The Hidden Lawgiver:
Jewish and Christian Interpretations of the Death of Moses, 1st-6th Century

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the Jewish and Christian interpretations of the death of Moses from the first to sixth century of the Common Era. The textual focal point of this study is Deuteronomy 34:5-6:

> *Then Moses, servant of YHWH, died there, in the land of Moab, by the command of YHWH.YHWH buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beith-Peor. And no one knows his burial place even until this day.*

These two verses create a surfeit of problems and opportunities for Christian and Jewish exegetes. Engaged both in intercommunal debate and in shaping ideologies for their communities in reaction to socio-political events, Jewish and Christian writers found within the biblical account of Moses' death, fertile ground for asserting claims to the preeminence of their religious traditions, as symbolized by their leaders.

The paper is divided chronologically into six chapters, looking separately at Jewish and Christian versions of the death of Moses found in the Bible, the writings of Philo and Josephus, the Pseudepigrapha and Apocrypha, the New Testament, Tannaitic midrashim, Patristic writings, the Talmud, and the extra-canonical tractate, *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*. In order to facilitate comparative study, whenever possible, each chapter of Jewish material is followed by a study of Christian writings from the same period.

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Table of Contents

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Introduction

> "Most wonderful of all is the end of his sacred writings, which is to the whole book of the law, what the head is to the animal."
>
> - Philo, *De Vita Mosis*[1]

Deuteronomy 34, the shortest chapter in the Torah, contains the final book's most momentous events: the death and burial of Moses. A cursory reading of the chapter illuminates a tension between the succinct, biblical narrative and the pathos of the events recounted therein: Moses ascends Mount Nebo; God shows him the Land; God denies Moses' entry into Canaan; Moses dies; God buries him; Israel mourns; Joshua is elevated to lead the people; Moses is eulogized. Twelve verses, eight significant events in which the juxtaposition between the content and the narrative style compels elucidation. The terse, third person narrative is provocative: what is described -- and what is not -- engenders much of the large body of interpretive literature and the ideological struggles that I seek to investigate in this paper.

The textual focal point of this study is Deuteronomy 34:5-6:

> *Then Moses, servant of YHWH, died there, in the land of Moab, by the command of YHWH.YHWH buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beith-Peor. And no one knows his burial place even until this day.*

These two verses create a surfeit of problems and opportunities for Christian and Jewish exegetes of the first to sixth century C.E. Engaged both in intercommunal debate and in shaping ideologies for their communities in reaction to socio-political

[1] ii 192.

events, Jewish and Christian writers found within the biblical account of Moses' death, fertile ground for asserting claims to the preeminence of their religious traditions, as symbolized by their leaders.

When competing for followers in the ancient Near East, the success of a philosophical or religious movement depended on the reputation of its founder or lawgiver,[2] and the manner in which a leader died served as confirmation for the extraordinary quality of the life he led.[3] Josephus, for example, writing in Rome at the end of the first century of the Common Era, transforms Moses into a paragon of the cardinal virtues, a recasting of the biblical Moses that would have appealed to the Greco-Roman proselytes for whom he wrote. His Moses is a philosopher king who is rewarded with a death appropriate for a Greek hero.[4] Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215), a Church Father who had high regard for Moses, also believed that Moses was rewarded with a death appropriate for a great philosopher.[5] Yet for Clement, Moses' death was not unique, and his accomplishments were surpassed by a different leader; Jesus not only interpreted God's laws -- like Moses -- but understood "his Father's heart."[6] Within a Hellenistic milieu, in which heroes ascended to an eternal life in heaven, establishing the

[2]See Louis H. Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: University Press, 1993), p. 233.

[3]See, for example, my discussion of resurrection in Chapter 2, pp. 47-49.

[4]*Antiquities* 4.8.48-49.

[5]See my discussion in Chapter 5, pp. 142-148.

[6]*Str.* I 169.

particulars of Moses' (and Jesus') death was a crucial task for early Jews and Christians in order to defend the legitimacy of their religious traditions for the sake of their own believers and against outside attacks.

A. A Context of Debate

Moses was the one Jewish figure who was known to the Pagan world and he was a boon for the Jews in attracting adherents. By and large, Pagans viewed Moses in a positive light. Hecataeus, for instance, writing around 300 B.C.E., regarded Moses as a philosopher-king and considered him responsible for all of the major Jewish institutions, including the founding of Jerusalem and the establishment of the Temple.[7] But his history was also a target for Pagan and Christian polemics: by casting aspersions on Moses' character, Judaism was undermined. Pagan writers described him as a charlatan and imposter,[8] and Christian writers minimalized him in favor of Jesus.

