146.
[12]Ibid.
[13]Numbers 20:27.

from the mountain, the text emphasizes that the people saw that Aaron had expired. The people actually could not have seen Aaron expire, because he died on top of the mountain. They inferred that he died from the fact he did not come down the mountain with Moses and Eleazer, thus Milgrom translates *va'yeru* as "to know" instead of "to see."[14] However, the choice of *va'yeru* serves to underscore the motif of the people seeing the death. The connection may be the sense that everything was done "above board;" the people saw everything the leadership was doing, so there would be no question as to the transfer of leadership. The midrash will take this biblical intention and turn it on its head to emphasize how the people suspected Moses and Elezer of foul play.

At Moses' death, "seeing" is a theme as well. Moses ascends the mountain to look out over the Land, with his eyes still undimmed by age. Moses is the one who "sees" at his own death, while at Aaron's death it is the people who are seeing. This fits in very well with the two characters. Moses is ultimately alone, caught between the people and God, while Aaron is very much a part of the people.

Unlike the death scene of Jacob, who is also surrounded by family pronouncing blessings over them, or even Moses who, before he dies, blesses the tribes, Aaron is silent throughout this scene. The scene is marked by his passivity: He does not protest his not being allowed into the land, as Moses does,[15] nor does he even undress himself. Rather, Moses undresses him and puts the priestly garments on Eleazer. This is also symbolic of Aaron not having the power to pass on the mantle of priestly leadership; only Moses could do this. The narrator of the scene reflects this passivity. It starts out with God addressing both Moses and Aaron, but switches to God addressing Moses only. The combination of

---

[14]Jacob Milgrom, *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publicaton Society, 1990), p. 171.
[15]Deuteronomy 3:25.

Aaron's passivity and the leitmotif of "seeing" gives this scene resonances of the Akedah- The Binding of Isaac.[16]

Aaron's death scene also raises the question of his death as a punishment. Aaron's role in the scene at Meribat Kadesh is less apparent than Moses', and yet the biblical narrative is unequivocal in connecting the death of Aaron and his not entering the Land with the waters of Meribah. Milgrom notes here that it is ironic that Moses and Aaron are called rebels, "*asher meriytem et-pi, (You rebelled against my word),*" when they call the people rebels at Meribat Kadesh.[17] Interestingly, the text is unclear as to who exactly calls the people "rebels." Moses and Aaron both gather the people together before the rock, but only "he" chastises them. Immediately afterward, Moses strikes the rock and God punishes both Aaron and Moses. Perhaps the text is linking us back to the original roles of the brothers, Aaron as the speaker and Moses as the doer. The idea that Aaron alone calls the people rebels is not picked up in any of the midrash as a reason for his inclusion in the punishment. Instead, the midrash will focus mostly on the themes of transition in leadership, Aaron's passivity, and the relationship between the brothers.

C. He was Gathered to His People

In general, death scenes in the Torah have little in common with each other. Jacob's dying surrounded by his children[18] is quite different from the terse description of Abraham's death and burial by his two sons, which in turn is quite different from Aaron's death on Mt. Hor. The one commonality is some form of the phrase, "he expired, he died, and he was gathered to his people." Being "gathered to your people," *va-yeasef el amav*, is used in describing the deaths of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron, and Moses. It is

---

[16]For an extensive treatment of this possibility, see chapter 8, "A Comparison of Moses and Aaron's Deaths," below pp. 97-103.
[17]Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 170.
[18]Genesis 49:29-33.

distinguished from death itself, because in the case of Abraham, the text uses the phrase "he expired, he died" prior to saying he was gathered by his kin. The phrase also might be thought to reflect a burial with one's ancestors, however it is used in connection with Moses and Aaron who die alone. It is also not identical with burial, because in its usage with Jacob, he is interred long after being gathered to his people. Perhaps then, this idiom connotes a belief in an immortal element which survives after death, where one is reunited with one's ancestors. "This contradicts the widespread, but apparently erroneous, view that such a notion is unknown in Israel until later times."[19]

Midrashic literature on Moses' and Aaron's death implicitly relate to ideas of the afterlife, however, one of the revealing elements of the midrash is how little attention is paid to what happens after death. Even with an extended treatment of the themes of the angel of death, and the heavenly courts, the afterlife is always in the background. One reads the midrash with a sense that the Rabbis are coming to grips with their existential fears of death, and refuse to allay these fears by elaborate descriptions of the world-to-come. In the midrash related to Moses especially, there is a great deal of anxiety surrounding death. Although Moses appeals to God to enter the land, as we see in Deuteronomy 3:26, in the actual scene of his death itself, he is silent. The midrash, however, puts words in his mouth and through his expressed anxiety we perceive some of the Rabbis' own understanding of death.

[19]Nahum Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 174.

Chapter II: Midrash Petirat Aharon - The Death of Aaron

A. Overview

Midrash Petirat Aharon has two distinct parts. The first part actually begins with the death of Miriam, and the subsequent loss of Miriam's well.[20] This sets in motion a contentious encounter between Moses and the people over the lack of water, culminating in Moses calling the people "rebels" and striking the rock which pours forth blood. God, then, turns the blood into water. The second part of the Midrash is a narrative on Aaron's death. Moses is instructed by God to tell Aaron of his death. It builds tension by showing Moses' inability to tell Aaron this news. "The Midrash artfully examines Moses' inner struggle, his psychic anguish and his inability to voice this awesome command."[21]

The Midrash follows Moses, Aaron, and Eleazer up Mt. Hor to a cave which disappears after Aaron dies. The theme of the burial site disappearing is most likely taken from the biblical disappearance of Moses' grave. The Midrash continues with the unusual story of the people accusing Moses and Eleazer of killing Aaron, an example of the anatagonism with which the Midrash portrays the relationship between Moses and the people. God then shows the people Aaron's bier to exonerate Moses and Eleazer. The denouement of the narrative has the clouds of glory disappearing, and the people seeing the sun and the moon for the first time and wanting to bow down to them. The Midrash thus shows that Aaron's death precipitates a crisis of faith for the people. They are distrustful of Moses, and they are confused as to the nature of God.

B. Midrash Petirat Aharon - Part I

1. The Clouds of Glory

[20]According to Midrashic tradition, Miriam's Well is the well which travelled with the Israelites through the wilderness and supplied them with water.

[21]Bernard H. Mehlman. "Midrash Petirat Aharon," *Journal of Reform Judaism*, no. 27, Summer (1980), p. 50.

Midrash Petirat Aharon begins by emphasizing the equality between Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. It claims that the three shepherds were decreed to die in the same month. It then quotes the Babylonian Talmud, *Taanit 9a*, "And three good gifts were given to Israel on their account. On the merit of Miriam, the well was given, and on the merit of Aaron, the clouds of honor, and on Moses' account, the manna was given." Each of the gifts is reflective of the individual.

Moses is symbolized by manna because he is the intermediary between God and the people, as the manna itself falls from God to the people. The clouds of glory represent Aaron in his role as High Priest. He deals with the cultic life of the people, and is thus concerned with the realm of God above. Miriam is matched with the symbol of the well, because she is connected to water throughout the Torah and because the well is a biblical symbol of fertility.[22] In the Torah she appears by the waters of the Nile at Moses birth, and the water disappears immediately after her death in Numbers 20:1-2. In the midrash, she is obviously connected with water, and is also connected to fertility. She encourages her parents to conceive children even after Pharoah's edict against the Israelites[23] and is also identified as one of the midwives who disobeyed Pharaoh.[24]

The three gifts are a unit, perhaps even a merrism constituting the entire world - the well beneath the ground is connected to the clouds of glory through the manna. The Midrash thus begins by establishing both the equality of Moses, Miriam, and Aaron, and that their presence amongst the people indicates the natural world's gifts to the people of Israel.[25]

---

[22]Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (U.S.: BasicBooks, 1981), p. 52.
[23]Exodus Rabbah 1:19.
[24]Exodus Rabbah 1:12.
[25]In Sifre Deuteronomy 305, there is another account of Moses', Miriam's, and Aaron' s connections with their gifts: "When Miriam died the well disappeared, but was restored on the merit of Aaron and Moses; when Aaron died, the clouds of glory disappeared, but both [the well and the clouds] were restored on the merit of Moses; when Moses died, all three disappeared and they did not return. At the time Israel was scattered and did not do all the mitzvot...."

Upon the death of Miriam, the water disappears and the people are forced to come to Moses for water. Moses and the people quarrel over the lack of water which results in the people's threat to stone Moses. As a result, Moses runs into the Tent of Meeting, and the text then reads:

> God said to him, "Moses, what are you doing?"
> Moses said before God, "Your children want to stone me. If I had not fled, already I would be stoned."
> God said, "How long will you speak ill of my children. It was not enough that at Horev, you said, '*They are almost ready to stone m*.e'[Ex 17:4].
> Now pass before them and I will see if they stone you or not," as it is said, "God said to Moses, '*Pass before the people*'"[Ex 17:5].

In this scene the Midrash is building tension between Moses and God. The Midrash must ultimately explain the perplexing question of why Moses is punished for hitting the rock. In a parallel scene in Exodus 17:3-7, Moses is commanded by God to hit the rock to bring forth water for the people. But in Numbers 20, Moses also hits the rock to bring forth water, but is punished for not sanctifying God. Jacob Milgrom, in his commentary to Numbers, offers eleven different explanations by commentators for Moses' punishment.[26]

Midrash Petirat Moshe condemns Moses for hitting and not speaking to the rock. The Midrash shows us how Moses will reach this point of frustration by creating a tension between Moses and God, which culminates in Moses hitting the rock. Tension is also created between Moses and the people by showing Moses' increasing frustrations with them. God thus asks above, "How long will you speak ill of my children?" God is siding with the people against Moses. Moses reaches such a level of frustration with Israel that he can no longer be their leader.

Midrash Petirat Moshe may be commenting on the frustrations of leadership, specifically Moses' isolation, which engenders enmity towards the very people he is leading.

---

[26]Milgrom, *Numbers*, pp. 451-452.

2. The Rock

The focus on Moses' mind set continues in the Midrash as he and the people go out and look for the rock God has told them will spout water:

> [Moses] said to them, "I don't know from which rock God wants to give you water."
> Israel responded, "You were our prophet and our shepherd in the desert and now you say you don't know from which rock God wants to give you water?"
> At the same time, Moses and Aaron gathered them around one rock, as it is written, "Moses and Aaron gathered them around one rock"[Nu 20:10], Moses said to himself, "If I say to the rock, 'Bring forth water,' and it doesn't bring forth, I will be embarrassed before the people and they will say to me, 'Moses, where is your wisdom?'"

The Midrash paints Moses as a leader concerned with his own appearance as much as the welfare of the Israelites. It is a strikingly human, and uncomplimentary portrayal of Moses at this juncture. The people goad him into feeling unsure by reminding Moses that he was their prophet and shepherd in the desert and now he cannot find the rock from which God wants to give them water. Moses, the great leader of the Israelites, is profoundly afraid of feeling "embarrassed." In not knowing where the rock was, and then being worried about his failing, the Midrash reinforces Moses' distance from God.

Moses testifies to this break between God and Moses, by saying, "You [Israel] know that the Holy One is capable of performing a miracle for you but He has hidden it from me." After 38 years of being in the wilderness, Moses can no longer recongnize God's miracles, nor can he assume God will act for him in bringing forth the water.

In the climactic scene of the first part of the Midrash, Moses sets his rod upon the rock, but "The rock began to produce water on its own." Then Moses hits the rock, and the rock begins to flow blood. God asks the rock why blood is flowing from it, and the rock responds, "Because Moses hit me." God then chastizes Moses, "Did I tell you to strike the rock? Did I not tell you to speak to it?" Moses responds, "I spoke but water did not come." This is Moses at his lowest point, like a child who is lying to a parent for what he has done.

The Midrash continues:

> God said, "You command Israel, '*In righteousness judge your neighbor*'[Le 19:15], and you will not judge the rock with righteousness? This is the one that raised you in Egypt, as it is written, '*He made him suck honey from the rock*'[Dt 32:13], and this is how you repay it? Moreover, you said to my children, '*Listen you rebels!*'[Nu 20:10] They are not rebels, rather fools. They are fools and you are wise, but you will not enter with the fools to the land, as it is written, '*So you will not take this people*'[Nu 20:12].
> After God spoke thusly to Moses, God said to the rock, 'Turn the blood into water,' as it is written, '*Who turned the rock into a pool of water and a flint into a flowing stream*'[Ps 114:8].

Moses' punishment comes about because of his anger at Israel and thus he breaks his relationship with God. Because he no longer acts as God's prophet, he is just a man and must die with the generation in the wilderness.

This section of Petirat Aharon reaches its end with the dissolution of the relationship between Moses and God. In the poem from *Ha'azinu*, Deuteronomy 32, the rock is a symbol of motherly care, letting the Israelites suck honey as if it were breast-feeding them. God is the father of Israel and the rock is a motherly figure. Moses has hit the rock though and fundamentally broken the connection with his "parents" that nurtured him. Again, the Midrash underscores the idea that Moses is a child, too immature to enter the Promised Land.

Finally, the Midrash says that Moses was not even the one who brought forth water from the rock. It was God, Himself, who changed the blood into water, thus reestablishing order. With that, it is clear that the dissolution is complete. God bringing forth the water is a new beginning of sorts, and Moses has no place in this new world. He must, therefore, die in the wilderness.

Strangely, throughout this whole first section of the Midrash which describes the scene at the rock, Aaron is barely even mentioned. His role in the scene is not elucidated, instead it remains as ambiguous as it is in the Torah's description of Numbers 20. Given the fact that the Midrash spends so much time trying to clarify Moses' sins, it is worth noting its silence when it comes to Aaron.

Perhaps the Midrash is purposely keeping silent about Aaron's guilt at the rock, because the Midrash portrays Aaron as such a pure person. Further, the relationship between Moses and Aaron is so intertwined, and yet dominated by Moses, that it is not surprising the Midrash focusses on Moses' activities, before moving to Aaron.

B. Petirat Aharon - Part II

1. The News of Aaron's Death

The second part of the Midrash leaves the waters of Meribat Kadesh behind, and picks up with the story of Aaron's impending death, and Moses' role in telling him of the death:

> When God decreed that Moses and Aaron will die, he called to Moses and said to him, 'My servant Moses, in all my house you are faithful. It is a difficult thing I have to tell you and it is hard for me to do.'
> Moses said, 'What is this thing?'
> God said, 'That Aaron will be gathered to his people, because he will not come into the land that I gave to the children of Israel because you rebelled against the word of God at the waters of Meribah.'

One of the questions this text raises is why God tells Moses to tell Aaron that he is going to die, instead of telling Aaron directly. In Numbers Rabbah, there is a parable explaining why God tells Aaron at all that he is going to die,[27] but there is no explanation of why Moses needs to be the conveyor of this piece of information, other than Moses' established role as the mediator between God and the people. The Midrash also takes Aaron's rebellion as self-explanatory and never discusses it.

---

[27]Numbers Rabbah 19:17 reads:. Why didn't Aaron die like Miriam that no one knew of her death? Rather, it was said to Moses, "Aaron will be gathered."(Nu 20:24) This is like a king that has 2 financial officers and they did not say a word without his knowledge. One of them had a nice piece of land on the king's, and the king needed it. The king said to him, "Even though he is living there at my permission, I cannot take the land without announcing thus." So God said, "These two old righteous ones, they did not do a thing without my knowledge and now when I went to take them, I can't take them without announcing it to them." Thus, it is said, "And Aaron will be gathered."

Moses is reticent to relay this message from God to Aaron. He admits, "My brother is older than I. How can I tell him,'Go up to the mountain of Hor and there you will die?'" God responds by telling Moses to take Aaron and Eleazer up the mountain and, "Say soft, supporting words, and through them [these words], Aaron will understand the matter." The Midrash has a strong sense of humanity here. God instructs Moses to break the news to his brother softly. However, God also instructs, "And after the three of you are on the mountain, strip Aaron of his clothing, and dress Eleazer, his son, in them, and Aaron will be gathered and die there." This act is much more involved in transferring power than in conveying the human dimensions of the scene. The Midrash will continue to move back and forth between a psychological portrayal of Moses, Aaron, and their relationship, and a stress on the importance of Aaron's death in transferring the status of the priesthood.

The Midrash continues with Moses still reticent to tell Aaron. He only is able to say, "The Holy One gave me a command concerning you." But Moses will not tell him what it is until they are outside the camp:

> When they were outside the camp, Aaron said to him, "Tell me what God said to you."
> Moses said, "Not until we reached the mountain."
> At that moment, Moses said to Israel, "Remain here until we return to you. I, Aaron, and Eleazer will go up the mountain, we will hear, and we will come down.

As in the biblical text, there are echoes of the Akedah in this scene. Moses tells Israel that he is going to ascend the mountain to pray, and that all three will return. It is reminiscent of Abraham telling his servants to wait while he and Isaac will go up to worship, and both will then return.[28] The Midrash uses this Akedah allusion to show how trusting and passive Aaron is at his death.

---

[28]Genesis 22:5. Also, see below, Chapter 8, "A Comparison of Aaron and Moses' Deaths," pp. 97-103, for a more indepth study of Aaron's death in relationship to the Akedah.

The Rock

The focus on Moses' mind set continues in the Midrash as he and the people go out d look for the rock God has told them will spout water:

> [Moses] said to them, "I don't know from which rock God wants to give you water."
> Israel responded, "You were our prophet and our shepherd in the desert and now you say you don't know from which rock God wants to give you water?"
> At the same time, Moses and Aaron gathered them around one rock, as it is written, "Moses and Aaron gathered them around one rock"[Nu 20:10].
> Moses said to himself, "If I say to the rock, 'Bring forth water,' and it doesn't bring forth, I will be embarrassed before the people and they will say to me, 'Moses, where is your wisdom?'"

e Midrash paints Moses as a leader concerned with his own appearance as much as the lfare of the Israelites. It is a strikingly human, and uncomplimentary portrayal of Moses this juncture. The people goad him into feeling unsure by reminding Moses that he was ir prophet and shepherd in the desert and now he cannot find the rock from which God nts to give them water. Moses, the great leader of the Israelites, is profoundly afraid of ling "embarrassed." In not knowing where the rock was, and then being worried about failing, the Midrash reinforces Moses' distance from God.

Moses testifies to this break between God and Moses, by saying, "You [Israel] ow that the Holy One is capable of performing a miracle for you but He has hidden it m me." After 38 years of being in the wilderness, Moses can no longer recongnize d's miracles, nor can he assume God will act for him in bringing forth the water.

In the climactic scene of the first part of the Midrash, Moses sets his rod upon the k, but "The rock began to produce water on its own." Then Moses hits the rock, and rock begins to flow blood. God asks the rock why blood is flowing from it, and the k responds, "Because Moses hit me." God then chastizes Moses, "Did I tell you to ke the rock? Did I not tell you to speak to it?" Moses responds, "I spoke but water did come." This is Moses at his lowest point, like a child who is lying to a parent for what has done.

The Midrash then builds the tension of Moses not being able to tell Aaron directly even further:

> Moses asked to speak with Aaron, but he did not know how to tell him.
> Moses said to him, "Aaron, my brother, has God given you a gift?"
> Aaron said, "Yes."
> Moses said, "What?"
> Aaron said, "God has given me an altar and table with bread."
> Moses said, "Perhaps, all that has been entrusted to you, He now requests that you return it."
> Aaron said, "What?"
> Moses said, "Has a candle been give to you?"
> Aaron said, "Not just one candle was given me, but all of the seven and behold they are burning in the Tent of Meeting." Moses wanted Aaron to feel that his soul was being compared to a candle, as it is written, "*The light of God is the soul of man*"[Pr 20:27]. When Moses saw that Aaron did not understand the thing, he said, "In truth, you will be called pure," as it is written, "And to Levi, God said, '*Your Urim and Tumim is with your pious man.*'"[Dt 33:8].

In citing Deuteronomy 33:8, the midrashist has the full verse in mind which continues, "who was tested at Massah and whom You strove with at Meribah." The prooftext seems to be extolling Aaron's virtue, when, in fact, the scene by the waters is the reason for Aaron's death.

The motif of Moses being unable to tell Aaron that he is going to die reaches its climax after Moses tells Aaron to take his priestly clothes and give them to Eleazer.[29] The pretext for Moses' request is that he would like to enter a cave, and because it might be a burial place, therefore, it would be impure for Aaron to enter dressed in his priestly clothes. The irony is, of course, that the burial place will be Aaron's.

Upon entering the cave, Aaron sees the ministering angels preparing his bier and says to Moses:

> "My brother, how long were you going to continue hiding this from me what God told you? You know that when God spoke with you at the beginning, His words testified to how I felt, "*When he [Aaron] sees you [Moses] he will be glad in his heart*"[Ex 4:14]. Why do you hide from me what God has spoken to you? Even if it is words of death, behold I will accept them happily.

[29]This act symbolizing the transfer of power is given extended treatment in earlier midrashim. See the following section on the "Development of Midrash on Aaron's Death," pp. 33-34.

The prooftext provides a nice symmetry to the relationship between Aaron and Moses, bringing us back to the beginning of their relationship in the Torah. At the end of Aaron's life, we see the roles having changed only slightly. It is still Moses who is unable to speak the necessary words. The contrast between the two is also stark in terms of Aaron's immediate acceptance of God's decree. While Moses fumbled for words, and was anxious about the death, Aaron faces it with equanimity, exactly as Moses hoped he would when he compared his soul to a candle.

Aaron is, in fact, not angry at his fate. Rather, he is angry at Moses' reluctance to have told him about his death, because Aaron could have said goodbye to his mother, his wife, and son had he known before he departed. Moses responds:

> "My brother, don"t you know it has been 40 years since you made the golden calf, and it was decreed that you should die, but I stood in prayer and supplicated before God and saved you from death, as it is said, "*and Aaron angered God*"[Dt 9:20]. Now behold, my death will not be like your death: when you die, I will bury you, and when I will die, I won"t have a brother to bury me. When you die, your sons will inherit your place; when I die, strangers will inherit my honor." These words pacified Aaron, and he went up to the bier, and God accepted his soul.

Moses answers Aaron's complaint with his own complaint about how horrible his death is going to be compared to that of Aaron's. From a modern perspective, Moses is portrayed as terribly selfish, but it is difficult to ascertain the author's intent because Moses' words comfort Aaron. The comfort is due to Aaron experiencing a "good death." The parts of this "good death" are the following: He has lived forty years longer than he might have, so he should be grateful for his extra time; he is buried by family; his sons are going to continue his role; and finally, the death itself is peaceful. Aaron knows he is going to be accepted into the next world, and that the angels are there to take his soul.

These are the things that Moses will not experience. The emphasis on family in Aaron's death appears to be an indictment of Moses for his lack of concern for his family. In contrast, in Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10, Moses is lauded for his purity since he did not have sexual relations with his wife. Here, however, there is almost a polemic against a

kind of stoicism or utter devotion to God which would make one unable to have a family. Part of a "good death" is passing along the future to the next generation. The Rabbis picture the liminal moment of death as one of peace and contentment for Aaron.

C. Petirat Aharon - Denouement

After the death of Aaron, Moses and Eleazer come down the mountain only to encounter an irate Israel wondering where Aaron is. They accuse Moses of killing him, and will not let Moses go until they see him, "dead or alive." This motif appears in many sources.[30] Moses stands in prayer and asks God to show the people Aaron, and God responds by suspending his body in the air, "*and the entire community saw that Aaron expired*"[Nu 20:29]. This motif is based on the Torah's claim that "the entire community saw that Aaron died," when Aaron really died on the mountain.[31] God's showing the people Aaron's body solves a number of problems: "The veneration of Aaron's burial place; the notion that Aaron is still alive or that he has been 'assumed' into heaven' and the denial of the possibility of making a god of Aaron."[32] The theme of Aaron's burial site disappearing appears taken from midrashim on Moses' death, because there is nothing in the Torah that would lead one to believe Aaron's burial site is hidden. The questions of assumption and veneration of burial places will be crucially important when we turn to midrashim on Moses' death, but in Midrash Petirat Moshe these questions seem secondary to the relationships between the people, Aaron, and Moses.

The story emphasizes the people's love for Aaron, and clearly their distrust of Moses. Why does the midrash portray Aaron as so beloved, and Moses as distrusted? There is a well-known midrash which attributes this contrast to Moses' strict sense of

---

[30]See Numbers Rabbah 19:20 and Yalkut Shimoni, Vol. 1. 787.
[31]See Chapter 1 above, "Death Scenes in the Torah," p. 12.
[32]Mehlman, "Petirat Aharon," p. 50.

judgement versus Aaron's peaceful nature.[33] The midrash may be making a comment about appropriate leadership style.

The Rabbi's portrayal of Moses is, after all, quite surprising. He is described in this midrash as self-serving, as having lost necessary faith in God, and as being distrustful. Much of it stems from his calling the people "rebels" in Numbers 20:10. Aaron is presumed innocent of this act, and thus is beloved by the people. The midrash ultimately wants us to be wary of Moses' leadership. It seems to portray Aaron as the populist and Moses as an elitist, and his elitism causes him great anxiety and despair over his own passing. That is the ultimate message: Moses dies without anyone to bury him, because he has isolated himself from everyone, including God. In other midrashim, including, Yalkut Shimoni, Vol. 1, 664 for example, at the precise moment when Moses says he is worried about being alone at death, God intervenes to say that He will take care of Moses. But in our text, the absence of this statement is notable. In Midrash Petirat Aaron, Moses is ultimately separated, even from God.

Midrash Petirat Aharon ends by taking us back to the beginning in a very artful way. The midrash returns to the disappearance of the clouds of glory. Because the clouds of glory have disappeared, the people, for the first time in the wilderness, see the sun and the moon in the firmament, and they want to bow down to them. All the time they had been travelling in the wilderness, the clouds of glory had covered the sun and moon, "When God saw that they wanted to bow down to the sun and moon, He said to them, 'Did I not say to you in my Torah, '*Lest you lift up your eyes to heaven and when you see the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and all the hosts of the heaven, you will be misled to worship them....?*'"[Dt 4:19] The death of Aaron has led to a new beginning. The clouds of glory were there to protect Israel, but now with his passing, that protection is gone.

---

[33] Avot de R. Natan, version A, ch. 12.

In B.T. *Rosh Hashanah* 3a there is a midrash based on Numbers 33:39-40, "And Aharon was 120 years. old when he died on Mt. Hor: And the Cananite king of Arad, who dwelt in the land of the Negev, heard of the coming of the children of Isreal." The midrash connects the verses to say when the clouds of glory lifted, the king could see Israel and attack. The Talmud follows by saying that in Nu 20:29 "And all the congregation *saw*..." should be read, "And all the congregation *was afraid*...." because of the danger they were now in from the king of Arad.

It is noteworthy that in Petirat Aharon, the disappearance of the clouds of glory does not cause phsycial fear, rather theological crisis. Perhaps this fits in more with the themes of Petirat Aharon. Midrash Petirat Aharon sees in various guises humanity's failure to worship God properly. First Moses' failure at the waters of Meribat Kadesh, and then the people's failure to believe Moses. Only Aaron's character remains unscathed as a believer. The end of Petirat Aharon is thus one of difficulty, as it ends with the people trying to figure out how to serve God without their beloved High Priest.

Chapter III. The Development of Midrashim on Aaron's Death

In comparison to midrashim on Moses' death, early midrashic material on Aaron's death is scant and the themes developed are very focused around a comparison of the two brothers. The midrash dwells on the people's intensive mourning for Aaron and juxtaposes this with the people's distrust of Moses. Where Aaron accepts the news of his death with equanimity, Moses cannot bring himself to even tell his brother of his fate. The midrash depicts Aaron as deeply connected to the people, and his death means emotional and even physical difficulties for them.

1. Tannaitic Sources

Two tannaitic midrashim describe Aaron's death: Sifre Zuta, Hukkat 19:21-16, and Sifre Deuteronomy 339 in a slightly different form. The following is from Sifre Zuta:

> "*And he stripped Aaron of his clothes, and put them on Eliezer*" [Nu 20:28], one had 2 [garments], one had 3 [garments]. He [Moses] said to him [Aaron], "Enter the cave." And he entered it. "Straighten your hand," and he straightened it. "Close your mouth" and he closed it. "Close your eyes," and he closed them. At that moment, Moses said, "Happy is the one who dies in this way." Therefore, it is said, "When Aaron, your brother, dies, it will be a death you desire."

In Petirat Moshe there is a very similar description of Moses' death, but only the ministering angels were responsible for telling Moses what to do. From this piece of midrash, the idea develops which is made explicit in Yalkut Shimoni,[34] that God and the ministering angels act for Moses at his death, as Moses does for Aaron at his death.

This scene depicts a very jealous Moses, which begs the question of what about Aaron's death is Moses jealous? In Petirat Aharon, Moses says he wants a death like Aaron's because Aaron does not die alone, but here we can only guess that Moses wants to be gently led to his death, the way Aaron is led by him.

[34]Yalkut Shimoni, vol.1, 664

Another early midrash concerning Aaron's death is found in Avot de Rabbi Natan, version B, 25, and it, too, contains almost an exact parallel to the comment above. It is also concerned with why the biblical text says *B'nai Yisrael* mourned for Moses,[35] but *kol ha-'edah*, the entire congregation, mourned for Aaron.[36] The midrash understands this to mean that more people mourned for Aaron then for Moses, and it provides four different reasons why this was the case. First, Moses was a judge and thus had to rule impartially, while Aaron was a maker of peace and as a result was more beloved. The second reason is a bit ambiguous. When the people saw Eleazer in Aaron's clothes, they all mourned. Third, Moses and Eleazer came down from the mountain weeping, thus inspiring everyone to mourn. Fourth, a comment found in B.T. *Rosh Hashanah* 3a, stresses that when the clouds of glory disappeared the people were afraid of being attacked. They mourned more because they realized how dependent they were on Aaron and their fear added to their mourning.[37]

The emphasis on Moses being less mourned than Aaron reinforces a theme developed in Petirat Aharon regarding their leadership. Especially in the first explanation given, that Moses was forced to be the judge, while Aaron could make peace, the reader learns that Moses' leadership isolated him from people. His role as the authority meant that he was forced to make judgements among people. Further, whereas Aaron had others to bury him, and the whole congregation saw him die, Moses' death was only seen by God. Moses' fate of being a prophet of God ultimately isolated him, compared to his brother who was beloved by the people, and on who's behalf the community was granted the clouds of glory.

In Sifre Deuteronomy 305 and Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 34:5, there are references to Aaron not really dying. Similar to the midrashim about Moses, God has

---

[35]Deutoronomy 34:8.
[36]Numbers 20:29.
[37]See a discussion above in Chapter 2, on "Midrash Petirat Aharon," p. 27, about the removal of the clouds of glory.

hidden him, *genazo*, in the world-to-come. In Sifre Deuteronomy, Moses responds to Israel when they ask where Aaron is, "God has hidden him in the world-to-come." This expression implies that Aaron may not have really died, but was taken by God. This idea is not developed in midrash on Aaron's death, as it is for Moses' death. It does show an equality between the brothers in that their ultimate fates were the same.

2. The Talmud

The Talmud contains few references to the moment of Aaron dying. As already mentioned, in B.T. *Taanit* 9a the clouds of glory are given to Israel on Aaron's behalf, and in *Rosh Hashanah* 3a, the king of Arad attacks them upon Aaron's death. *Baba Batra* 17a also has the famous statement, "Six are not under the control of the angel of death: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and Miriam..... For Moses, Aaron, and Miriam it says, 'By the mouth of God.'"[38] The phrase, "*'al pi Adonai*" could be read, "at the command of," but it is clear that the Rabbis mean it physically. Michael Fishbane writes, "Most cleverly, the (anonymous) sages midrashically construe the standard idiom *'al pi*, 'at the command of,' in an utterly literal way in order to support the idea of death 'by the mouth' of God. The mysterious death of these persons by divine dictate (in Scripture), is thus, anthropomorphically transfigured in this midrash."[39]

Fishbane supports this idea by what follows in the Talmud. An objection is raised to the statement that Miriam died *'al pi adonai'* - by the kiss of God, because the Torah does not say it. But Rabbi Eleazer rebuts, "Miriam also died by a kiss, as we learn from the occurrence of the word, 'there'[40] [both with regard to her death] and that of Moses. And why is it not said [more directly] of her that [she died] 'by the mouth of God?'

---

[38]Moses dies by the mouth of God in Deuteronomy 34:5; and Aaron dies by the mouth of God in Nu. 33:38.
[39]Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss*, pp. 17-18.
[40]Numbers 20:1.

Because such an expression would be disrespectful [to her, as a pious woman]."[41] The idea that the text saying *'al pi adonai* about Miriam would be disrespectful, supports a very anthropomorphic reading of the expression, because only if it were anthropomorphic would it be disrespectful. A tradition in Song of Songs Rabbah I.2.16 extends death by the kiss of God to include all the righteous.

Fishbane does not address why the Rabbis anthropomorphize the expression and why they would introduce this sexual element to Miriam's death. Perhaps death by the actual mouth of God represents a more intimate passing which is befitting the "three shepherds."

3. Numbers Rabbah, Yalkut Shimoni

The real expansion of midrash on Aaron's death takes place in Numbers Rabbah. Numbers Rabbah 19:9 responds directly to the question which all of Petirat Aharon ignores: What was Aaron's sin?:

> *"God said to Moses, 'Because you did not believe in me'"*[Nu 20:12]. Why was Aaron punished? To what can this be compared? To a creditor who comes to take the grains of one who owes him money, and he took his and his neighbors. Said the one who owed, "If I am the one who owes, what is the sin of my poor neighbor?" So Moses said before God, "Master of the Universe, I got angry, what was Aaron's sin?" So it is written in praise of Aaron, "*And of Levi, he said, 'Let your Urim and your Tumim be with your pious one*"[Dt. 33:8].

Moses exonerates Aaron from any wrongdoing at the waters of Meribah. The Midrash equates Aaron with an innocent person who gets caught up in the sin of his neighbor.

The Midrash continues on this theme in 19:10:

> Vanity was inflicted upon the land, that there are righteous to whom it happens according to the wicked"[Ec 8:14]. When God cursed the snake, "Cursed are you"[Gn 3:14], the snake was not allowed to plead at all. The snake might have said, "You said to Adam, 'Don't eat' and I said to him, 'Eat', these are the words of the teacher and the student, the words of one

[41] Fishbane's translation, *The Kiss*, p. 18.

who hearkens, why now do you curse me? But he was not allowed to plead at all. And Aaron could have said to God, "I have not transgressed your words, why should I die?"

The Ecclesiastes quote suggests the unfairness that the righteous often suffer the same fate as the wicked. And the fate of the snake who is not allowed to plead is likened to Aaron to reinforce the notion that the righteous are punished with the wicked. The midrash's attempt to claim Aaron's innocence is not really picked up in Petirat Aharon. Petirat Moshe also has the same inclination not to discuss at all why Moses is being punished with death. But in Numbers Rabbah, we get a number of explanations for Moses' punishment as well as Aaron's. The historical reasons why the Petirot do not address the justifications for their punishments, while Numbers Rabbah is centrally concerned with it, remain unclear.

Numbers Rabbah does not have an account of Aaron's actual death except in brief, "'Take Aaron and strip him'[Nu 20:25]. God said to him, 'You can comfort him that he will pass his crown to his son, [something] you will not be able to do to your sons.'"[42] This brief statement contrasts Moses and Aaron sharply. God heightens Moses' own feelings of isolation by pointing out how Aaron has children to carry on his work, while Moses does not.

Numbers Rabbah continues in 19:20 with a different account of the people accusing Moses and Eleazer of doing something to Aaron:

> "*And all the community saw that Aaron expired*"[Nu 20:29]. When Moses and Eleazer went down from the mountain, all the community gathered around them, and they said to them, "How is Aaron?"
> They replied, "Dead"
> The people asked, "How was the angel of death able to hurt him? A man stood up to the angel of death and stopped him, saying, "*And he stood between the dead and the living*"[Nu 17:13]: If you bring him, good, if not, we will stone you."
> At the same time, Moses stood in prayer and said to God, "Remove our suspicion."
> Immediately, God opened the cave and showed [Aaron] to them, as it is said, "The whole congregation saw that Aaron expired."

[42]Numbers Rabbah 19:19.

The structure of this theme is the same as in Petirat Aharon, the difference is only in the reason for the people's disbelief of Moses and Eleazer. The people claim that Aaron had the power to stop the angel of death, thus Moses and Eleazer must be lying. In Numbers 17:10-13, God says he is going consume the people, but Moses tells Aaron to take a fire pan from the altar:

> And take it quickly to the congregation, and make atonement for them, for wrath is gone out from God; the plague has begun. Aaron took it as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the community, and, behold, the plague had begun, and he put on the incense, and made atonement for the people; and he stood between life and death, and he stopped the plague.

In Pesikta Rabbati, Pisqa 20, this scene is used as a prooftext to show that Moses was taught by the angel of death to preserve his life. This seems to be the only place where this power is mentioned in connection with Aaron. The prooftext is most ironic because Moses is the one who tells Aaron what to do to save the people, but it is Aaron who gets the credit and affection for saving them.

In Yalkut Shimoni, three different versions of Aaron's death are given. The first is a repetition of the tradition found in Sifre Zuta.[43] The second and third version are both thematically linked to Petirat Aharon, but develop the themes of Moses' fear of telling Aaron he was going to die, and the changing of the garments in a different manner. The second version, found in volume 1, 664, is exceedingly human in its depiction of Moses' fear:

> R. Huna in the name of R. Tanhum Bar Hiyya said, "What did Moses do? He woke up early in the morning, went out to Aaron and began to call, 'Aaron, my brother, come out. Aaron said, "Why did you wake up early and come here today?"
> Moses said, "I was up all night with a difficult piece of Torah, so I woke up early and brought it to you."
> Aaron said, "What is it?
> Moses said, "I don't know, only that it is in Bereshit."
> "Bring it and we will read it."
> He brought Bereshit and they read each *parashah* and in each one they said what God created is good. When they arrived at the creation of man, Moses said, "What can we say about man, that he brought death into the world?"

[43] See above, p. 29.

Aaron said, "My brother, do not say this thing. Who are we not to receive the decree of God? He created Adam and Eve and they merited 13 canopies, as it is said, 'You were in Eden, the garden of God'(Ez 28:13), and ate food from the trees, as it is said, "You are dust"(Gn 3:19).
Moses said to him after all his praise, "The time of your death has arrived."

In a certain sense, Moses has manipulated Aaron to accept his death. But the death of Aaron is here put in the perspective of Adam, and the way of all human beings is to die. As we saw in Midrash Petirat Aharon, Aaron essentially affirms the positive nature of existence by refusing to say, "human beings who brought death into the world were the downfall of the created world." Moses, on the other hand, who is fearful of telling Aaron of his death, denigrates human beings. Again, we see the same theme of Moses' isolation from human beings, while Aaron embraces God's plan for them.

Aaron is taken by the kiss of the Shekhina, as in *Baba Batra* 17a, and then when the people see just Moses and Eleazer, this prompts another version of their accusation against Moses and Eleazer. In this version, the people are divided in three groups, "One group said that Moses killed him because of jealousy; one group said that Eleazer killed him because he wanted to inherit the High Priesthood; and one group said it was the way of heaven." This is the only version of the story where there is a split between Israel over whether Moses and Eleazer are murderers.

Again, the level of distrust the people have towards Moses is expressed to an astonishing degree: they run to call him a murderer! There is also no hesitation by the Rabbis to portray this deep level of mistrust between Moses and the people. This could be another comment about leadership. They understand that leadership of Moses' type breeds discontent and challenge. In Yalkut Shimoni, Vol. I, 787, there is another version of the story, where the midrash says that, "Satan went amongst them and stirred up all Israel against Moses and Eleazer. Israel grabbed them and said, 'Where is he?'" At least in this version, it is acknowledged that Satan is responsible, though the Rabbis might be speaking metaphorically, where Satan represents the *yezer ha-ra* (the evil inclination). Either way, it makes clear that it is not the natural reaction of the people to accuse Moses of murder.