The debate revolving around Moses' reputation began perhaps as early as the fifth century B.CE.,[9] but fundamentally changed with the emergence of Christianity in the first century C.E. During the rabbinic period, Jews and Christians debated who was the true Israel.[10] As Marc Hirshman writes, the Jewish-Christian

[7]See Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, p. 234.

[8]See Josephus *Against Apion* 2.290. Also see Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, pp. 233-242, for a detailed discussion of the manner in which Moses was portrayed by Pagan writers.

[9]Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, p. 234.

[10]See Marc Hirshman, *Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996), p. 1.

debate was a case wherein,

> one religion claims to be the heir of the other, draws from the same sources, adopts the same ancestral myths, and presumes, in fact, to be *the* true religion, arguing that the other has lost its identity and authenticity. Whether the pretenders to the crown have their roots in the first religion or whether they are outsiders does not matter. Their claim that the legacy which has so far been understood and practiced in a specific way is now the patrimony of a greater and more expert interpreter, who holds the true keys to its understanding and fulfillment.[11]

At the center of this debate stood the Bible, and Jews and Christians interpreted it to serve their own needs. Both camps sought to persuade their own believers, Pagans, and each other that theirs was the authentic tradition and that their leader was God's chief agent on earth. Within this debate, Jews claimed that the Oral Law was unique and given to them by Moses, while Christianity saw its singularity "in its belief in Jesus as the Messiah and his grace to humanity."[12]

The Bible was woven inseparable into Christian writings. According to A. Harnack, there were five ways in which the Bible served the Church as a source of religious recognition:

> 1. for the development of a monotheistic cosmology;
> 2. for the presentation of proof from prophecy of the validity and antiquity of Christianity;
> 3. for the foundations of all the conceptions, ritual ceremonies and regulations which were needed by the Church;
> 4. For a deepening of the life of faith (chapters from psalms and from various prophets);
> 5. for the refutation of Jewry as a nation, that it, for the proof that this nation had been rejected by God, whether by the argument that it had never had a covenant with God or that it had only been

[11]Hirshman, *Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation*, p. 13.

[12]*Ibid.*, p. 22.

> a covenant of anger, or that the Jews had forfeited the covenant; also, to prove that the Jewish nation did not understand the Bible at all and therefore was deprived of it, if indeed it had ever had possession of it.[13]

Harnack's list describes the general usefulness of the Bible for Christian internal and external purposes. And although this paper is primarily concerned with the Christian-Jewish debate, it is important to highlight that this debate occurred within a larger context of conflict between Christians and Pagans. In fact, as David Rokeah argues in his book, *Jews, Pagans and Christians In Conflict*, the principle debate occurred between Christians and Pagans, while Jews were a secondary component to this encounter.

Rokeah offers a survey of scholarly approaches to the question of the intensity of debate between Jews and Christians.[14] Rokeah agrees with Adolf Harnack, who states that what purports to be a polemic against the Jews is nothing but an apologetic for the internal use of the Church.[15] Polemicists viewed Jewish sources as reliable and unbiased.[16] Rokeah argues that in the first century and first half of the second century, Christians and Jews were engaged in active polemics, but shortly after the Bar Kokhba revolt, the interaction shifted to one

[13]See David Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians In Conflict* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1982), pp. 92-3. List from *Dogmengeschichte* (6th ed.; Tubingen, 1922, p. 49).

[14]*Ibid.*, pp. 42ff.

[15]See Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians*, p. 47, and Adolf Harnack "Die Altercation Simonis Iudaei et Theophili Christiani nebst Untersuchungen uber die antijudische Polemik in der alten Kirche," in Texte und Unterschungen (Leipzig, 1883) I, 3, pp. 75ff.

[16]See Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians*, pp. 9-10.

of "debate" or "dispute." According to Harnack, Judaism did not worry the Christians, nor Christianity, the Jews. The two religions disregarded each other, and did not confront each other in an active polemic after the end of the second century.[17]

Rokeah further suggests that even the anti-Jewish character of Christian treatises, such as Tertullian's "Adversus Iudaeos" (late second century), does not testify to the existence of a Christian -Jewish polemic.[18] According to Rokeah, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue With Trypho* is the last work, both chronologically and materially, intended primarily as a polemic against the Jews.[19] After that, he concludes, the Jews were not part of the debate, but Jewish writings were key to the Christian - Pagan polemic. Christians and Pagans made extensive use of all facets of Judaism and were conscious of the fact that arguments based upon Judaism were powerful because the Jews were not suspected of favoring either Christians or Pagans.

Marcel Simon suggests a different perspective and points to the issue of proselytism. Within this context, it is important to judge whether the Jews conducted active proselytism, as this might indicate the intensity of the debate between Christians and Jews. Simon maintains that Jews did indeed actively seek converts during the first five centuries of the Common Era, and characterizes the period from the Bar Kokhba revolt to the abolition of the Patriarchate of the Jews

[17]See Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians*, p. 47.

[18]*Ibid.*, p. 209.

[19]*Ibid.*, p. 47.

(135-425) as a time of active polemics between Jews and Christians. But Simon admits that it is difficult to locate decisive Jewish sources in support of this contention.[20] Arguing that Judaism was not reclusive and its proselytizing was a "thorn in the eyes" to Christians, Simon interprets the Christian sources as an attempt to counter the attractiveness of Judaism.[21] Furthermore, Simon suggests that as result of the strength and expansion of the Church in the second century, the hostile Pagan attitude towards the Jews from 70-135 C.E. gradually changed to a positive position and the Pagans perhaps began to see the Jews as their allies against the Christians.[22] In this view, the Pagans saw conversion to Judaism as a lesser evil than to Christianity, while conversion of a Christian to Judaism was perceived as a positive gain. As a result of this alliance, in which Pagans and Jews became united against the Church Simon believes that there is no ground for speaking of a Pagan-Jewish polemic.[23] But as Rokeah points out, even if the Pagans viewed the Jews as allies, the attitude was not necessarily mutual.[24]

In the middle of second century there was a recognizable change in Pagan-Jewish relations which is characterized by a spirit of moderation and acquiescence brought by the Romans. With the final military defeat in 135 C.E., the Jews were

[20]See Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel : a study of the relations between Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire, 135-425* (New York : Published for the Littman Library by Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 315.

[21]*Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

[22]*Ibid.*, 61-62.

[23]*Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

[24]See Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians*, pp. 40-41. See n. 4.

no longer considered a threat to the security of the Empire, and as a result of the destruction of Hellenistic and Palestinian Jewry, conversion of Pagans to Judaism may have subsided. But the emergence of Christianity and its proselytizing created a new threat for the Romans, and the Jewish-Pagan polemic was replaced by a Pagan-Christian one. Pagans tried to sever the connection between the Christians and the Bible by emphasizing the position of the Jews against the Christians, and they attacked Christianity by seeking to undermine its Jewish roots. [25]

The Christians used the Bible in their polemical arguments against the Pagans and linked themselves to Judaism in order to assert their historical validity. Without Judaism, Christianity "would have appeared to Pagans as a new religion that spread in the Hellenistic-Roman period and centered on a certain divinity or personality (e.g. emperor worship)."[26] By connecting themselves to the Bible, Christians were able to refute accusations of novelty and sedition. Christianity sought to remain under the aegis of Judaism, for it had legal status. Furthermore, Christians argued that the Bible was older than Greek writings - (a claim originally presented by Hellenistic Jews) and therefore more truthful. Moreover, the Bible was indispensable for proselytism, as it contained the origins of Christianity. Finally, the Bible offered a decisive and uncompromising monotheistic and anti-polytheistic attitude, thus strengthening their position and

[25]See Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians*, p. 210.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 92.

unequivocally separating its tradition from Paganism.[27] In their struggle to appropriate Jewish texts, the Christians believed that the Jews were incapable of understanding their own Torah. In an effort to defend themselves, the Rabbis used midrashim (textual exegesis), while Christians wrote whole works on who they were and what they believed.[28]

B. Definitions and Methodologies

As this paper is an investigation of the ideological messages contained in Jewish and Christian descriptions of Moses' death, which were composed against this "background" of Christian-Jewish debate/polemic, it is important to clarify the terms utilized in this discussion. I have been guided in my investigations by the terminology presented by certain scholars. When searching for ideological messages, I utilized Rella Kushelevsky's definition of an "ideological principle":

> The ideological principle suggests contact points between the literary material and the extra-literary phenomenon belonging to the realms of philosophy and psychology. At the same time, the different shaping of ideas in the different works sheds light on contact points between literature, history, and sociology: the fashioning of the material, and the ideas arising from it, is related to specific circumstances of time and place.[29]

Rokeah describes the relationship between a "polemic" and an "apologetic":

> Polemic [is a word] used to indicate a campaign or conflict having the aim of changing an opponent's view or religion. A religious

[27]See Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians*,pp. 92-93.