Yalkut Shimoni, Vol. 1, 787 also presents three different versions of Aaron's clothes being transferred to Eleazer. Representing the rabbinic preoccupation with modesty, much attention is paid to actually how the undressing was done. In Petirat Aharon the Rabbis asks, "Is it possible to say that when Aaron was stripped of his clothes, he died naked and was buried naked?" In the three Yalkut versions, as Aaron is undressing, he is either covered by ministering angels, the mountain, or appropriately for Aaron, the clouds of glory. The transfer of clothes is representative of the shift of power. Aaron's being covered by these other things is his slow transition into God's presence. Moses asks Aaron what the death of the righteous is, and Aaron replies, "I am unable to tell you, only that I wish I had come sooner to the place I am now." Aaron's final utterance is of the positive nature of death. Until his final moment, he accepts God's will.

This theme is ultimately the one which comes through from surveying the scope of midrash surrounding Aaron's death: he accepts his fate with certainty and few words. Ironic, given that Aaron begins his biblical "career' as the spokesperson for Moses who subsequently builds the golden calf, the midrash paints him as the soft-spoken beloved follower of God.

Chapter IV: Midrash Petirat Moshe - The Death of Moses

1. Introduction

Midrash Petirat Moshe represents the most extensive narrative treatment of Moses' death. The premise of the Midrash is that Moses simply refuses to go quietly. The Midrash begins with Moses pleading for God not to take his life. After God dispatches the Angel of Death (a.k.a Samael), Moses fights with the Angel, refusing to give up his soul. The Angel of Death has a prominent place in this midrash. He is both an evil figure and a necessary one. He goes to take Moses' soul "wrapped in cruelty," yet, he is a messenger of God's words. With the introduction of the Angel of Death, the Midrash explores some profound theological questions as to God's involvement with death.

The Midrash also explores the question of whether Moses actually dies or is assumed to heaven. There are hints in the Midrash that both happened. As in the Torah, the ambiguity over his ultimate fate feels purposeful.

The Midrash has two parts: one theological, the other psychological. Theologically, the midrash expands upon the biblical tension of Moses' death versus his possible assumption to heaven, and his divinity versus his humanness. Psychologically, the midrash also explores Moses' character. Moses is portrayed with a surprising degree of humanness. He is fearful of death, and he is disappointed that his life's dream of entering the Promised Land is ultimately unrequited. The combination of the psychological and the theological fuse to create a rich account of Moses' ultimate fate.

2. Words and Death

Where Midrash Petirat Aharon is marked by Aaron's quiet acceptance, Petirat Moshe begins with words of anxiety, "Moses said to God, 'With words I have praised you before the sixty myriads, and I said to them, "*Behold, to Adonai your God, the heavens and the heaven of heavens belong....*"[Dt 10:14] and now, with words you decree upon me death?'" The motif of words emerges from the biblical text itself. Moses' initial response in Midian to God's plan that he go before Pharoah, is that he is of uncircumcised lips and

can not speak well. He is also punished for not speaking to the rock, and he ironically dies "according to the word of God."[44] God responds to Moses that he must die in this world so he can live again in the world-to-come. Moses pleads with God, saying that he does not need to enter into the land. He could be like a ram or mountain deer. God responds, "Enough! Don't add another word in these matters." At which point Moses again pleads and God says, "Did I not tell you, do not add another word to me." The fact that Moses adds more and more words is again ironic, given his statement in Exodus 4:10, "*I am not a man of words.*"

In Moses' first question, "Now with words you decree me to death?" we get a hint that the decree of death is unjust. However, this is the only sense that we have that Moses is questioning the justice of the decree. The midrash, in fact, does not address the question of what Moses' sin was at all, or why it is decreed that he die. It takes the matter as a given, thus raising other questions of why the midrash is silent on this matter, when, as we will see, other midrashim on Moses' death are interested in these questions.[45]

The midrash begins with Moses' fierce belief that living as an animal is preferable to God's promise of life in the Garden of Eden. Moses faces his death with utter fear; all his words are the sounds of desperation. The midrash first sees Moses as a very vulnerable human.

Moses then goes to different elements of creation to ask them to intervene on his behalf with God. This motif will return at the end when the angel of death goes to the different elements of creation in search of Moses. The angel of death searching for Moses is found in early midrashic texts like Sifre Deuteronomy, so this section grows out of an earlier tradition. Moses goes to the land, the heavens, the stars and the moon, Mt. Sinai, the rivers, and finally the objects of creation. All of these objects turn Moses down, citing

---

[44]Moses tells God he is of uncircumcised lips in Exodus 4:10-12; He is punished for not speaking to the rock in Numbers 20:7-13; and he dies by God's word in Deuteronomy 34:5.
[45]See Chapter 7, "Why did Moses and Aaron Die?" pp. 88-97.

their own lack of power. The personification of these natural objects are used to extend the sense of God's dominion. There is no element of nature, including the heavens themselves, which God does not have control and judgement over.

Moses continues his search for help by going to Joshua. Joshua rises to pray , but then, "Samael came and closed his mouth. He said to him, "Why are you rejecting the word of God, as it is written, 'The rock! His work is perfect, all his ways are just'"[Dt 32:4]. Samael is introduced abruptly and with a great deal of irony. He appeals to Joshua to stop praying to God for Moses, because, in doing so, he is really disobeying God. The prooftext which Samael cites is one ironically which Moses used previously as a plea to persuade God to change his decree.

The inclusion of Samael brings up a basic theme of Petirat Moshe. Samael is arguing here for strict justice. He wants God to hold to his own decrees. Moses is praying for mercy. The tension between God's justice and mercy will be central to the entire midrash.

Moses then goes to Eleazer and Caleb, and Samael thwarts their prayers as well. Finally, Moses goes to the people who immediately enter into the Tent of Meeting to pray for Moses. The relationship between Moses and the people is vastly different here than in Petirat Aharon or any of the midrash where the people are quick to accuse Moses of murdering Aaron. When the people began to pray:

> At the same time, the ministering angels came down and seized the people's words so that their prayers would not rise to God. And two great angels were appointed over them, one named Sikon and the other named Lahash, and Lahash returned what the angels seized. Immediately, Samael came down and imprisoned him with chains of fire and brought him up to God. He struck him seventy times with lashes of fire, and removed him from the realm of God. When Israel saw this, they said, "Teacher, the ministering angels will not allow us to pray for you."

Words are again the theme of this intriguing section of Petirat Moshe. The words of prayer are embodied, physically ascending to God's throne. This raises a number of questions. Why would the ministering angels seize the prayers? There is a similar scene in

Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10, in which we read, "[God] proclaimed in all the gates of the firmament, in all the courts, not to receive the prayer of Moses, and not to bring it to God because the decree of justice was sealed....[and] the voice of the prayer of Moses is like a sword that cuts and slices and doesn't delay."

God's own ambivalence in decreeing the death of Moses is underscored here. God's justice is in conflict with God's mercy. Mercy can temper justice through the power of words. The midrash begins with God decreeing death literally "with words," so, too, words have the power to temper this decree. Moses' words are seen as especially powerful, they have the power to cut and slice. This embodiment of words is the concretization of the abstract. Similarly, the ministering angels are used to represent different aspects of the Godhead. Laḥash, who only appears in Midrash Petirat Moshe, represents mercy, and the part of the Godhead that can be swayed. Samael and the other angels represent strict justice. Laḥash's being lashed and banished from the heavenly court represents the mercy God may have had for Moses' plea being banished.

3. Samael Versus Moses

The midrash continues with God telling the angels to go and take Moses' soul. Each of the angels whom God asks is unable. Gabriel responds to God, "Master of the Universe, how will I be able to witness the death and retrieve the soul of one who is equal to 60 myriads?" God then turns to Samael and instructs him to bring back Moses' soul:

> Immediately, the Evil One rejoiced greatly and dressed in anger and rage, he bound his sword and wrapped it in cruelty. He went to Moses, and saw Moses writing the Tetragramaton with the light shining from it like the sun, and Moses was like the angel of the God of hosts.

The midrash presents a stark contrast between Samael and Moses. Samael is wrapped in cruelty and anger holding a sword, while Moses is pictured as pure light, armed with a writing quill to write the Tetragramaton. The image is light versus dark, good versus evil, but it is not a cosmic battle because both forces are calling upon God's will. Samael, the

archetype of evil, is present to do God's bidding. Theologically, the midrash is showing that nothing, not even death itself, exists outside of God's domain. The midrash is also playing out the tension surrounding God's responsibility for Moses' death. By sending Samael to do the job, God is ultimately responsible for the death, but is not immediately responsible for taking Moses.

When Moses sees Samael standing by him, Moses begins to grab and shake Samael:

> [Samael] said, 'Why do you shake me angrily teacher? Give me your soul.'
> Moses said to him, 'Who gave you power?'
> Samael said, 'By the authority of the One that sent me, and He is the King of Kings who created all creatures.'
> Moses said to him, 'God forbid that you are one of His creations and I will give you my soul.'
> Samael said, 'Behold, the souls of all the people of the world are transmitted to my hand since the six days of creation.'

There are three references to Creation in this exchange, and the subtle argument taking place between Moses and the Angel of Death is whether death is part of Creation and thus part of God's domain. The Angel of Death insists that death is part of the natural fabric of the world, since, from the very beginning of time, all people have died. It is also important to note that the question of sin and death is also subtly being argued. Contrary to midrashim which view death as a result of sin,[46] the Angel of Death's argument removes death from sin, because death is an inevitability.

Moses, therefore, moves on to another argument to try to avoid the Angel of Death taking his soul. Because death happens to all human beings, Moses argues to Samael that he is not a normal person, but rather he is an almost-divine being: "Am I not more important than the children of this world? I have a portion of God's truth, more than you and more than all others in the world." The Midrash is balancing the tension between Moses being a unique, divine being, and Moses being just a human being. The midrash

[46]See Sifrei Deuteronomy 137 for one example. R. Shimon b. Eleazer says that even Moses and Aaron, like all human beings, die because of their sins.

spends a good deal of time on Moses' claims of divinity, perhaps to underscore the notion that he was not an ordinary human.

Moses tries to prove his divinity by going through all of his accomplishments, which appear to be two lists tied together. The first list includes: his being born already circumcised,[47] decreeing to Pharoah 10 plagues, taking the children of Israel from the midst of Egypt, parting the sea, drowning the Egyptians in it, turning bitter waters sweet, speaking with God face-to-face, and, receiving the Torah. Except for his being born circumcised, this list conforms to what is the plain meaning of the Torah. Many of those things which Moses takes credit for, are things which God has really done through Moses. There is a tension in the Torah itself about whether these things were done by God or Moses. One example is the splitting of the Red Sea, in which it is stated, "And Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and God caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night"[Ex 14:21]. The first list thus subtly creates a certain ambiguity as to whether Moses was anything more than a human being.

The second list, however, begins again at Moses' birth but unlike the first list, it is made up from primarily aggadic traditions. Moses says he walked and talked at 3 days,[48] sucked alcohol and not milk from his mother,[49] understanding was given to him at 3 months;[50] he prophesied that he would receive Torah and overthrow Pharoah;[51] he took out the sixty myriads from Egypt; he smote the princes of Egypt; he divided the Red Sea in 12 paths;[52] hewed the tablets of stone with the 10 commandments; lived under the throne of glory without eating for 40 days and nights, on three occasions; he was covered

---

[47] B.T. *Sotah* 12a, Exodus Rabbah 1:20, and Avot de Rabbi Nathan, Version A, ch. 2. His being born without foreskin is adduced from his mother's "seeing that he was a goodly son" [Ex 2:2], and also from the Phaorah's daughter recognizing him as an Israelite [Ex 2:6].
[48] B.T. *Sotah* 12b; Exodus Rabbah 1:24.
[49] B.T. *Sotah* 12b; Exodus Rabbah 1:25.
[50] B.T. *Sotah* 12a; Exodus Rabbah 1:20.
[51] Exodus Rabbah 1:26.
[52] Mechilta de R. Ishmael, *Va-Yehi* 4.

by the wings of the Shekhinah and revealed secrets to man; received the Torah; and wrote the 613 commandments.

Between the two different lists, Moses says he made war with Sihon and Og, two giants born at the time of the flood, and the flood only came up to their ankles. He also caused the sun and moon to stand still in the battle with them, before killing them with his staff.[53]

The second list was probably added to bolster the sense of Moses as a divine being. To reinforce this point, the Angel of Death goes back to God and says he cannot take Moses' soul: "Because he is like the angels of your great chariot, and lightning, thunder, and fire come from his mouth, his words are like those of the seraphim...and the light shining from his face is like the light shining from your Holy Presence, please don't send me to him...." It is ironic that Samael, who talks to God directly, is afraid of Moses' reflecting too much of God's presence. It again underscores the tension within the Godhead. Samael, representative of strict justice, cannot overcome Moses and his plea for mercy.

The midrash then reaches perhaps its climactic moment. God forces the Angel of Death to collect Moses' soul, so Samael goes down with his sword ready to kill. But Moses takes the rod with God's ineffable name upon it, and blinds the Angel of Death, almost killing him. The act of blinding the Angel of Death has symbolic significance because the Angel of Death is described in the Talmud as "full of eyes."[54] Thus, the blinding of the Angel of Death signifies Moses' victory over him.[55]

The scene continues, "At that moment, the *bat kol* came down and said, 'Don't kill him; people need him.'" The *bat kol* provides an answer to Moses' desire to overcome the Angel of Death. The midrash has already established that since man was created on the

---

[53]B.T. *Berakhot* 54b.
[54]B.T. *Avodah Zarah* 20b.
[55]Rella Kushelevsky, *Moses & The Angel of Death* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 183.

sixth day, the Angel of Death has collected people's souls. People thus need death because it is part of God's plan. The midrash does not address why it is God's plan, although God says initially that Moses needs to die so he can enter the Garden of Eden.

A similar story occurs in B.T. *Ketubot* 77b of R. Joshua b. Levi tricking the Angel of Death into giving him his sword. R. Joshua then jumps over the wall guarding the Garden of Eden, and refuses to give back the sword, saying it would be better if the Angel of Death didn't kill people anymore. Finally, a *bat kol* tells Joshua to return the sword because death is part of the nature of the world. This expresses a similar idea that death has a role in this world, which humans, including Moses, cannot change.

Moses then pleads with God not to be given over to the Angel of Death. God responds:

> 'Don't be afraid, I myself will take care of you and bury you.'
> Immediately, Moses rose to pray and prostrated himself in supplication,
> 'Master of the Universe, with mercy you created your world, and with mercy, you run the world. Deal with me in mercy.' A *bat kol* went out and said, 'Moses, Moses, don't be afraid, your righteousness goes before you, and the honor of God will be gathered to you.'

The midrash's juxtaposition of justice and mercy reaches its conclusion here. Moses makes a final plea for mercy, to which God responds. Mercy cannot overcome the decree of death, but mercy is ultimately defined as God taking Moses' soul with a kiss. A compassionate death is thus the resolution of the mercy/justice dialectic. This resolution of the different aspects of the Godhead is also attested to by God directly participating in the burial and the taking of Moses' soul. Moses is surrounded by the ministering angels who instruct him to bring together one body part after the next until God takes his soul with a kiss.

Moses' psychological state changes throughout the course of the midrash. In the beginning, Moses is angry and fearful, pleading that he be allowed to live even as an animal. He, then, moves to denying that death could reach him, by pointing out how he is divine. With the climactic moment of God telling Moses that people need the Angel of

Death, Moses comes to understand that death is a part of the world he cannot overcome. Finally, with the *bat kol*'s plea for Moses not to be afraid, we assume he has accepted his fate. The psychological aspect of the text humanizes his character. The reader is able to peer through the character of Moses to see the Rabbis' own understanding of how people function with the knowledge of their own deaths.

4. Death and Genizah

The midrash makes a distinction between dying by the hand of the Angel of Death and being taken by the kiss of God. This raises the question of what the difference is between these two things? Is Moses' soul being taken by God's kiss just a form of death differing only in how Moses dies, or does it connote something different from death? Kushelevsky defines the central message of the midrashim on Moses' death as the, "tension between perceiving Moses' departure from the world in terms of **Death** and perceiving it in terms of **Genizah**"[author's emphasis].[56] She defines *genizah* in the following manner:

> it means the concealment and preservation of Moses on high. In contrast to death and burial, which are associated with placing the body in the ground, *Genizah* connotes eternal life on high, in proximity to, and under the protection of God, Himself. By definition, the elusive term *Genizah* also suggests invisibility - a hidden, enigmatic existence outside this world, which is indiscernible to mortals and far beyond the grasp of human reason.[57]

Kushelevsky places "death" and "*genizah*" as two poles of a spectrum, and claims that the midrashim on Moses' death move between the two poles. Where "*genizah*" is prominent, "Moses' last moments are marked by his mysterious disappearance. Conversely, the versions that gravitate toward death describe the burial of Moses by God and His angels."[58]

---

[56]Ibid, p. xix.
[57]Ibid.
[58]Ibid.

Kushlevesky's spectrum is very helpful in categorizing the varied midrashim which this study will look at. When applying her spectrum to our midrash, we see that it appears to be close to the "death" pole. The Midrash describes Moses' burial by God and the ministering angels. However, after God takes Moses' soul with a kiss, and all the elements of Creation mourn for Moses, the denouement of the midrash describes how the Angel of Death goes looking for Moses. This is one of the earliest motifs associated with the death of Moses, appearing in Sifrei Deuteronomy 305, but its use here in Midrash Petirat Moshe underscores the *genizah* aspect of his death.

The denouement begins, "Until now, the Angel of Death did not know that Moses had died...He went to the land and said, 'Have you seen the son of Amram?'" The Angel of Death then goes to see if the following have seen Moses: the Sea, Gehinom, Sheol, Avedon [personfications of death in Job 28],[59] the miry clay,[60] and, the children of Korach. These are all places that are in the ground or under the ground, some having a negative connotation to them, like the children of Korach. The Angel of Death then goes to the Garden of Eden, where, according to the midrash's own narrative, God tells Moses that God is going to take him. However, when the Angel of Death gets there:

> When the angels appointed over the Garden of Eden saw him, they pushed him, saying, 'Don't enter the Garden of Eden, as it is said, "This is the gate of God, only the righteous may enter"'[Ps 118:18]. What did he do? He spread his wings above the doors, the span of four thousand handsbreadth and fell inside the Garden of Eden.

The scene is reminiscent of the story of R. Joshua b. Levi in B.T. *Ketubot* 77b, only it is inverted. Here, the Angel of Death is the one who must jump over the gate to the Garden of Eden. Moses is not there, however, and the Angel of Death continues his search

---

[59]For further discussion of this scene, see chapter VI, "The Use of Biblical Quotations," pp. 80- 85, where the use of prooftexts from Job 28 is examined in-depth.
[60]It is described in Ps 40:3, "He brought me up out of the gruesome pit, out of the miry clay [*Teyt Ha-yaven*], and set my foot upon the rock, and established my footsteps."

approaching the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge, the mountains, the wildernesses, Mt. Sinai, the animals and beasts, the angel Dumah,[61] and, finally he goes to the people.

The Angel of Death asks the people if they have seen Moses, and they respond, "If you mean Moses, the human, he is no more, rather like the ministering angels he rises to the heavens....and the Holy One gathered him to the place of God's holiness." It is ironic that the people are the ones who know where Moses went, since the biblical text is so clear that no one knows where Moses is buried. But the people say very clearly he is no longer human; the tension between his divinity and his humanness has been dissolved. Upon his death, his divinity takes prominence and he is with God. The midrash, thus, has two final stages for Moses. Initially, Moses dies a special death, being buried by the angels and God. Subsequently, with the search for him by the Angel of Death, Moses himself is described as angelic. It appears therefore that Moses' death has elements of both of Kushelevsky's poles.

The ending of this midrash is unique, in that it contains both a scene of Moses being buried, and the clear description of his being taken to God. Its uniqueness is supported by a survey of themes found in other midrashim. In all the other midrashim that include the theme of the Angel of Death searching for Moses,[62] no other also include a significant description of Moses' death as does Midrash Petirat Moshe. And in midrashim that do describe the death,[63] none include the motif of Samael searching for Moses. The midrash thus significantly reflects a certain synthesis of the idea that Moses was assumed, and Moses was buried, or in Kushelevsky's terms, a synthesis between death and *genizah*.

---

[61]Dumah is the angel in charge of souls in Gehinom. He is mentioned in a midrash that states that at twilight, he would let the souls in his care go to eat fruit and drink water. This statement evolved into the folk superstition that on the twilight of the Sabbath, whoever drinks water robs from the dead. See Joshua Trachtenbeg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (New York: Athenium, 1939), p. 66, in this regard.

[62]These include: Sifre Deutoronomy 305, Midrash Tanaiim on Dt 34:5, and Avot de R. Natan, Version A, ch. 12.

[63]These include: Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10, Avot De R. Natan, Version B, ch. 25, Sifre Deuteronomy 357, Sifre to Numbers 106, and B.T. *Sotah* 13b.

Kushelevsky, though, admits that her poles of "*genizah*" and "death" do not apply very neatly, because the descriptions of Moses' death in all of the midrashim are ambiguous:

> These descriptions of Moses' departure from the world are elusive, concealing twice as much as they reveal.... The texts insist that God Himself attended to Moses' burial. Yet, by definition, isn't a burial by God a *Genizah*? Thus, the opposite poles in the description of Moses' death do not amount to a contradiction in terms, but rather coexist simultaneously, paradoxically complementing each other.[64]

It is this paradox which Kushelevsky says can only be seen by exploring the full range of midrash on Moses' death. Only in the broader picture of how the midrash developed can the choices made by the particular redactors make sense.

[64]Kushelevsky, *Moses*, p. xx.

Chapter V: The Development of Midrashim on Moses' Death

A. Hellenistic Sources

The earliest sources for an account of Moses' death are found in two sources from the Hellenistic period: *De Vita Mosis* by Philo and the *Antiquities of the Jews* by Josephus. The apocryphal book *The Assumption of Moses* is also part of this early category of sources. Unlike Midrash Petirat Moshe, these sources are concerned with portraying Moses in an ideal a manner as possible.

1. Philo[65]

Philo's description of Moses' death comes in his biography of Moses, *De Vita Moses*, written for a gentile audience, which depicts Moses as the ideal king, law-giver, priest, prophet, and sage.[66] His account of Moses' death is infused with Greek notions of the soul:

> The time came when he [Moses] had to make his pilgrimage from earth to heaven, and leave this mortal life for immortality, summoned thither by the Father Who resolved his twofold nature of soul and body into a single unity, transforming his whole being into mind, pure as the sunlight.[67]

In Philo's thought, the soul has two portions. The higher portion is equated with reason, linking the individual to the world of Intellect, while the lower portion of the soul is linked to the physical world through the body. Hans Lewy, in his introduction to Philo's thought, writes, "The first [part of the soul] tries to elevate him towards her heavenly origins, the second drags him down into earthly desires. Man's task is to abandon his lower existence and to rise to God."[68]

Thus, the transformation of Moses' whole being into pure mind is the achievement of perfection. As Lewy states, "The way of perfection is Wisdom. The souls of those

---

[65]Texts cited from: *Philo* , Edited and translated by F. H. Colson, vol. 6 (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1929), pp. 593 - 595.
[66] Hans Lewy, from his Introduction, *Three Jewish Philosophers*, ed. by Hans Lewy (New York: Meridian Books and the Jewish Publication Society, 1961), p. 15.
[67] *De Vita Moses*, Moses II. 288.
[68]Lewy, *Three Jewish*, p. 18.

who have walked in this way during their lifetime will return afterwards to heaven; they have gained immortality."[69] Philo interprets Moses' death to be about the removal of the body and earthly desires, so as to become pure thought. Moses' fate is not unique, nor is there tension over what happened to Moses. Philo, according to his own thought, is very clear: Moses' body is buried and his soul is granted immortality. After these Hellenistic writers, the distinction between body and soul is for the most part dropped as a theme in the midrash, only to reappear centuries later in Deuteronomy Rabbah.[70] Perhaps this is due to the revival of interest in Greek thought around the time it was written.

Philo presents the moment of Moses' death by prefacing it with the fact that Moses was granted prophecy that he would die:

> ...[he] stood at the very barrier, ready at the signal to direct his upward flight to heaven, the divine spirit fell upon him and he prophesied with discernment while still alive the story of his own death; told ere the end how the end came; told how he was buried with none present, surely by no mortal hands but by immortal powers; how also he was not laid to rest in the tomb of his forefathers, but was given a monument of special dignity which no man has ever seen;...[71]

The prophecy of his death and his burial by God is Philo's way of answering the question of how Moses could have written about his own death in the Torah. Having already explained the meaning of Moses' death as the freeing of the soul, his description of the scene holds very close to the biblical text, except his burial is by "immortal powers" instead of God.

2. Josephus[72]

In Josephus, the account of Moses' death resembles more closely the midrash from rabbinic sources. Josephus is clearly concerned with the biblical tension surrounding

---

[69]Ibid, p. 18.
[70]In Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10, God has a conversation with Moses' soul about leaving Moses' body. In Midrash Tannaim on Dt. 33:4, Moses' soul leaving his body appears as a minor theme.
[71]*De Vita Moses*, Moses II. 291.
[72]Texts cited from: Josephus Flavius, *Antiquities of the Jews, Vol. IV*, translated by H. St. J. Thackeray (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1926).

Moses' ambiguous departure from the world. He presents both the possibility that Moses was assumed and that he was buried.

Josephus' description opens with an extended scene of lament by the people, by far the most extensive in the entire scope of midrash on his death: "The multitude fell into tears...the children also lamented still more, as not to be able to contain their grief...and truly there seemed to be strife betwixt the young and the old, who should most grieve for him."[73] Moses is so moved by the lamenting of the people, that he weeps himself. Josephus suggests that the intensity of the lamenting is due to the importance of Moses in the people's lives: "The old grieved because they knew what a careful protector they were to be deprived of, and so lamented their future state."[74] The emotional account of Moses leaving the people humanizes the text, and draws a connection between the people and Moses.

Unlike Philo, Josephus' account of the actual death strays from the straight biblical narrative:

> Now, as soon as they were come to the mountain called Avarim (which is a very high mountain, situated over against Jericho and one that affords, to such as are upon it, a prospect of the greatest part of the excellent land of Canaan), he dismissed the senate; and as he was going to embrace Eleazer and Joshua, and was still discoursing with them, a cloud stood over him on the sudden [sic], and he disappeared in a certain valley.

Josephus' scene has the same elements as the scene at Mt. Sinai. As they approach a mountain, Moses tells everyone to stay back and he has an encounter with God. Kushelevsky notes the similarity and claims that the significance of the similarities is in the separation of Moses from the people. She says Josephus' account and Mt. Sinai are both part of a motif she terms "farewell scenes." The farewell scene marks something as a

[73] *Antiquities*, Book 4, Chapter 8, 320-321.
[74] *Antiquities*, Book 4, Chapter 8, 321.

solemn occasion that is followed by spiritual uplift, and "the connotations of this scene define Moses' leave-taking of his people as a distinct metaphysical occasion.[75]

The allusions to Mt. Sinai are present in Josephus, but there is even more similarity with Aaron's death scene. Aaron climbs up Mt. Hor in the sight of all the people and dies with Moses and Eleazer there. Very similarly, Josephus depicts Moses coming to a mountain in the sight of all the people, and being taken by a cloud with Eleazer and Joshua there. As Aaron dies passing along his legacy to Eleazer, so Moses dies passing along his legacy to Joshua. Contrary to the Torah, Moses does not die here alone. He is closely connected both with the people and with Joshua and Eleazer. The reason for Josephus modelling Moses' death after Aaron's may be because Aaron approached his death with a great deal of acceptance. Aaron journeys knowingly toward his death, as does Moses here, "he exhorted those that were near to him that they would not render his departure so lamentable. Whereupon they thought they ought to grant him that favor, to let him depart, according as he himself desired."[76]

Moses' acceptance of death may be part of Josephus' attempts to portray Moses as the ultimate leader and teacher. Josephus then moves beyond human terms though to portray what the biblical text only hints at: Moses is taken up in a cloud and assumed to God. "The emphasis placed on Moses' disappearance establishes him as a superhuman figure. He is not described in terms of his fully human presence, but rather in terms of his sublime, superhuman absence."[77]

Josephus, however, does not end his narrative at this point. Instead, he adds in a comment in an intervening narrator's voice, "He wrote in the holy books that he died, which was done out of fear, lest they should venture to say that, because of his

---

[75]Kusbelevsky, *Moses*, p. 36. The other biblical scenes she mentions which make up the "typescene" of the farewell are: Abraham parting from his servants just before the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:5), and Naomi's leave-taking of her daughters-in-law when she is about to return from the land of Moab back to the land of Judah (Ruth 1:7-18).
[76]Antiquities, Book 4, Chapter 8, 323-324.
[77]Kusbelevsky, *Moses*, p. 41.

extraordinary virtue, he went to God."[78] The narrator's voice is double-edged. He admits that there is a discrepancy between Josephus' account and the biblical text, and explains it so that one should not believe the biblical text. At the same time, however:

> The narrator's argument uncovers the duality inherent in both the biblical description and the post-biblical tradition of Moses' death. In the *Antiquities*, this duality, which also concerns Moses' figure, finds its expression on the one hand in the narrative text itself, and, on the other, in the comment of the intervening narrator, which introduces into the version the biblical account of Moses' death. While on the surface, this comment provides the motivation why the Scripture disguises Moses' ascent, it also suggests, however obliquely, that Moses might have died after all![79]

Kushelevsky goes on to point out that since Josephus does not explicitly state that Moses was taken up to heaven in the cloud, she suggests he might have been buried in an unknown spot.

Josephus is thus ultimately ambiguous about Moses' assumption. The use of the narrator's intervening voice suggests that Moses might really have died, although the rest of the narration claims Moses was assumed. To go back to the notions of "*genizah*" and "death," Josephus, through the narrative and then the narrator's comments, provides both possibilities. The Original Assumption of Moses attempts the exact same balance as Josephus, although through different means.

3. The Assumption of Moses and The (Original) Assumption of Moses

The Assumption of Moses is presumed to have been written in the first century, C.E. although there is some debate about its dating. The text was discovered and first published in 1861 in Italy.[80] The bulk of the text, which is incomplete, is an address by Moses to Joshua prophesying the future. The text does not contain an account of an assumption, and its name comes from a tradition of the Church Fathers that a work of this

---

[78] Antiquities, Book 4, Chapter 8, 326.
[79] Kushelevsky, *Moses*, pp. 41-42.
[80] "Moses, Assumption of," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Volume 12, (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House), p. 411.

name existed in ancient times. The text is, therefore, also known as *The Testament of Moses*, which is the name of a text cited in early Church documents.[81] The original text of the Assumption has been reconstructed by R. H. Charles from scattered passages found in the letter of St. Jude and some other Patristic literature,[82] and is known as *The Original Assumption of Moses*. *The Assumption of Moses* is probably an amalgamation from *The Testament of Moses* and *The Original Assumption of Moses*.

In The Assumption of Moses, 1:15, Moses declares his death to the people in the following manner, "And now I declare unto thee that the time of the years of my life is fulfilled and I am passing away to sleep with my fathers even in the presence of all the people." The surprising aspect of this text is Moses' declaration that he will pass away in the presence of all the people. This is directly contrary to the biblical text in which no one saw him die. In saying he will sleep with his fathers, Moses also indicates that his death will be "normal." Of all the texts we will examine, this text most clearly portrays Moses as human, and his death as a "normal" death. It runs contrary to the contemporaneous accounts in not including some transcendent aspect to his passing, and it also runs counter to the Original Assumption.

In *The Original Assumption of Moses*, Charles describes Moses' death taking place in the presence of Joshua and Caleb, "...and in a very peculiar way. A twofold presentation of Moses appears: one is Moses, 'living in the Spirit,' carried up to heaven; the other is the dead body of Moses, buried in the recesses of the mountains."[83] The Original Assumption has elements of Josephus' account, such as Moses departing the world in front of two people. The Original Assumption is a radical expression though of the tensions in Moses' death: his dying versus his being assumed, his humanness versus his divinity. The tension is solved by literally having two Moses, one human and buried,

[81]"Moses, Assumption of," p. 412.
[82]R. H. Charles, *The Assumption of Moses* (Oxford: 1897).
[83]Charles, *Original Assumption*, p 106.

the other divine and assumed. This creates as many problems as it solves. For instance, what does it mean that there are two Moses?

The other aspect to the Original Assumption is a fight between Michael and Satan. Michael is commissioned to bury Moses, while Satan opposes him, claiming that he is the lord of matter. Michael rebuts this by telling him that God is the true Lord of all matter. Satan then brings a charge of murder against Moses, which the text neither explains nor answers. In all of the midrash on Moses' death, there is only one other place where Moses is accused of murder. In a version of Petirat Moshe, God tells Moses one of the reasons he is being punished with death is because he slew the Egyptian taskmaster. Moses retorts that it was God, Himself, who slew all the Egyptian first born.[84] The Original Assumption text does not explain its charges, and Petirat Moshe was written so much later it would be difficult to say whether the author drew upon The Assumption, but it is, nonetheless, worth noting how themes repeat centuries later.

Significantly, the sense of divine drama which has a central role in later midrashim is already present here. Michael and Satan's argument over the body of Moses is the forerunner to Samael and Moses arguing in the rabbinic midrash. What is not present in these early sources, which plays a central role in later midrash, is Moses' anxiety over his death. Clearly, his anxiety was not a problem for the Hellenistic authors. The early sources are very intent, though, in portraying Moses as the ultimate human being, or perhaps even divine being. Any sense of Moses' anxiety in confronting his own death would not have fit into their world view.

[84] *Midrash Petirat Moshe*, reproduced by A. Jellinek in *Bet ha-Midrash* 1:115-129. Exodus Rabbah 4:1 holds that Moses had good cause to kill the Egyptian.

B. Early Rabbinic Sources

This layer of sources has two distinct thematic emphases. One stream has its locus in the Tosefta and the Talmud. This stream could be termed "the funeral" midrashim. It is concerned with questions associated with the characters' funerals: Where Moses was buried? How the news of his death and burial was disseminated? and How God, the ministering angels, and the people mourned after his burial? The other stream is introduced in Sifrei Deuteronomy - and is concerned with more theological issues: Where does Moses go after he departs from the world? What is the role of the Angel of Death? and Why does Moses have to die? The two different streams of midrashim can be seen as complementary and many of the Tannaitic Midrashim contain elements of both.

1. T. Sotah 4:8

The Tosefta's discussion of Moses' death focuses on where he is buried. Given the extensive accounts of Moses' departure in the Hellenistic sources, it is surprising that neither the Tosefta nor the Mishnah comment on Moses' actual death. The entire passage in the Tosefta on his death is as follows:

> R. Yehudah said: Moses was taken 4 mils [after he died] by the wings of the Shekhinah, he died in the territory of Reuben, and was buried in the territory of Gad, as it is said, "He went up to Mt. Aravim, this is Mt. Nebo"(Dt 32:49). Mt. Nevo is in the territory of Reuben, as it is said, "The children of Reuben built ..."(Nu 32:37). How do we know that Moses was buried in the territory of Gad? As it is written, "Blessed is one that enlarges Gad...(Dt. 33:20). He saw the first part for himself. For there a portion for the lawgiver was hidden"(Dt 33:21). And the ministering angels were there, as it is said, "The justice of God he did, and his laws with Israel"(Dt. 33:21).

The Tosefta's description leaves no question as to Moses' fate. He has died, and is buried in a grave who's location is hidden but in the territory of the tribe of Gad. One of the elements of the story which retains Moses' unique stature is his being carried by the wings

of the Shekhinah. "The metaphor of the 'wings of the Shekhinah' fashions a deep metaphysical experience founded on the positive feelings of being nurtured by protective love. Thus, the connotation of this image removes the description of Moses' death from its logical context and places it in the metaphysical realm."[85] The death of Moses by the kiss of God reinforces this sense of God's love. The God who loves Moses must be placed in context with the God who decreed Moses' death. The distinct tensions within God, having to nurture while at the same time having to carry out justice, parallel a parent who must punish because it is necessary, but may also be nurturing while carrying out the punishment.

Most of the midrash, however, focuses on the question of where Moses is buried. As the midrash cites, Moses died on Mt. Nebo, which in Numbers 32:27 is said to be part fo the territory of Reuben. However, the Rabbis claim that the Shekhinah carries Moses' body from Gad to Reuben. This claim rests on an interpretation of Deuteronomy 33:21. The verse is part of the blessing Moses gives to the tribe of Gad, "He selected a premier-part for himself, for there a portion of the ruler was hidden; he approached the heads of the people, the justice of God he did do, and his laws withs Israel."[86] The verse is difficult to translate, as Gunther Plaut notes, "The verse is obscure and all translations are speculative."[87] The verse is unclear as to whom the "ruler" refers, and to what the "portion that was hidden" refers. The Rabbis seize on this ambiguity to argue that the verse refers to Moses. Moses must be the ruler, for of whom else would it be said that he did the justice of God? They then connect the phrase "portion that is hidden" with Moses' hidden burial site.

Behind this midrash is also the rabbinic view of Reuben. In Jacob's death-bed blessing of Reuben, he says, "Unstable as water you will not excel, because you went up

---

[85]Kushelevsky, *Moses*, p. 78.
[86]The translation roughly follows Everett Fox in *The Five Books of Moses* (Dallas: Shocken Books, 1995), p. 1011.
[87]W. Gunther Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, UAHC, 1981), p. 1572, n. 21.

to your father's bed, and you defiled it, he went up to my couch"[Gen 49:4]. Jacob is referring to Reuben laying with Bilhah after the death of Rachel.[88] Even with this sin, however, the midrash is generally kind to Reuben in its portrayal of him, in large part because he saves Joseph by convincing his brothers not to kill him before casting him into the pit.[89]

Because of Reuben's attempt at saving Joseph, Genesis Rabbah 84:15 explains why the first of the cities of refuge mentioned in Deuteronomy 4:43 is placed in his territory. Genesis Rabbah 98:4 goes so far as to explain his going up to his father's bed means that he was removing Bilhah's bed which his father had put in Rachel's room right after she died. The Rabbis portray Reuben also as repenting for his actions, thus earning him a place in the world-to-come.[90]

Nonetheless, one can guess that the Rabbis would be particularly concerned with Moses' burial place being in his territory, given that Reuben is so closely associated with sexuality in the Torah. Is it any surprise that the same person who lays with Bilhah was the one who found the mandrakes to give to Leah, thus enabling her to spend the night with Jacob? This stands in contrast to Moses, who is portrayed in the midrash as extremely chaste.[91] Significantly, it is Moses' body which is not buried in Reuben's territory, but he does die there. And it is precisely with the body that Reuben's troubles begin. The Rabbis just could not believe that Moses' pure body could be laid to rest in Reuben's territory. The ambiguous reference of the Deuteronomy verse thus gave the Rabbis the opportunity to move his body.

---

[88]Gen. 35:22.
[89]Gen. 37:21-22.
[90]B.T. *Sotah* 7b.
[91]See, for example, Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

2. Sifrei to Numbers, Piska 106

The Sifrei to Numbers adds two elements to the story in the Tosefta. As a preface to the story, R. Yehudah says, "If it were not written in Scripture, it would be impossible to say it...." It then continues with the above story of Moses' body being moved. The insertion of this comment probably reflects the Rabbis' sense that the interpretation they were making was difficult.

The other insertion is at the end, where it is stated in the Sifrei, "And not only Moses [will be gathered to God], rather all the righteous God will gather, as it is said 'Your righteousness will walk before you and the honor of God will be gathered to you'"[Is 58:8]. By claiming that all the righteous, and not just Moses, are gathered, the Sifrei removes the element of uniqueness which was preserved for Moses in the Tosefta. The midrash, thus, also removes from the Tosefta's version, the possibility that Moses was semi-divine.

3. Sifrei Deuteronomy: The Angel of Death's Search for Moses[92]

Sifrei Deuteronomy, Pisqa 305, opens with a central motif on Moses' death, an encounter between Moses and the Angel of Death:

> At the same hour, God said to the Angel of Death, "Go and fetch me the soul of Moses." The Angel of Death went and stood before Moses and said to him, "Moses, give me your soul." Moses retorted, "Where I sit, you have no right even to stand, and yet you dare say to me, 'Give me your soul?'" Moses thus rebuked him, and the Angel of Death left with a rebuke. He went and reported these words to the Mighty One. God said to him, "Return, and bring me back his soul." The Angel of Death searched for him but could not find him.

The confrontation between Samael and Moses reflects the Divine aspect of Moses, in that he is able to scare away the Angel of Death. In effect, they switch places, and the Angel of Death takes on a more human role in being the one to search for Moses. The question not

[92]Sifrei to Deuteronomy 305 and 357.

raised is, Why God has decreed that Moses must die? The Sifrei, like Midrash Petirat Moshe, does not seem concerned with this question.

The Angel of Death continues his search:

> And he went and searched for for him, but could not find him. He went to the sea, and said, "Have you seen Moses?" The sea said to him, "From the day that he crossed through me, I have not seen him." He went to the mountains and the hills and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "From the day that Israel received Torah on top of Mt. Sinai, we have not seen him." He went to hell, and said to him, "Have you seen Moses?" "I have heard his name, but I have not seen him."
> He went to the ministering angels and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "Go to the people."

The search for Moses underscores both the failure of the Angel of Death, and Moses' divinity. The Angel of Death goes to the sea, which Moses' succeeded in parting and leading the Israelites to safety through it. Similarly, in going to Mt. Sinai, the Angel of Death is going to the place of Moses' revelation - where he lived underneath the throne of glory without food and drink communing with God. The question implicit in the search is how Moses, the prophet of God, could die?

However, in the very next scene, Moses' divinity is placed in tension with his humanness. The Angel of Death ultimately finds Moses when he goes to the people who reveal to him Moses' fate:

> He went to Israel, and he said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "God understands his way, God hid him in the world-to-come, and there is not a creature in the world who knows where he is, as it is said, "And he buried him in the valley " [Dt 34:6].

This scene contains a contradiction regarding Moses' fate. It is an example of the "Death-*Genizah* paradox" which Kushelevsky discusses.[93] God "hides" Moses in the world-to-come, but it also mentions the biblical verse that states that God buried him in the valley. The "hiding" implies some type of assumption to heaven, while the burial suggests the exact opposite. Further, there is the contradiction that on the one hand, the people know

[93]Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p. xix. Also, see discussion above, pp. 45-48.

where Moses is, although, on the other hand, the text undermines this by saying, "there is not a creature in the world who knows where he is." The contradictions are left unresolved: Moses dies and is hidden without dying, the people know and they don't know. The midrash does not want to resolve these tensions, leaving us with the mystery of Moses' death.

A further contradiction is found in God's sending the Angel of Death to take Moses' soul. Why does God dispatch the Angel of Death, if God is going to take Moses and hide him in the world-to-come? This reflects God's own ambivalence in taking Moses, which is reinforced in the next scene of Joshua mourning for Moses:

> And Joshua wept, cried and mourned for him bitterly, and said, "My father, my father, my teacher, my teacher; my father that raised me, my teacher that taught me Torah." And he mourned for him many days, until God said to Joshua, "Joshua, until when will you mourn? Does the death of Moses affect you alone? Does it not affect rather Me? From the day that he died there has been great mourning before Me, as it is said, "And on that day did God call to weeping and to lamenting"[Is. 22:12], but he is guaranteed the world-to-come, "And God said to Moses, 'You will lie with your fathers...and will rise'"[Dt. 31:16].

The scene humanizes God's relationship to Moses; Moses' death affects God as well. But again this raises the question of God's ambivalence, because previously it says God has hidden him in the world-to-come. This would imply that God still has a relationship with Moses. God's mourning, however, is a sign that Moses died some type of death that would separate them. The notion of God hiding Moses in the world-to-come is also at odds with God telling Moses he will sleep with his fathers. Hiding Moses implies that God has actively thwarted the Angel of Death by giving Moses a unique departure from the world. But in this part of the tradition, God is the passive mourner, and Moses' death is similar to those of the patriarches. The tension is only eased in the final phrase where there is the promise of ultimate redemption. This ultimate redemption signals that the contradictions of Moses' death will one day be resolved.

4. Another Version of the Search: Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 34:5

Midrash Tannaim sets up the Angel of Death's search for Moses with a prologue in which Moses pleads with God not to be given over to the Angel of Death:

> Moses said before God, "Master of the Universe, even though you have decreed death upon me, don't give me to the hand of the Angel of Death." God said to him, "I will take care of you, and hide you." God then showed him his dwelling, as God showed Aaron, his brother, and when he saw his chair in the middle of the Garden of Eden, he was satisfied.

This piece from Midrash Tannaim is the first case of Moses' explicit anxiety over death. In Sifrei to Deuteronomy, he rebuked the Angel of Death, but here he pleads with God not to be handed over to him. God responds to Moses' plea, and he is satisfied. Midrash Tannaim establishes a direct relationship between God and Moses, where the tradition in Sifrei does not have them speak at all. This midrash hints at a closer relationship between God and Moses, and thus a different fate.

The major difference between this account and the one in Sifrei is that here: Moses does not die. The tension over his fate is not present; he is clearly hidden in the Garden of Eden with his brother.[94] This is attested to most clearly by the end of the Angel of Death's search. Whereas Sifrei creates tension over Moses' fate by quoting Deuteronomy 34:5 at the end of the search, "And he buried him in the valley," here the final encounter between the Angel of Death and the people ends with a different prooftext:

> He went to Israel and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "God understands his way, and knows its place [Job 28:23]. God hid him in the world-to-come, and there is not a creature in the world that knows where he is, *and wisdom where will it be found*"[Job 28:12].

Moses is equated here with wisdom: wisdom is not found in this world, wisdom is only found in the realm of God. The Job text reinforces the idea that Moses has vanished and is to be found in the realm of God.[95]

---

[94]In Midrash Petirat Moshe, Moses is initially told by God that he would be placed in the Garden of Eden, but then, when the Angel of Death searches for Moses, Moses is not there.

[95]For further analysis of the use of Job 28 as a prooftext in Midrash Tannaim, see Chapter VI on "The Use of Biblical Prooftexts," pp. 80-84.

Midrash Tannaim also has a scene of Joshua's mourning, and God's rebuke of Joshua:

> When he [Moses] disappeared from him [Joshua], he cried greatly and tore his clothes and said, 'My father, my father, the chariots of Israel and their horsemen'[2 Kings 2:12], and 'Wisdom where will it be found?'[Job 28:12]. God said to Joshua, 'How long will you mourn for Moses? "Moses, my servant, died"[Josh 1:2]. His death is not only for you but for Me.'"

The prooftext from Joshua reinserts the tension over Moses' fate. It is a straightforward text saying that Moses has died, and God mourns for Moses. However, even within this scene, there is a subtle tension over what happened to Moses. A biblical verse from 2 Kings is placed in Joshua's mouth. This verse is what Elisha says upon seeing Elijah go up in a whirlwind. Elijah's going up in the whirlwind is the paradigmatic scene of assumption. Even in this paragraph that seems very clear in discussing Moses' burial, there is a subtle hint that Moses did not die, but was assumed like Elijah. Midrash Tannaim proves to be just as elusive over Moses' fate as Sifrei Deuteronomy, edging closer, however, towards the idea of assumption.

5. Avot de Rabbi Nathan[96]

Both versions of Avot de Rabbi Nathan introduce an answer to the question of what Moses did that caused God to decree his death:

> God said to Moses, 'Moses, your time is done in this world. I have given you the world-to-come, which was ordained from the sixth day of Creation.' as it is said, 'And God said, "Behold there is a place by Me, and I will place you upon the rock."' And God took the soul of Moses and hid it under the throne of glory.[97]

The hiding of Moses underneath the throne of glory was ordained from the sixth day of Creation. Moses' departure, thus, has nothing to do with any possible sins, but Moses

---

[96]Avot de Rabbi Nathan, Version A, chapter 12 & Version B, chapter 25.

[97]Cf. with Midrash Petirat Moshe where the Angel of Death says that since the sixth day of creation, he, The Angel of Death, gained control over all souls. Here, it is God's direct words that Moses was ordained to be hidden.

needed to go like other humans. The midrash, then, supports the idea that Moses is like other people, "The soul of Moses was not alone secreted below the throne of glory; also the souls of the righteous were stored below the throne of glory...." The midrash curiously eliminates the idea that Moses died a unique death.

However, being hidden beneath God's throne is a potent image of assumption. In Midrash Petirat Moshe, when Moses is recounting to the Angel of Death those things which make him unlike any other person, he refers to being beneath the throne of glory as being on top of Mt. Sinai. He says, "...and I went up to the heights, and I lived *underneath the throne of glory* for forty days and forty nights, three times, one hundred and twenty days and one hundred and twenty nights. Like the ministering angels, I didn't eat nor drink, and the wings of the Shekhinah covered me." On top of Mt. Sinai, Moses ascends to an angelic status, not needing to eat or drink. Mt Sinai is the physical connecting point between this world and God's. Being beneath the throne of glory thus hints at the idea that Moses was assumed by God.

Version B of Avot de Rabbi Nathan gives a different explanation for Moses' decree of death:[98]

> Moses went before The Mighty One and said, 'Master of the Universe tell me if death is already decreed upon me so that I will not enter the Promised Land. What sin did I do?' God said, 'Moses, you have not committed a sin. You are not dying for your sin; rather for the sin of Adam Ha-Rishon, as it is said, 'Your first father has sinned'[Is 43:27]. God placed his soul and the souls of the righteous underneath the throne of glory to thank and to praise....

The discussion here is unusually direct for the midrash. God tells Moses he must die because of Adam's sin. Adam brought death into the world by his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and all people, therefore, must die. This version of Avot de Rabbi Nathan also does not ascribe to Moses a special status. Moses is not any different from the other righteous.

---

[98]Avot de Rabbi Nathan, Version B, Chapter 25.

In version A, death is removed from the idea of punishment. It was created on the sixth day, it is inevitable, and it not something brought about as God's punishment for sin. In version B, death is introduced a few days later. Death is brought about through the idea of sin, but it is not directly the sin of Moses, but rather the sin of Adam. Death is, therefore, not a neutral concept: it is introduced as the result of expulsion from the ideal world. Death, though, leads the soul to being placed under the throne of glory, thus returning one to this ideal state. In fact, Avot de Rabbi Nathan does not use the word "*genizo*" (hidden it) which has been predominate throughout all the midrash. Rather God tells Moses he will take his soul from this world and "*makhziro*" (return it) to the world to come. Returning to the world-to-come is an oxymoronic expression, unless one understands that all souls are returning to the Garden, a state that somehow we have previously experienced. The introduction of Adam's first sin as the cause of all death leads to the idea that by dying, one is released from the sins of this world and one returns to a preexisting state of being with God.

This return to God, however, cannot be open to everyone. Only those who have not repeated the sins of Adam can return to God. The reward of the after-life is dependent upon behavior in this world. Thus, the midrash says that all the righteous are placed in the after-life below the throne of glory. In the entire scope of midrash which is focussed on this moment of Moses' departure from this world, this is probably as close as the midrash comes to speculating that the world-to-come is, in some way, a more rewarding place to be. In contrast, we have seen the midrash describe God's own mourning at Moses' death.[99] The latter attitude is perhaps far more representative of the Rabbis' opinion on the nature of death. It is neither a relief from this world, nor a simple return to God.

[99]See above, in Sifrei to Deuteronomy and Midrash Tannaiim, pp. 62-65.

C. B.T. *Sotah* 13b

The Talmud's description of Moses' death enlarges the discussion in the Tosefta and Sifrei Numbers about the "funeral" of Moses. It discusses where Moses is buried, and "the eulogies" given for him.

1. The Eulogies

This Talmudic passage begins with a restatement of the Tosefta's question of where Moses is buried. It then continues with the "eulogies" given for Moses:

> The Ministering Angels proclaim, 'He executed the justice of God and his judgements with Israel'[Dt. 33:21]. And God declares, 'Who will rise up for Me against the evil-doers, who will stand for Me against the doers of sins?'[Ps 94:16], Samuel said, 'Who is like a wise one, and who knows the interpretation of a thing?'[Ec 8:1], R. Yohanan said, 'Where will wisdom be found?'[Jb 28:12], R. Nahman said, "And Moses died there'[Dt. 34:5], Semalyon said, 'And there Moses died, the great scribe of Israel.'

This text is interesting in that it mixes the earthly and heavenly realms. Semalyon is a mysterious character because this is the only time in the entire Talmud that his name is used. His name sounds like an angel, but he appears with the Rabbis.[100]

The eulogies themselves are of three types: God and the ministering angels eulogize Moses based on his ability to carry out God's will and thwart those who stand against God; their eulogies reflect the perspective of the heavenly world; and they mourn that the one who was able to be a messenger for that world can no longer perform that task.

Shmuel and R. Yohanan eulogize the loss of Moses' wisdom. The author uses Ecclesiastes 8 to answer the question of why good things happen to bad people. Ecclesiastes 8:14-15 reads, "There are just men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the

[100]Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel*, p. 79.

righteous. I said this is also vanity, so I coffmand joy." Ultimately, Ecclesiastes cannot answer these questions, "Then I beheld all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work done under the sun; because though a man labour to seek it out, yet, he shall not find it"[Ecclesiastes 8:17]. Job 28 has a very similar theme. Humans may search, but wisdom is ultimately beyond them.[101]

> The context of both of these eulogies raises the deepest and most frustrating problem of all existence: that of sublime justice. On the one hand, it suggests that the wise man knows the answer, and yet admits in the end that though he may seek to know it, he shall not be able to find to find it. Moses is presented as the wise man who attained the level of superhuman wisdom and yet he, too, is frustrated in the end.[102]

Although Moses may have attained wisdom, he is ultimately not able to transcend his human limitations. In these eulogies, he is, in the final analysis, human, and his death is a tragedy. Perhaps, this is why R. Nahman and Semalyon seem to be expressing just simple shock at Moses' passing. Their eulogies reflect a grief that is beyond the words and philosophical queries of Ecclesiastes and Job, but can only register the shock of the tragedy.

2. A Sign Within A Sign

The Talmud continues by introducing the idea that perhaps Moses did not die:

> It has been taught in a *baraita*, Rabbi Eliezer, the Elder, says, 'Throughout the entire 12 mil by 12 mil area of the camp, the *bat kol* was heard, saying, "And there Moses died, the great scribe of Israel."' There are those who say Moses did not die. It is written here, 'Moses died *there*'[Dt 34:5] and it is written there, 'And he was *there* with God' [Ex 34:28]. What is written [in Exodus] that he stood and served, is even meant [in Deuteronomy] that he stood and served.

The *gezerah shavah*[103] is used to equate the way Moses served on Mt. Sinai with his death. This is yet another occasion where Mt. Sinai is used as the example of a "living"

---

[101] See Chapter VI, pp. 80-84, on "The Use of Biblical Prooftexts" for an analysis of Job 28.
[102] Kushelevksy, *Moses and the Angel*, p. 80.
[103] Literally "equal cutting," it refers to a hermeneutical tool whereby the Rabbis claim that a word mentioned in two places allows the reader to draw an analogy between them.

assumption of Moses because he was in such intimate contact with God and he did not eat or drink for 40 days.[104] As he was assumed there in Exodus, so he is assumed here. As we have seen, the idea of Moses' being assumed is already well established by the time of the Talmud's redaction, so it is not surprising to see it inserted here. The story after this seems to address this notion though, and ultimately rejects the idea that Moses was, in fact, assumed:

> "And he was buried in the valley of the land of Moab, over against Bet-Peor" [Dt 34:6]. R. Berechiyah said: This is a sign inside of a sign, nevertheless it says, "And no one knows where he is buried"[Dt 34:6]. And already, the evil kings[Roman government] sent [troops] to the camp of Bet-Peor, and they said: We will see where Moses was buried. They stood above - and it appeared to them as if the grave was below, below - and it appeared to them as if it was above. They broke into two groups, the ones that stood above the grave - it appeared to them as if the grave were below, and the ones that stood below, it appeared to them as if it were above. This proves what is said, "And no one knows his grave"[Dt 34:6].

The "sign within a sign" refers to the fact that the biblical text gives the location of Moses' burial site -- "in the valley of the land of Moav," but then says "no one knows his grave." This verse is central for those who would argue that Moses was assumed or hidden in the world-to-come. Here, however, Moses' death is implied by the discussion of Moses' grave. Not only did Moses not get assumed, but the Roman troops *are able to see his grave*. They just cannot come close to it. The story ingeniously thus affirms the death of Moses and still maintains that Moses' grave site is unique and unapproachable. Keeping the grave site unknown was important to rabbinic tradition. Midrash Leqah Tov says explicitly that no one knows where Moses is buried as a precaution, lest his sepulcher become a shrine of idolatrous worship.[105]

One of the final comments in this *Sotah* passage affirms the idea that Moses died, but his grave has special powers. "R. Hama, in the name of R. Hanina, says, 'Why is

---

[104]See above, pp. 53-53 for a discussion on the phrase "hidden beneath the throne of God".
[105]See: Judah Goldin, "The Death of Moses: An Exercise in Midrashic Transposition," in *Judah Goldin: Studies in Midrash and Related Literature*, edited by Barry Eichler and Jeffrey Tigay (Philadelphia: JPS, 1988), p. 183.

Moses buried against Bet-Peor? In order to atone for the actions at Bet-Peor.'" The actions at Bet-Peor refers to the story of the slaying of Zimri for his lying with the Midianite woman Kasbi. In Numbers 25:16-18, the text says, "And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, 'Vex the Midianites and smite them, for they vex you with their wiles, with which they have beguiled you in the matter of Peor.'" The idea of death as atonement is frequently attested to in rabbinic literature. M. *Sanhedrin* 6:2 describes how someone about to be stoned for being convicted of a capital crime is instructed to say, "May my death be an atonement for my sins." In Tanhuma Buber, *Acharei Mot* 6:10, it says, "the death of the righteous atones." It is not surprising, therefore, to see the death of Moses as an expiatory action for the entire people. Death as atonement for Moses' own sins is never explicitly addressed in the midrash, perhaps because of the ambiguity surrounding whether Moses' death was due to his sins.

Unlike other midrashim, such as the Sifrei to Deuteronomy or Midrash Petirat Moshe, the tradition in the Talmud is not concerned with a psychological portrayal of Moses. We do not hear what Moses was thinking or feeling; we only get a description of how he was buried and how he was eulogized. Why did the Talmud not include some of this material which was already part of the midrashic tradition in Sifrei Deuteronomy? The Talmud seems to be more involved in political or communal issues, such as why Moses was buried in Gad and not Reuben, mocking the Roman government for trying to find his grave, and death being atonement for all people. Midrash Petirat Moshe, on the other hand, is very focussed on the psychological dimension and barely relates how the death affects the people.

D. Deuteronomy Rabbah

Deuteronomy Rabbah signals a tremendous expansion in the narratives relating to Moses' death. It develops themes surrounding Moses' death with extended stories which have not previously appeared in the midrashic literature. It is also significant in taking on the question of theodicy directly, which most of the other midrashim do not do.

1. Moses Acquiesces to the Angel of Death

Deuteronomy Rabbah contains an unusual story of Moses agreeing to the Angel of Death's mission.[106] The Angel of Death initially comes to take Moses' soul and Moses says, "Go from here, I desire to praise God, as it is written, 'I will not die because I will live and speak praises of God'"[Ps. 118:7]. The Angel of Death comes back a second time and this time Moses tells the Angel of Death the ineffable name of God and the Angel of Death flees. Up until this point, the story follows the same pattern as their encounter in Petirat Moshe. However, "When he came to him a third time, he [Moses] said, "It seems that this is from God, who needs me to give myself to His justice, as it is said, 'The rock, His work is perfect'"[Dt. 22:4].

In Midrash Petirat Moshe, it is only when a *bat kol* comes out to tell Moses not to kill the Angel of Death that Moses begins to accept his own death, and, even at that point, Moses begs not to be handed over to him. Here, Moses accepts the Angel of Death as part of God's plan. This is a rare occasion in the midrashim where Moses is fully accepting of God's decree for him to die. Perhaps, Deuteronomy Rabbah was even written as a response to Moses' anxious portrayal in earlier midrashim.

The theme of acceptance is extended in Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:8, where Moses pleads with God:

[106]Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:5.

In the hour that Moses was to depart this world, God said to him, "Your days are coming to an end"(Dt 31:14).
Moses said before God, "After all this time, you say to me, your days are drawing to an end? 'I will not die, I will live and utter the praises of God"(Ps 118:17).
God said to him, "How will you be able? This is the fate of all man"(Ec 12:3).
Moses said to God, "One thing I ask of you before I die, that I will enter, and all the gates of heaven and the deep will be opened and they will see there is none like you, as it is said, "You know this day, and put it in your heart"(Dt 4:39).
God said to him, "You said, 'There is none like me' and I say, 'There will not arise another prophet in Israel like Moses'(Dt 34:10), 'The signs and wonders the great teacher Moses did in the eyes of Israel'"(Dt 34:11-12).

This pleading must be contrasted with the opening of Petirat Moshe where Moses pleads to live forever. Here, Moses accepts God's judgement that the fate of all humans is to die. He also implicitly accepts the fact that his fate is like that of all other people. His plea is only "to enter" one last time before he dies. The entering could refer to the Promised Land, to seeing the Divine's Presence one more time, or to entering Eternity. If it is to enter Eternity, then the midrash is similar to Midrash Petirat Moshe. If, however, he is to enter the land or to see God once more, the midrash underscores Moses' acceptance of God's nature. As death approaches, his final request is that all see there is none like God.

2. Moses' Pleas for Mercy From the Decree

Other traditions in Deuteronomy Rabbah stand in contrast to the above portrayal of Moses' acceptance of his decree. Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10 contains a remarkable description of Moses arguing with God over the decree of death. It is, in many ways, the antithesis of their relationship pictured in the tradition above. The encounter begins by listing the ten times in the Books of Deuteronomy and Joshua which speak of Moses' death.[107] The midrash notes, "This teaches that until the tenth time, the decree was not

[107]"R. Yochanan said, 'It is written in ten places that Moses will die:
1. The time for you to die is drawing near (Dt 31:14), 2. Die in the mountain (Dt 33:50), 3. But I must die(Dt 4:22), 5. After my death (Dt. 31:29), 6. And how much more after my death (Dt 31:27), 7. Before his death (Dt 33:1), 8. He was 120 when he died (Dt 34:7), 8. Moses the servant of God died there (Dt 34:5), 9. After the death of Moses(Js 1:1), and 10. Moses, my servent, is dead (Js 1:2)."

sealed. It was not sealed until it was revealed to him by the great court [God] who said, This decree before me cannot be transgressed, as it is said, "Because you will not cross the Jordan""[Dt 3:27]. The question is why the decree was not sealed until the tenth time and the answer is given in the story that follows.

Moses is told of God's decree and is unmoved by it. Given Moses' responses in other midrashim, the following response is highly unusual:

> And this decree was unimportant in the eyes of Moses. He said, "Israel sinned many times and I requested mercy for them, and immediately it was given for me, as it is said, 'Leave me alone, and I will destroy'(Dt 9:14). [But] what is written there? And God will comfort the wicked(Ex 32:14), "I will smite them with pestilence, and disinherit them"(Nu 14:12). [But] what is written there, "And God said, 'I forgive'"(Nu 14:20). I have not sinned since my youth, and if so, I will pray for myself and God will accept my prayers."[108]

Moses is in a stage of denial. He believes he can appeal to God's mercy just as he did before in the incident of the Golden Calf and when the spies reported on the Promised Land. In Petirat Moshe he appeals to God's mercy as well, but here Moses is confident about it, while there, he is desperate. The sin to which Moses refers is most likely his killing of the Egyptian. Moses interestingly does not mention the incident at Meribah where he strikes the rock.

God responds to Moses' overconfidence with indignation, sealing the decree against Moses:

> And when God saw that Moses was taking the matter lightly, and did not jump up immediately to pray and praise His name greatly, [God decided] that he will not enter the Promised Land, as it is said, "*Therefore*, you will not go in with this people"(Nu 20:12). *Therefore* means it is an oath, as it is said, "*Therefore* , I swear to the house of Eli"(1 Sam 3:14).

---

[108]Ginzberg gives an alternative explanation for why Moses was confident the decree would change. From Mekhilta d' Rabbi Ishmael, *Beshalah* 2, "Moses had also a special reason for assuming that God had changed His determination concerning him, and would now permit him to enter the promised land, for he had been permitted to enter the part of Palestine lying on this side of the Jordan, the land of Sihon and Og, and from this he reasoned that God had not irrevocably decreed punishment for him, and that it might therefore now be recalled. See Louis Ginsberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: JPS, 1928), pp. 418-419

The midrash implies that had Moses not acted so haughtily, the decree that he should not enter the Promised Land and perhaps even his death would have been revoked. In this regard, the midrash blames Moses for his own death. Because of Moses' actions, God can "feel" justified in His decree. This scene also shows the battle within God between mercy and justice. God had decreed ten times that Moses was to die, but that decree was open to Moses' pleas for mercy. God's mercy could have been overcome, but Moses chose not to try. Note also that in this midrash alone, God is identified with the epithet, "The Great Court," signalling that God's justice is the attribute which is going to be most evident.

The midrash almost follows the stages of death as outlined by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Moses begins with denial, but upon realizing God was not going to revoke the decree, moves to the next two stages: anger and bargaining. Kubler-Ross writes, "If we have been unable to face the sad facts in the first period and we have been angry at people and God in the second phase, maybe we can succeed in entering into some sort of an agreement which may postpone the inevitable happening."[109] The midrash continues with Moses saying to God, "When Moses saw that the decree of justice was sealed for him, he fasted, and drew a circle around him, and stood in the middle, and said, "I am not going to move from here until you remove the decree."

God answers Moses by declaring that all of the gates of the heaven should be closed to Moses' prayer:

> What did God do? In the same time it was proclaimed in all gates of the firmament, in all the courts, not to receive the prayer of Moses, and not to bring it to Him, because the decree of justice was sealed. At the same time too, an angel was appointed to proclaim it; his name was Akhzariel. Then, God called suddenly and said to them, "Go down and close all the gates of the firmament since the strong voice of the prayer may rise and request to enter the heavens, because the voice of the prayer of Moses is like a sword that cuts and slices and doesn't delay. His prayer is the Ineffable Name which he learned from Zagzagel, the great scribe of Israel. At the same time it is said, "I heard behind me the great raging voice [saying], "Blessed is the glorious Name from His place"(Ez 3:12)...Why "Blessed is the glorious Name from His place?" At the same moment, they saw the fiery chariot,

[109]Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1969), p. 72.

> God said, "Don't accept the prayer of Moses and do not lift up your face, and don't give him life, and don't let him enter the Promised Land." And they said, "Blessed is the glorious Name from in His place," that no one will be brought before him, no one large, nor small."

This scene is similar to the scene in Midrash Petirat Moshe where Moses' prayers are also emodied, and God does not want to hear them. Moses' words have the power to slice and cut like a sword. That power comes from learning the Ineffable Name from Zagzagel.[110] Moses' prayers are attempts to call upon God's mercy to suspend the decree of death. This decree of death is part of God's justice. As in Midrash Petirat Moshe, the battle is over God's justice versus God's mercy.

The tension within the Godhead is represented by God's response to Moses. Initially, God's decree of death is not sealed. The justice of the decree grew stronger as Moses did not respond and was arrogant. Finally, Moses' pleas for mercy are not strong enough to overcome God's justice. The arrogance of Moses is reflective of a number of concerns. It may reflect the Rabbis' concern over rabbinic leadership. The Rabbis themselves recognize the dangerous nature of power and leadership. Power, as Moses wielded it, may lead to arrogance, and a wrong notion about how much power one actually has. On a similar theme, Moses' arrogance could be intended as a lesson, that there is no way of knowing or anticipating God. Moses' sin was not following the message of Job 28:28, "Wisdom is the fear of God." Instead, he assumed that God could be manipulated.

But, if one cannot anticipate God's ways, then the rabbinic system of doing *mitzvot* is called into question, because the impetus for doing the mitzvot is to curry God's favor, with the hope that one will be rewarded. If God cannot be counted on to reward, then the system is in trouble. Moses, thus, argues with God:

> At the same time, Moses said before God, "God, it is revealed and known before You, many times I suffered for Israel until they believed in Your name. How I suffered for them concerning the *mitzvot* until I established for them Torah and *mitzvot*. I said, 'Just as I saw their pain, so may I see

---

[110]Ginzberg writes, "Zagzagal is none other then Metatron, and, consequently, one is inclined to explain this strange name as "*segan sangiel*" the prince of heavenly princes. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 6, n. 898, p. 150.

> their greatness.' And now the greatness of Israel has arrived, and you say to me, "Don't cross the Jordan"(Dt 31:2). Your Torah is, therefore, a forgery, as it is written, "On this day you shall give him his pay, neither shall the sun go down on it, because he is poor and he depends upon it, or he will cry unto God and it will be a sin to you"(Dt 24:15). Is this my reward for 40 years of work? That Israel should become a holy and faithful people, "But Judah rules with God, and is faithful with the saints"(Hos 12:1).

In this climactic moment of the midrash, Moses attacks the entire rabbinic system by calling the Torah a forgery. He has previously tried God's sense of compassion, and now he is trying to "win" the argument for his life by appealing to God's sense of justice. Deuteronomy, which espouses a reward and punishment theology, ends with Moses dying before he reaches the Promised Land. The question being implicitly asked by the Rabbis is the following: If Moses, prophet of God, dies before he reaches his goal of the Promised Land, how can we regular people hope to be rewarded? Judah Goldin writes, "It's almost as though the Moses story, unique as it surely is, is treated as a forecast of what to expect in the centuries to come: a lifetime of loyalty without the commensurate reward in this world."[111]

The prooftext Moses cites from Deuteronomy reinforces this question. It concerns the giving of wages to a poor man who has done work for you. Because he is poor, he is in need of those wages. Thus, if you are not prompt in giving him his pay, it is a sin. Moses sees himself as the poor man, and God as the hirer. Moses accuses God of failing to pay him his "wages," meaning he has put in the work of leading Israel and now he demands his reward. Moses is articulating a fundamental challenge to God: If the righteous are not rewarded, what is the point of being righteous?

This question can be restated as the classic question of theodicy: Why do the righteous suffer at all? In Midrash Petirat Moshe, the question is never asked in this manner, but here the question is raised directly. And the response is never given. The

[111]Goldin, "The Death of Moses," p. 182.

midrash has already stated that part of the issue is Moses' failure to immediately pray for mercy. But God does not respond to this challenge, as Goldin notes:

> Since, if the purity of the faith fails to survive, it is futile to ask about the justice of rewards and punishments - and Moses, after all, is pleading only for what he feels like he deserves - something like a compromise must be attempted. Note, incidentally, that no Job-like, God-out-of-the-storm, answer is resorted to, i.e., the Lord is just, but we can't understand His ways, just as we can't understand much else: No overwhelming theophany [is given].[112]

The compromise which Goldin claims must be attempted is the same one that appears in Midrash Petirat Moshe: God, Himself, buries Moses, in almost the exact same manner. Given the directness of Moses' challenge though, the resolution does not appear satisfying.

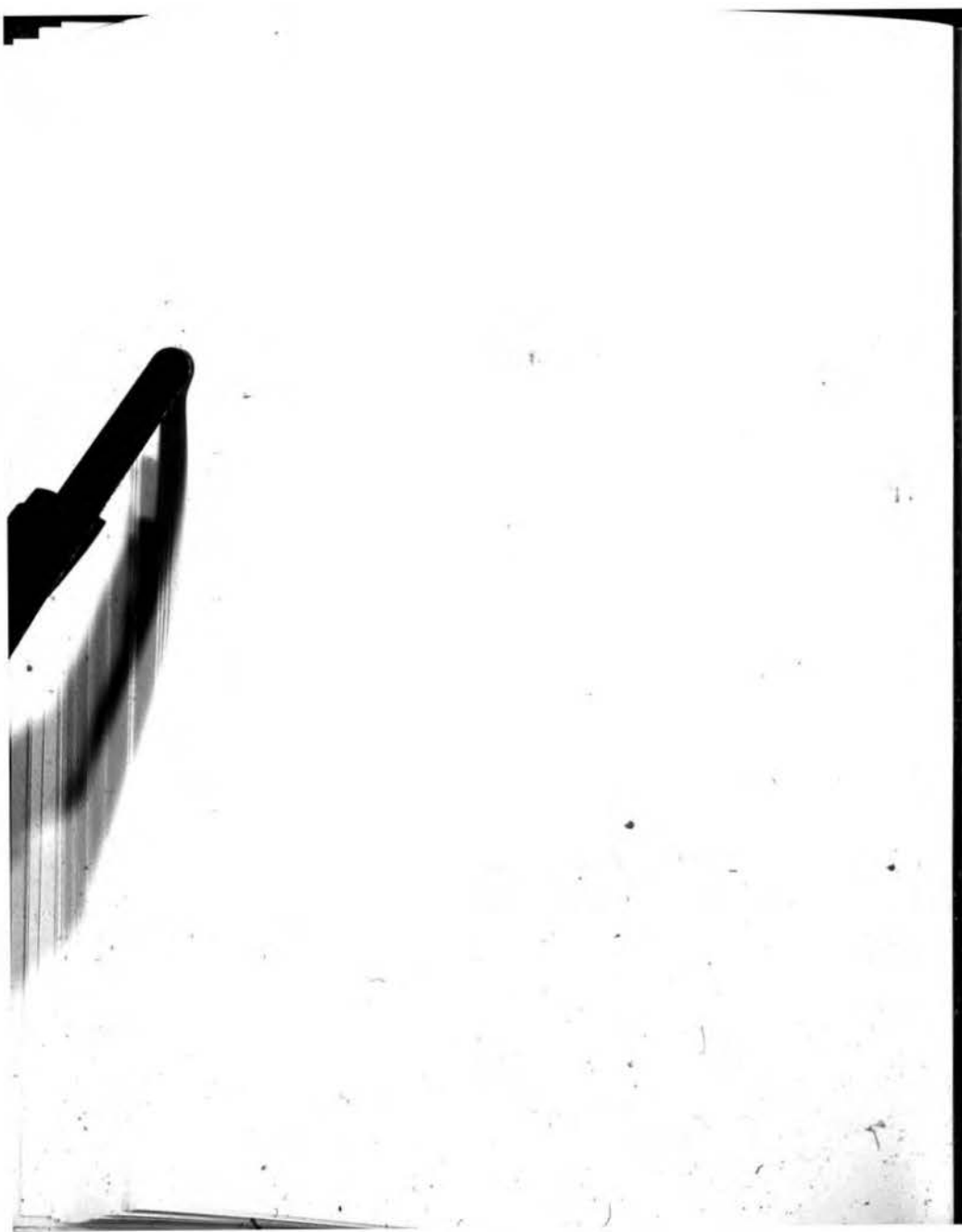
Deuteronomy Rabbah presents the boldest attempt to address the question of theodicy which has been running throughout the midrashim on Moses' death. What is especially striking is that God does not respond to the direct challenge. There is no explanation of Moses' sins as the reason for his death. He is left to realize that his pleadings are not going to reverse God's decree.

And, ultimately, he comes to the last stage of Kubler-Ross's scheme: acceptance. "Moses, seeing that there was not a creature in the world that could save him from death, says, 'God is the rock! His work is perfect'"[Dt. 32:4]. Moses must be satisfied that even though his pleas are not heard, God's way is still perfect. The other final piece of this question is God's mourning. "And God cried, saying, 'Who will rise up for me against the evil-doers, who will stand up for me against the doers of sins?'"[Ps 94:16] God mourns for Moses, thus Moses' death cannot be simply arbitrary, it does have significance. The Rabbis' final word on Moses' challenge to God may be that reward and punishment is not guaranteed. The decrees of death come to people as part of God's justice, and even

---

[112]Ibid.

though God's mercy may not be able to overcome this decree, God, nonetheless, deeply cares.



Part II

Chapter VI: The Use of Biblical Prooftexts

A. Job Chapter 28

The following analysis will examine a section of Midrash Tannaim which extensively uses prooftexts from Job Chapter 28. Although this chapter will only consist of an analysis of Midrash Tannaim, the use of verses from Job Chapter 28 can be found also in Midrash Petirat Moshe, Avot de Rabbi Nathan, version B, chapter 25, and B.T. *Sotah* 13b. In the first two cases, the verses are used as they are in Midrash Tannaim, as part of the Angel of Death's search for Moses. In the Talmud, the verses are used as part of the people's lament for Moses. There are other biblical verses which are used in a significant number of places, but the use of Job Chapter 28 is perhaps the most thematically nuanced, and thus will provide a good lens by which to view how the midrash incorporates biblical prooftexts.

1. Biblical Background for Job Chapter 28

Job Chapter 28 is commonly known as the "Hymn to Wisdom." It is assumed to be a later insertion into the Book of Job because it does not seem to refer to the chapters before or after it. Also, it has a "reflective tone" which does not seem to match any of the speakers: Job, his comforters or God.[113] The chapter involves an extended search for wisdom. The search motif makes it an obvious analogy to the Angel of Death's search for Moses. The first part of the chapter, vv. 1-11, detail the ability of humankind to search the most remote areas of nature for precious stones. This is a prelude to contrast the ability of people to find precious stones with their ability to find wisdom. This contrast is made in 28:12: people may locate precious stones, "but from where will wisdom come? And where is the place of understanding?" In 28:14-19, the point is made that wisdom cannot be

[113]John Hartley, *The Book of Job* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdman Publishing, 1988), p. 373.

found in the deep or in the market. In 28:21-22, it is searched for in the realm of death, but, ultimately, it is only found with God.

In God's creation of the world, God established and utilized wisdom. In 28:25-26 God measures and details four chaotic forces of nature: wind, water, rain, and thunder. God determines how much rain will fall and the path of the thunder. And this is done in accordance with wisdom. "Thus, the cosmos is an ordered and elegant structure, not threatened by the attacks of chaos."[114] Doing evil is injecting chaos into this ordered structure. Thus, in 28:28, it says, "And he said to Adam, 'Behold! The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding.'"

As God utilized wisdom to create the world, people utilize wisdom to discern the Creator. "This wisdom is a spiritual wisdom that transcends human knowledge, but that does not mean that it is irrational. The converse is true. It is intelligible, for it is the portal into the vast resources of God's wisdom."[115] But even as humans use it to ascertain truth, one cannot actively search for it. "[The Author] wished to show that wisdom is not to be found at the end of human seeking, but that God alone, who possesses it, can impart it to man's understanding."[116]

The search for wisdom thus defines human limits. Even in death, wisdom is not granted, because death itself is part of the created world. This is exhibited in the midrashim by the fact that the Angel of Death is always clearly under the power of God.

Acknowledging that wisdom only comes as a gift from God is paradoxically the key to having wisdom. As Psalm 111:10 states, "The beginning of wisdom is the awe of God." The awe of God leads one to act piously, which "requires the renunciation of human hubris and efforts at self-deification and rule."[117]

---

[114]Leo Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt* (Sheffield: The Amond Press, 1991), p. 245.
[115]Hartley, *The Book of Job*, p. 384.
[116]E. Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job*, translated by Harold Knight (New York: Thomas Nelson Publihsers, 1984), p. li.
[117]Perdue, *Wisdom*, p. 247.

Leo Perdue summarizes the theology of Job Chapter 28 with the following:

> Job Chapter 28 leads to no revelation, produces no theophanic vision, and structures no alluring mythic world into which humans may enter. It attempts to return to a simpler, precritical faith yet unchallenged by the crisis of Holocaust.[118]

2. Midrash Tannaim: Text

Midrash Tannaim uses the prooftexts from Job Chapter 28 in the context of the Angel of Death searching for Moses. The following is the scene from Midrash Tannaim on Deuteronomy 34:5:

At that same time, God said to the Angel of Death, "Go and bring me the soul of Moses." And he went and searched for him, but could not find him. He went to the sea, and said, "Have you seen Moses?" The sea said to him, "From the day that he crossed through me, I have not seen him."

He went to the mountains and the hills and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "From the day that Israel received Torah on top of Mt. Sinai, we have not seen him. Maybe he is standing in supplication before God to enter the land of Israel."

He went to the land of Israel and said, "Is the soul of Moses here?" They said to him, "It is not found in the land of the living"(Job 28:13).

He went to the clouds of glory, and said, "Is the soul of Moses here?" They said to him, "It disappeared from the eyes of all the living"(Job 28:21).

He went to the ministering angels and said, "Is the soul of Moses here?" They said to him, "From the birds of the sky it is hidden."(Job 28:21) These ministering angels were called *Meoffin*.

He went to the deep and said, "Is the soul of Moses here?" They said to him, "No, as it is said, 'The deep says it is not in me'"(Job 28:14).

He went to Sheol and Avaddon and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "We have heard of him, but we have not seen him," as it is said, "Avaddon and death say, 'With our ears we have heard of it'"(Job 28:22).

He went to the ministering angels and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "Go to the people."

He went to Israel, and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "God understands its way, and knows its place (Job 28: 23). God hid him in the world-to-come.

---

[118]Ibid. Compare this statement with Goldin's about the lack of Jobian-like whirlwinds in these midrashim. See Golden, "The Death of Moses," on p. 66.

and there is not a creature in the world that knows where he is, "and wisdom where will it be found?" (Job 28:12)

3. Analysis

The search for wisdom is equated with the Angel of Death's search for Moses. As humanity is unable to find wisdom, so the Angel of Death cannot find Moses. As wisdom is only found in God, so, here, Moses is only found with God. As the search for wisdom defines the limits of humanity, so the search for Moses defines the limited power of the Angel of Death.

If the analogy is parsed more closely, the Angel of Death is associated with a humanity that searches for wisdom and Moses is associated with wisdom itself. In B.T. *Shabbat* 89a there is a direct parallel to this story where the Angel of Death searches the world for Torah:[119]

> When Moses had stepped down from before the Lord, Satan came and spoke to God, "Master of the World, where is the Torah?" He said to him, "I have given it to the earth. He went to the Earth and said, "Where is Torah?" The Earth said, "God knows its way"[Job 28:23]. He went to the sea...He went to Avaddon and Death, and they said, "We have heard of it"[Job 28:22]. He went before God and said, "Master of the Universe, I have searched the Earth and cannot find it. God said, "Go to the son of Amram." He went to Moses, and said to him, "The Torah that was given to you, where is it?" Moses said, "God gave me Torah?" God said to Moses, "Why are you lying?" Moses said, "Master of the Universe, it is your desire to hide [*genuz*] it, that you take pleasure from it every day. Am I able to take some of its greatness for myself?"

---

[119]The search for wisdom is a common folkloristic motif. Note the following taken from. N.H. Tur-Sinai, *The Book of Job* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer. 1957), p. 395: "In various legends, a hero searches the world for his beloved. After endless tribulations, he comes to the wise old man of whom he has been told that no secret is hidden from him, and inquires of him the whereabouts of his beloved, the old man confesses that he has never heard of her or of her mysterious palace. However, he comforts the questioner. Beyond the seven seas and the seven dark mountains he has a brother, older by a day, but wiser by a year, who may possess the required information. The lover then travels on, from place to place, from disappointment to disappointment, until he reaches his goal. In similar fashion, the searchers for wisdom are sent from the land of the living to the sea, and then to Avaddon and Death. Even these latter have not seen wisdom; but they have heard of it, and know that Yhwh is its possessor. When He installed the works of creation, He established wisdom, too - but man has no wisdom, save the fear of God and the observance of His commandments."

In this story, Torah itself takes the place of wisdom, and it is the Torah which is kept in God's domain. Torah functions similar to wisdom in Job Chapter 28, as Leo Perdue notes, "Wisdom is the mediator between God and the world."[120] Moses is, thus, associated with wisdom, which is Torah. "Nature is powerless against wisdom, just as it is powerless against the Torah. Both the Torah and Moses are above nature, found in proximity to God Himself. This is why the Angel of Death is unable to reach Moses."[121] The Angel of Death cannot reach Moses because death itself is part of nature and thus Moses, hidden by God, is above nature and above death.

From a theological viewpoint, the Rabbis have another layer of meaning in mind when they utilize the motif of the Angel of Death's search for Moses. The death of Moses implicitly brings up the question of why people die. The search by the Angel of Death for Moses is also a search for the meaning of death itself. One can search for answers as the Angel of Death does, going to all of the created world, only to learn that the explanation lies not in knowable terms, but resides only with God. And the appropriate response to intractable questions of theodicy, such as why people die, is simply to go back to the "pre-critical" faith found in Job Chapter 28: fear God and turn from evil.

The "meaning" of death thus rests in its capacity to humble people, so they come to understand God's Sovereignty. In Job Chapter 28:22, Death and Avaddon say, "We have heard of it with our ears." The anthropomorphization of death obscures what the Job text means by having a place called "Death." It is difficult to intuit whether this is pure abstraction or they truly envisioned a place or a state of being. However, of all the places the searchers for wisdom go, death is the only place that has even heard of wisdom. The author of Job is, perhaps, hinting at a certain wisdom that is born from an experience of death. Death is part of creation, and yet of all of creation, it, alone, stands just on the

[120]Perdue, *Wisdom*, p. 244.
[121]Kushelevsky, *Moses*, pp. 61-62.

fringe between this world and God's world, perhaps able to give some insight into God's realm.

To return to the Tannaim text, the search for Moses by the Angel of Death is infused with three layers of meaning. First, the Angel of Death's search is futile. Moses is with God and the Angel of Death cannot reach God. Second, the wisdom of why people die is also a futile search. This wisdom, too, is with God. Finally, the Angel of Death's futile search lends support to Moses' assumption. If Moses is Wisdom, which is Torah, he is in some way with God.

Chapter VII: Why Did Moses and Aaron Die?

The midrashim provide a number of different responses to the central question: Why are Aaron and Moses decreed to die? Were they punished due to their sins or was it "natural causes?" The answers to this question get to the heart of the rabbinic understanding of sin and death, reward and punishment, and God's justice. Far from speaking in one voice, the breadth of rabbinic tradition gives a multiplicity of answers.

1. Background

The Torah, itself, is not clear as to why Moses died.[122] In Aaron's case, the Torah is explicit, "Aaron shall be gathered to his people. He will not enter the Land which I have given to the children of Israel, because you rebelled against my word at the water of Meribah"[Num 20:26]. For Moses, however, the Torah provides three possible explanations for his death. The first is due to his role in the waters of Meribah scene. In Numbers 27:13-14, the text says, "And when you have seen it [the Land], you will be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother was gathered: Because you rebelled against my word at the Wilderness of Sin, in the strife of the congregation, to sanctify me at the water before their eyes, that is the water of Meribat Kadesh in the Wilderness of Sin." The second explanation for his death is that it is due to the people's siding against Caleb and Joshua. Moses' sin, here, is that he is part of that generation which did not believe. Deuteronomy 1:37 states, "Also God was angry with me on account of you [the people] saying also you will not go into the land." The final explanation for Moses' death is that he was simply old and it was time for him to die. In Deuteronomy 31:2 Moses says, "I am 120 years old this day; I can no longer go out and come in."

The three different explanations are all cited and supported in several midrashic traditions. Those who say Moses' death was due to his sin, and then by extrapolation, all death is due to sin; those who say Moses' did not sin, but believe that as a result of the

[122]See Chapter 1, pp. 5-9.

sins of others he was decreed to die; and finally, there are those who say Moses died because death is a part of life.

2. Sin

The clearest statement that Aaron and Moses died because they sinned is found in Sifrei to Numbers, *Pisqa* 137, "R. Shimon b. Eleazer says, 'Even Moses and Aaron died because of their sins, as it is written, "Because you did not sanctify me..."[Num 20:12]. But if you had sanctified me, your time for dying would not have come."[123] According to this statement, it is not that they would have lived forever had they not sinned, but their premature deaths were due to their sin at Meribah.

Other sins are also given as the reason for Moses' punishment. In Petirat Moshe, the Jellinek-A version, five other sins besides the striking of the rock are suggested: Ex. 4:13, Moses is reticent to follow God's command; Ex. 5:23, Moses questions God's judgement in sending him to Pharoah; Numbers 16:29 and 16:30, Moses sets forth the test of Korah, whereby if God is on Moses' side, Korah and his followers will be swallowed up; and, Numbers 32:14, Moses calls Israel, "sinful people." The other sins listed are hardly grounds for the punishment he receives. They are enumerated in order to reject the idea that God punishes on the basis of one sin alone.

In a different section of Jellinek-A, another sin is cited: he killed the Egyptian taskmaster; a reason which is not cited in any other source. However, the reasoning for citing this sin is clear: Moses killed the Egyptian and, therefore, he is guilty of a sin for which he needs to die.

In Deuteronomy Rabbah 2:8, a final reason is cited. Moses is not permitted to enter into the land, and thus must die because he did not correct Zipporah when she referred to

---

[123]Parallel sources which cite the sin at Meribah as the cause of Moses' death are found in Tanchuma *Ha-Nidpas Hukkat* 10; B.T. *Shabbat* 55b; B.T. *Sotah* 12b.

him as "an Egyptian" in Exodus 2:19. Joseph, on the other hand, admitted he was a Hebrew, thus earning the right for his bones at least to be brought into the Promised Land.

Midrash Petirat Moshe and Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10 both present more subtle versions of this theme. In both, Moses is decreed to die for unspecified reasons, and then the decree becomes fixed because Moses acts contrary to God. Interestingly, the actions he is punished for are exactly the opposite! In Petirat Moshe he is punished after he keeps pleading when God tells him not to, but in Deuteronomy Rabbah the decree is sealed when he does not jump up and plead. As discussed above,[124] this is a modified version of the reward and punishment system. Moses has done something wrong, but his actions do not fully justify his punishment.

In reviewing all the sources, only Sifrei to Numbers and B.T. *Sotah* 12b present an unmodified version of reward-and-punishment. In the other midrashim, alternative explanations are at least put forth. This is consistent with David Kraemer's work in Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature, in which he sees the reward and punishment system operating most directly in the earliest sources, specifically the Mishnah and Halakhic Midrashim.[125] It is, nonetheless, surprising. Although there are alternative explanations for Moses' death in the Torah itself, the scene at Meribah is the primary sin, and it is very clear in its condemnation of Moses. It is, perhaps, a mark of the post-Tannaitic period which is uncomfortable with the reward and punishment system, that by the time of Midrash Petirat Moshe and Deuteronomy Rabbah, the scene at Meribah is not even mentioned.

---

[124]See above, pp. 65-66.
[125]David Kraemer, *Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 211-213.

3. Original Sin

Kraemer demonstrates that as the Rabbis get further away from the Destruction of the Temple, their understanding of theodicy moves away from notions of strict reward and punishment, by looking at B.T. *Shabbat* 55b.[126] This passage begins with an opinion by R. Ammi, "There is no death without sin and no suffering without transgression." This opinion is supported by Sifrei to Numbers 137 which is cited above. Sifrei makes it clear that if Moses and Aaron died because of their sins, then surely all people die because of their sins. An anonymous *baraita* is brought against the position in Sifrei, "Four died because of the urging of the snake, and who are they? Benjamin, the son of Jacob, Amram, the father of Moses, and Jesse, the father of David, and Caleb, the son of David." The "urging of the snake" refers to the idea of original sin. In other words, there were four who died, even though they themselves never sinned, but died because of the original sin. This argument is so persuasive for the Bavli, that it ends the discussion by saying, "There is death without sin and there is suffering without transgression, and the refutation of R. Ammi is a refutation."

We have already seen the notion of original sin in Avot de Rabbi Nathan, version B, chapter 25, where God tells Moses he will die because of Adam's sin.[127] In Deuteronomy Rabbah 9:8, this idea is repeated, and in Petirat Moshe, Jellinek-A, Moses asks God, "Lord of the Universe, what sin is found in my hand that I must die?" God responds, "[For having tasted] from the cup of Adam." The cup of Adam refers to being a descendent of Adam.[128] It is quite surprising to find the doctrine of original sin so prominently displayed in Avot de Rabbi Nathan, the Talmud, Petirat Moshe-Jellinek-A, and Deuteronomy Rabbah. One would have thought that the Rabbis would have tried to distance themselves from it as being too Christian. The Talmud, in fact, contrary to the

---

[126]Kraemer, *Responses*, pp. 184-188. I am using his translation of B.T. *Shabbat* 55b.
[127]See above p. 54.
[128]Kushelevsky, *Moses*, p. 197.

Shabbat 55b passage, utilizes the same polemic against original sin in three other places.[129] Someone asks R. Yohanan why the gentiles are contaminated with lust, and he responds, "Because they did not stand at Mt. Sinai. For when the serpent came upon Eve, he instilled contaminating lust into her; when, however, Israel stood at Mt. Sinai, their lust ceased. But since the gentiles did not stand on Mt. Sinai, their contamination did not disappear." R. Yohanan's statement claims that for the Jews there is no such thing as original sin. The Talmud, thus, has seemingly contradictory statements regarding this idea.

Ephraim Urbach tries to explain this apparent inconsistency by rereading the *Shabbat* 55b passage contrary to David Kraemer's reading. He believes the Rabbis were actually rejecting original sin. He points out how the four characters mentioned who did not sin are really minor characters. He claims the Rabbis are making a subtle point. "The restriction of the effect of the first sin to the fate of four not very important persons annuls the significance of the episode, and, hence, takes away the basis of Paul's doctrine of redemption."[130] Urbach argues that the *Shabbat* 55b passage really means that sin does cause death, and the exceptions are so minor they prove the rule. The problem with Urbach's analysis is that it fails to view the case in the context of the Talmud, where the story is meant to stand in contrast with R. Ammi's opinion that death is a result of sin.

The apparent discrepancy over the Talmud's belief in original sin is difficult to harmonize. There is strong evidence that Judaism rejected the idea of original sin. Urbach claims, "The conception of death as a decree...puts an end to the connection between the sin of Adam and the sins of his descendents." Yet, at the same time, one must then try and explain how all these references to original sin made it into midrashim on Moses' death, from the earliest Tannaitic midrash all the way to the early Middle Ages and Midrash Petirat Moshe - Jellinek-A. The answer lies in the manner in which the Rabbis apply the doctrine

---

[129]B.T. *Shabbat* 145b-146a; B.T. *Avodah Zarah* 22b; B.T. *Yevamot* 103b.
[130]Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages*, translated by Israel Abrahams (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 427.

of original sin. The Rabbis use original sin in a limited way to discuss the issue of theodicy as it relates to death directly, divorcing it from its Christian connotations regarding the sinful nature of humanity.

In *Shabbat* 55b, the Rabbis are certainly using the idea of original sin, but they do not use it to discuss why people sin, rather to make the theological point that sometimes people die without having sinned. The utilization of the concept of original sin allows the Rabbis to go beyond the strict reward and punishment system. This is most clearly seen in an extraordinary passage in Numbers Rabbah 19:18:

> Because you rebelled against my word"(Num 20:24). This is related to the verse which says, "God will not starve the soul of the righteous"(Pr 10:3) This is Adam; all the righteous are decreed to die because of him. There is no death until one sees the face of the Shekhinah and reproves Adam, saying, "You caused us to die," and he answered them, "I had one sin, and you all have more than four sins."
> From where do we learn that one sees the Shekhinah and reproves Adam, as it is said, "I said I will not see God, God in the land of the living; I will see man no more with the dwellers of the world"(Is 38:12).[131]
> The righteous are punished with death because of light sins, that Adam will not be seized on their account, as it is said, "God will not starve the soul of the righteous." Therefore it says, 'Because you rebelled against my word."

This midrash presents a dialectical tension between original sin and personal responsibility. Adam is the one who brought death into the world, but the righteous after him are still responsible for their own deaths through their committing light sins. Original sin is thus placed in tension with reward and punishment to justify why the righteous are punished.

The midrash is careful to say in a most ambiguous manner that the righteous have committed light sins. "Light sins" either means that because of these sins, they were punished, or it means that they were nominal sins, and the righteous are truly being punished for Adam's sin. The point of the midrash is not to solve the tension, but to highlight these tensions.

---

[131]Here, Hezekiah is speaking after he was faced with death and recovered.

The tension in the scene is evident at the moment of death itself, in which one both sees the Shekhinah and reproves Adam. At one and the same time, there is both intimate revelation and bitter anger. This paradox may sum up the rabbinic world view of death better than anything else: It is the cause for bitterness, but it also affords the possibilities of seeing God.

4. Death Removed From Sin

There are still other explanations for why Moses is decreed to die. Numbers Rabbah, which is especially concerned with this question, offers two other possible explanations. In 19:14, the midrash says:

> "These are the waters of Meribah"[Num 20:13]. From here you learn that it was determined from before that Moses would be punished due to water. See where it is written, "And they turned back and came to Ein Mishpat, which is Kadesh, and destroyed all the country of the Amalkites and the Amorites"[Gen 14:7].

The midrash is playing on this verse in Genesis which says Kadesh is equal to the place of Mishpat, but the Rabbis read *Mishpat* here not as a place, but as "justice." Because the scene at Numbers takes place at Meribat-Kadesh, the Rabbis claim that from the earlier scene in Genesis 14, it is ordained that Moses would have justice done to him at Kadesh. This argument touches on the nature of free-will and sin. Did Moses have any choice but to strike the rock at Meribah? The discussion of free will is rare in these midrashim, indicating the Rabbis do not consider it a problem.

Numbers Rabbah 19:13 presents yet a different reason for Moses' death. If Moses does not die in the wilderness, it will be assumed that the generation that died in the wilderness did not enter the world-to-come. Moses, therefore, must die with the people. This particular explanation is not just to Moses' particular desire to enter the Land. The Rabbis, though, connect him with the people. It is ironic, because Moses' death scene in the Torah is marked by his solitude. But this midrash is similar to the traditions which

focus on original sin in the respect that Moses' death is perceived as not due to his own actions.

Finally, there is the notion that death does not have a reason attached to it at all. Sifrei Deuteronomy, *Pisqa* 339 reads, in this regard:

> The ministering angels ask God, "Master of the Universe, why did Adam Ha-Rishon die?" He said to them, "Because he did not fulfill my commandments." They said before him, "But Moses did fulfill your commandments, [so why did he die]?" God said to them, "This is my decree, it is equal for all men, as it says, 'This is the law of man when he will die in the tent'"[Num 19:14].

There is also a dialectic here. Adam died because he sinned, thus establishing death as a result of reward and punishment. Moses, however, dies simply because it is the natural way of the world. "It might be possible to resolve this apparent contradiction by proposing that only Adam's death must have been due to transgression, but that subsequent deaths are necessary on account of the decree of death precipitated by Adam's sin."[132] However, the midrash is more likely rejecting the notion of original sin, and simply placing the ideas of death as due punishment, and death as being inexplicable in tension with each other.[133]

The idea of death as simply part of nature is seen in Petirat Moshe where the Angel of Death says that all the souls were handed over to him on the sixth day of Creation. From this perspective, since all people die simply because God created death, then death must be seen as good. Thus, in Midrash Petirat Moshe, God tells Moses he needs to die to enter the world-to-come. But the Rabbis are always careful; death is never viewed only as good or redemptive in these midrashim, which we see in Numbers Rabbah where people rebuke Adam when they die. It is this constant tension which, more than anything else, marks the explanations for Moses' death. The Rabbis do not want to divorce the idea of sin from death, just as they recognize that sin is not always involved with death. Thus,

---

[132]Kraemer, *Responses*, p. 89.
[133]Ibid.

there is no one theology that ever emerges from the explanations given; only a constant struggle to find a balance between sin and death.

Even across time it is difficult to categorize the reasons given for Moses' death. As we have seen, many of the midrashim contain variant positions. In Midrash Petirat Moshe, the Jellinek-A version has three different positions, while the Midrash Petirat Moshe which we have looked at does not really even contain one. The one constant across time is that in no midrashim do we ever find a concept of a limited God. Even when death has no reason, God is still always seen as decreeing death. The inexplicability of death does not mean for the Rabbis that it exists outside of God's domain. As the theology of Job Chapter 28 informs us, the reason for death is found only in God's realm.

Chapter VIII: A Comparison of Death Scenes Between Moses and Aaron

A. Like a Lamb to Slaughter

The first time Aaron is introduced in the biblical text, the reader is unaware that Moses even has a brother. Owing to the Torah's terse style, the reader does not receive a description of Aaron's life or where he came from. All the reader knows is the important information - Moses cannot speak; Aaron is the talker. The initial encounter between the brothers is seen in the contrast between them: The text wants us to measure one in the light of the other. The text's desire to compare and contrast continues explicitly and implicitly in the midrash. There are occasions where Moses and Aaron are contrasted with each other, such as Avot de Rabbi Nathan, Version A, chapter 12 which focusses on the people's mourning. But more often, the texts do not make comparisons. The Torah, though, has "given permission" and even encouraged the reader to compare and contrast the brothers. In reading midrashic texts of Moses' death in comparison to Aaron's, certain aspects of the text only come to light in comparison to each other.

The most striking comparison is how they both approach death. The midrashim on Aaron's death present him as accepting the fact that he is going to die. Aaron tells Moses in Petirat Aharon, "Even if it is words of death [you need to tell me], for behold, I will accept them happily." And in Yalkut Shimoni, Vol 1, 664, Moses asks Aaron, "Do you accept death?" Aaron responds simply, "Yes." This acceptance must be seen in contrast to Moses' great anxiety and his refusal to be handed over to the Angel of Death. Moses says in Midrash Petirat Moshe, "Master of the Universe, if you will not let me enter the Promised Land, [at least] leave me in this world; I will live and not die...I will live like a ram or mountian deer that eats greens and bushes, and drinks rain water, and sees the world."

When Aaron accepts of his death, he is not merely someone who has made peace with the end of his time. Rather, Aaron becomes the model for absolute obedience to God's will. This motif appears most strikingly in Yalkut Shimoni, Vol 1., 787:

> Moses said, "Aaron, my brother, if God said to you that you will die in 100 years, what would you say?"
> Aaron said, "Righteous judge."
> Moses said, "And what if God told you today is the day?"
> Aaron said, "Righteous judge."
> Moses said, "Since you accept it, let us go to the top of mountain as God has told me." Aaron walked after him as a lamb to slaughter. God said to the Ministering Angels, "You were amazed at Isaac when he went up to the altar without refusing, and now you see the older following the younger to his death."

Aaron is more of a sacrifice than Isaac, because Aaron is fully aware of his walking towards his death and still journeys willingly. Aaron's death alludes to the Akedah - the Binding of Isaac - in other midrashim as well.[134]

In Midrash Petirat Aharon, Moses tells Aaron and Eleazer to come up the mountain with him, "At that moment, Moses told Israel, 'Wait here until we return to you. Myself, Aaron, and Eleazer will ascend the mountain; we will hear, and we will return." The scene is unmistakably an allusion to Abraham telling his servants to wait for him while he goes up to pray, and then he and Isaac will return.

There are other connections between the scenes. Both scenes are journeys up a mountain inspired by God's command. In Midrash Petirat Aharon, this journey is like Isaac's in that Aaron does not know why he is going up the mountain; he simply follows Moses' words. In Yalkut Shimoni, Vol. 1, 787, Satan circulates among the people stirring up trouble while they are on the mountain, reminiscent of midrashim in which Satan goes to the Abraham, Isaac, and Sarah with the goal of stirring up trouble. The notion that Aaron gives all of his clothes to Eleazer, perhaps also alludes to Isaac being replaced by the ram.

Why do the Rabbis make a connection between the Akedah and Aaron's death? Midrash Petirat Moshe and Yalkut Shimoni are both products of the Middle Ages, probably the post-Crusades, a time when the Akedah takes on prominence in Jewish theology.

---

[134]In the biblical scene of Aaron's death, there are also echoes of the Akedah. For example, Aaron is excessively passive and there is a leitmotif of "seeing," as there is in the Akedah. See Chapter 1, pp. 6-7.

Perhaps, the attention paid to the Akedah is carried over to other biblical characters, and the idea of sacrifice comes along with it.

In Isaac's almost-death, especially in midrashim where he is said to be 37, Isaac is a model for absolute trust and submission to God's will. He is totally passive and allows himself to be bound by his father without any struggle. Yalkut Shimoni, Vol. 1, 101 reads:

> "And they came to the place"[Gen. 22:9]. Both of them brought stones, both of them brought fire, and both of them brought wood, and Abraham was like one preparing for the wedding of his son, and Aaron was like one coming to his wedding canopy. Isaac said to Abraham, "Hurry and do the will of your Creator, burn me well and take my ashes to my mother and leave it with her."

Isaac is willing and anxious to fulfill his task as the sacrifice. Similarly, Yalkut Shimoni claims Aaron was willing to follow Moses to his death. In this Akedah-influenced world view, sacrifice is a religious ideal, and death is the ultimate sacrifice. Thus, Aaron's allowing himself to die is the religious act par excellence.

The midrash makes the point that Aaron could have fought his death, as Moses does. Numbers Rabbah 19:20 explicitly says that Aaron had the power to stand up to the Angel of Death. But Aaron does not. He is totally submissive to God's will. Death in this system could become a reward, as the ability to act out the highest ideal. However, the Rabbis are cautious of such sentiments, as we find no hint of this in the midrashim. All we see is that Aaron accepts his death. When compared with midrashim on Moses, the contrast becomes that much more highlighted.

Moses does not approach his death with anything near passive acceptance. The quiet of Aaron's death is replaced with the beginning of Petirat Moshe where God becomes angry at Moses for excessively pleading for his life too much. Moses asks to be turned into an animal that could quietly graze in the mountains, anything that would have him live forever. Moses fights with the Angel of Death to the point of almost destroying him. If he must die, he requests that at least his dead body be brought into the land. Sifrei to

Numbers 357 reads, "If I will not enter it living, I will enter it dead." To which God replies that Moses will not cross over at all. Moses' death is a disappointment; his goal is unfulfilled. Where Aaron is a model for passive submission to God's will, Moses expresses the burning sense of loss of this world. As they were in their initial encounter in the Torah, the two figures are complementary. Through both of them, the Rabbis are expressing the dual nature of their attitudes toward death. Their anger comes through with Moses, and their acceptance with Aaron.

B. You Will Be as a God to Him

When Moses and Aaron first meet in the Torah, God tells Moses rather strangely that he will be as a god to Aaron.[135] It is a rather odd way to characterize a relationship between brothers, but it does anticipate their relationship in the midrash. In Sifrei Zuta, Petirat Aharon, and Yalkut Shimoni, Moses expresses a desire to die like Aaron. In Yalkut Vol. 1, 664, we read, "My brother, when Miriam died, she saw you, and you and I were there to take care of her; when you die, you will see me and Eleazer taking care of you. When I die, who will take care of me?" To which God replies, "I will take care of you." As Moses does for Aaron, so God will do for Moses. Therefore, one sees in this parallelism the biblical statement coming true: Moses acts as a god for Aaron.

Moses as a god-like figure is an important element of the midrashim on Moses' death. His uniqueness is often seen in tension with his being like all other men. This god-like status is also why he is portrayed so horribly in Petirat Aharon. His divinity isolates him from people. The people reject his leadership, telling him they will stone him unless he produces water. The midrash justifies the people's anger by having God chastise Moses for his lack of respect for them. Moses is alone and, ultimately, cut off from the people.

---

[135]Exodus 4:16.

His death reflects that sense of isolation. In Avot de Rabbi Nathan, Version A, chapter 12, "Moses was not with anyone when he asked [to die like Aaron]: he was alone and God heard his whispering." This must be contrasted to Petirat Aharon where Aaron asks Moses why he did not tell him in the presence of his family that he was going to die. Moses' death is underscored by his aloneness, while Aaron has Moses, Eleazer and a family in his mind. In not a single midrash do we hear anything about Moses' family.[136]

Moses' isolation from people extends to the point where he has not been intimate with his wife:

> The soul said to God, "It is known to me that you are the God of all the spirits, and all the souls of all the living and all the dead who are in your hand. You created me, you formed me, you gave me the body of Moses who is 120, and there is no more pure body in this world than the body of Moses. He is not decomposing, and he is not food for worms. Therefore, I love him, and I don't want to leave from him.
> God said to the soul, "Leave, don't stay, and I will raise you to the high heavens, and I will place you under the throne of glory next to the *keruvim*, *seraphim*, and *gidodim*.
> The soul said to God, "God, from your Presence on high, 2 angels came down, Aza and Azael. They desired the daughters of the land, and they perverted the ways of the land, until you suspended them between the firmament and the ground. But the son of Amram, from the day that you revealed Yourself to him at the bush, he has not slept with his wife, as it is said, 'And Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Kushite woman whom he had taken, for he had taken a Kushite women'(Num 12:1). Please leave me in the body of Moses.[137]

This unusual midrash does not account for the problem of how Moses could have had children if he never slept with his wife. However, this midrash, which on the surface extols Moses for his virtuous nature, also makes clear that he is beyond relating to human beings. This inability is condemned by the Rabbis, as seen in his negative portrayal in Midrash Petirat Aharon, where the people jump to accuse him of murdering Aaron. Ultimately, as the midrash in Avot de Rabbi Nathan, Version B, ch. 25 states: The people

---

[136]L. Wienberger does reconstruct a midrash which has Zipporah searching for Moses in: "On a Lost Midrash," *Tarbiz*, 38 (1969): 285-293.
[137]Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

loved Aaron because he was a peacemaker. while Moses was disliked because he was a judge.

Conclusion

Midrash Petirat Moshe begins with Moses' decree of death. It makes no mention of the reason for this decree; it is not punishment for the waters of Meribat-Kadesh, for original sin, or for any thing else. The Midrash, thus, begins with silence on this crucial subject, even though the theme of the beginning of the Midrash is Moses making too much noise in pleading for his life. Irony, such as this, is employed throughout Midrash Petirat Moshe. For example, when the Angel of Death comes down to take Moses's soul, it is ironically the Angel of Death who is "working" for God, but it is Moses who defeats him using God's name. The use of irony reflects the paradoxical view of death the Rabbis hold. It is both frightening, yet absolutely necessary. This human tension is played out at the divine level in the battle between Moses and the Angel of Death.

Their battle represents the division within the Godhead between mercy and justice. The Angel of Death represents justice. By "justice" the Midrash does not refer to God's judgements, but rather, that part of God which is the way of the created world. It is a mechanistic view of God which often sees God as a victim of the laws of the world. God, for example, is seen mourning for Moses' death. God's justice, in this midrash, means God carrying out the sentence of death which falls upon all people, who must reach a point when it is their time to die. Moses has reached his time. Hence, Midrash Petirat Moshe emphasizes that all souls are handed over to the Angel of Death on the sixth day of creation, and that people need for this to happen. Conversely, the mechanistic nature explains the midrash's silence on the subject of what Moses did to deserve the decree of death. Justice means simply, it is Moses' time to die, and God must carry this "justice" out. Mercy, then, is that aspect of God which can intervene in the natural course of things.

The divison within the Godhead could lead to a radical seperation - in effect, two different powers. But the Rabbis never take this possibility seriously. The Angel of Death always acts within God's control. People need the Angel of Death. People need to move on from this world. There is no simple resolution to the division, only an understanding that the created world must be good, because it is God's creation. Yet, the Rabbis allow

themselves, through Moses, to express their anxieties, even while they affirm that God is in control. With Moses, the Rabbis move from denial to acceptance of death.

Midrash Petirat Aharon presents a different emphasis. In it, the bothers are implicitly contrasted with each other. The entire first part of the midrash is devoted to depicting Moses as isolated from the people, and falling out of God's favor. The last part of the Midrash, after Aaron dies and the people accuse Moses of the murder, also presents Moses as disconnected from the people. In between these two scenes is Aaron's death. In Midrash Petirat Aharon, Aaron is extremely passive. He is led up the mountain by Moses, without even knowing the purpose of the journey. This midrash must be seen in contrast to Yalkut Shimoni, Vol. 1, 787, where Aaron knows he is going to die the entire journey up the mountain. Here, Aaron is ignorant of what is happening around him. There is a childlike trust he has in Moses and in God. It is this trust which makes Aaron a model of faith.

Aaron dies surrounded by his brother and son. He accepts his death and in Yalkut Shimoni, Vol. 1, 787, proclaims at the moment he is dying, "I wish I had come sooner to the place I am now." The Rabbis affirm their sense of justice with the portrayal of Aaron. He accepts God's will and, in turn, is rewarded with peace as he leaves the world.

In Midrash Petirat Aharon and in virtually all of the midrashim, the relationship of the brothers is firmly in the author's minds. Moses envies his brother's death. Yet, at the same time, Moses is a "god" to Aaron. As God was the one who decreed to Moses that he would die, so Moses is the one who must tell Aaron of his decree of death. The elements of their deaths mirror each other, only whereas Aaron has Moses bury him, Moses has God and the ministering angels. Even as Moses is a "god" to Aaron, the pyschological portrayal of Moses humanizes him. He is simply scared to die. In these midrashim, Moses is thus a god and a brother, divine and human, and, finally, he is buried and also assumed to heaven.

There are a number of areas for further research which would extend and broaden this thesis. Moses' and Aaron's deaths are the subject of both Christian and Muslim oral traditions. This material could be examined and compared to rabbinic midrashim. Also, looking at later commentators and kabbalistic sources on the deaths of Aaron and Moses could provide a very rich resource. This is the subject of Fishbane's *The Kiss of God*. For both Petirot, manuscript work could be done towards developing critical texts for analysis.

Another area for further research is Jewish history. This study laid out the historical development of the midrashim, commenting only rarely on the reasons for this development. Thus, a study which attempted to understand to a greater extent the changes in motifs from a historical perspective would be invaluable. Also, there are number of themes which surfaced in this study, who's usage here should be compared to a more general study of these themes in Rabbinic Literature. These themes include: original sin, the soul versus the body, and the afterlife. Finally, this study very briefly used the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross[138] in understanding the stages of accepting death to view the midrashim. A study of these midrashim from a modern pyschological perspective may provide additional interesting insight.

[138]Kubler, Ross, On Death and Dying. See p. 74.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Assumption of Moses. Edited and translated by R.H. Charles. Oxford, 1897.

Avot de Rabbi Nathan, Versions A & B. Ed. S.Z. Schecter. Vienna, 1887.

Joshephus Flavius. Antiquities of the Jews, Vol. IV. Edited and translated by H. St. J. Thackeray. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1926.

The Letter of St. Jude. In The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha. Eds. Herbert May and Bruce Metzger. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Midrash Petirat Aharon. In Beit Ha-Midrash, Vol II. A. Jellinek. Leipzig: Nies, 1870. Reprinted in Ozar Midrashim. Judah Eisenstein. New York: J.D. Eisenstein, 1915.

Midrash Petirat Moshe Rabbenu. As printed in Notes on the Commentary to the Pentateuch. Abu Manzur Al-Damari. Edited by A. Kohut. New York, 1892. Reprinted in Ozar Midrashim. Judah Eisenstein. New York: J.D. Eisenstein, 1915.

Midrash Rabbah, 11 Vols. Ed. A. Mirkin. Tel-Aviv, 1956.

Midrash Tannaim. Ed. D.Z. Hoffmann. Berlin, 1908.

Petirat Moshe Rabbenu (Jellinek-A). In Beit Ha-Midrash, Vol II. A. Jellinek. Leipzig: Nies, 1870. Reprinted in Ozar Midrashim. Judah Eisenstein. New York: J.D. Eisenstein, 1915.

Philo. De Vita Moses. Edited and translated by F. H. Colson. Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1929.

Sifrei Bamidbar and Sifei Zuta. Ed. H.S. Horovitz. Jerusalem: Shalem Books, 1992.

Sifrei Devarim. Ed. L. Finkelstein. Berlin, 1939.

Talmud Bavli, 27 Vols. Ed. Adin Steinsaltz. Jerusalem: Israel Institute for Talmudic Publications, 1993.

Tosefta. Ed. Shmuel Zuckermandel. Jerusalem, 1937.

Secondary Sources

Alter, Robert. The Art of Biblical Narrative. U.S.: BasicBooks, 1981.

Dhorme, E. A Commentary on the Book of Job. Translated by Harold Knight. New York: Thomas Nelson Publihsers, 1984.

Eisenstein, Judah. Ozar Midrashim, 2 Vols. New York: J.D. Eisenstein, 1915.

Fishbane, Michael. The Kiss of God. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994.

Fox, Everett. The Five Books of Moses. Dallas: Shocken Books, 1995.

Ginzberg, Louis. The Legends of the Jews, 6 vols. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1928.

Goldin, Judah. "The Death of Moses: An Exercise in Midrashic Transposition." In Judah Goldin: Studies in Midrash and Related Literature. Eds. Barry Eichler and Jeffrey Tigay. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.

Hartley, John. The Book of Job. Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdman Publishing, 1988.

Jellinek, Adolph. Beit ha-Midrash, 2 Vols. Leipzig: Nies, 1870.

Kraemer, David. Responses to Suffering in Classical Rabbinic Literature. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth. On Death and Dying. New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1969.

Kushelevsky, Rella. Moses and The Angel of Death. New York: Peter Lang, 1995.

Lewy, Hans. "Introduction." Three Jewish Philosophers. Ed. by Hans Lewy. New York: Meridian Books and the Jewish Publication Society, 1961.

Loewenstamm, Samuel. "The Death of Moses." In From Babylonia to Canaan: Studies in the Bible and its Oriental Background. Eds. Y. Avishur and J. Blau. Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1992.

Mehlman, Bernard H. "Midrash Petirat Aharon," Journal of Reform Judaism, CCAR, no. 27, Summer (1980), pp. 49-59.

Michaelis, Werner. "Moses, Assumption of." In Encyclopedia Judaica, Volume 12. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1971.

Milgrom. Jacob. JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers. Philadelphia: Jewish Publicaton Society, 1990.

Perdue, Leo. Wisdom in Revolt. Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1991.

Plaut, W.Gunther. The Torah: A Modern Commentary. New York: UAHC, 1981.

Sarna, Nahum. JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989.

Schoenberg, Gary. Midrash Petirat Aharon. Unpublished Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, 1981.

Sirkman, Jeff. Midrash Petirat Moshe. Unpublished Rabbinic Thesis, Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion, 1987.

Strack, H.L. and Stemberger, G. Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash. Edited and translated by Markus Bockmuehl. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.

Thompson, J.A. Deuteronomy: An Introduction and Commentary. U.S.: Inter-varsity Press, 1974.

Trachtenbeg, Joshua. Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion. New York: Athenium, 1939.

Tur-Sinai, N.H. The Book of Job. Jerusalem: Kiryath Sefer, 1957.

Urbach, Ephraim. The Sages. Translated by Israel Abrahams. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Von Raad, Gerhard. Deuteronomy: A Commentary. Philadelphia: Westminister Press, 1966.

Weinberger, L. "On a Lost Midrash," Tarbiz. 38 (1969), pp. 285-293.