[28]See Hirshman, *Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation*, p. 10.

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

> polemic can be conducted independently or in conjunction with other coercive means, police or political. A decisive criterion is the interest it arouses in the participants of the polemic. A polemic is at the same time also apologetics, that is, a justifying of oneself in the face of an opponent's attack.

Furthermore, Rokeah distinguishes a polemic from a dispute or debate:

> A "dispute" or "debate" is an interchange of words aiming at the clarification of various matters. Participants are aware that the outcome will not entail any crucial change in their future attitudes, behavior, or fate.[30]

In his *A Rivalry of Genius: Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation in Late Antiquity,* Marc Hirshman further distinguishes between "open" and "hidden" polemics or controversy when tracing an ideological struggle as it is expressed in literary sources: "In the open controversy the source explicitly mentions the name of ideological rival and ascribes to him a particular stance."[31] As for the "hidden controversy," Hirschman explains:

> Different reactions are possible when faced with an ideology one dislikes. One can simply disregard it, and fail to address it altogether, either explicitly or implicitly. One can insist on adhering to known ways, dismissing any attempt to change them because of external causes, and remain oblivious to all other views, whether similar or different. An alternative approach may choose to conceal any material that may be helpful to the opponent... A third approach might be to adopt our rival's claims and imprint them with our own seal of "authenticity," in other words, "judaize" [or "christianize"] our opponent's doctrine.[32]

Hirshman emphasizes that this analyzing these messages requires extreme caution

[30]Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians*,pp. 9-10.

[31]Hirshman, *Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation*,p. 126.

[32]*Ibid.*, p. 130.

and at times is no more than an hypothesis.[33] In addition to attempting to adhere to this terminology, when studying the texts I asked the following questions, put forward by Hirshman:

> 1. Were the homilists of the time aware of their ideological rivals?
> 2. Perhaps the texts were meant only for their communities?
> 3. Maybe they expounded texts without any polemical concerns?
> 4. Does the literature attest to any awareness of exegetical rivals outside of Judaism and Christianity?[34]

C. Overview of the Thesis

In Chapter One, I examine the biblical account of Moses' death and the separate biblical traditions which offer explanations for his death, and God's punishment of not allowing him to enter the Land. This serves as the textual background to the Christian and Jewish interpretations of Moses' death from the first to sixth century.

Moses' transgressions, as presented in the Bible, are of particular interest to the first century, Jewish writers surveyed in Chapter Two. Josephus and Philo, writing in the Diaspora, transform Moses into a Greek, philosopher king who dies a unique death, appropriate for a Greek hero. In this chapter, I compare Philo's and Josephus' descriptions to those of their near contemporaries writing in Palestine, by analyzing the accounts of Moses' death found in *Biblical Antiquities*, II *Baruch*, and the *Assumption of Moses*. These texts evidence different ideological perspectives than those of Philo and Josephus, and reflect contact

[33]See Hirshman, *Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation*, p. 129.

[34]*Ibid.*, p. 5.

with emerging Christianity.

In Chapter Three, I evaluate the New Testament references to Moses' death. In these descriptions (which predominately point to Moses' ascent), I find a polemic aimed at certain Jewish circles in Palestine, and more broadly, at Moses' standing as God's chief agent on earth.

In Chapter Four, I begin my examination of the rabbinic accounts of the death of Moses from the second to sixth century. The Tannaitic Midrashim (second and third century) show a shift away from the exegetical orientation of Moses' ascension and concealment described in first century accounts. Furthermore, in contrast to Philo and Josephus' interpretations, the ideological messages of these texts appear to be directed internally; within these death accounts there is little overt evidence of Christian-Jewish debate.

I return to Christian exegetical perspectives in Chapter Five, through an examination of Clement of Alexandria's and Origen of Caesaria's comments on the death of Moses and the manner in which they use his death to serve Christian apologetic purposes. This material is roughly contemporaneous with the rabbinic midrashim studied in Chapter Four.

In Chapter Six, I conclude my investigation of rabbinic versions of the death of Moses, by studying fourth through sixth century accounts found within the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds and the extracanonical tractate, *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*. This material emphasizes Moses' death as it is portrayed in the Bible, and appears to be intended solely for the Jewish community.

Finally, I have tried to avoid the masculine pronoun in my references to God. As Frederick J. Murphy writes, "Language reflects and influences thought, and our efforts to rectify distorting, gender-based language about God are right and important."[35] Within my translations of Rabbinic material I have maintained the androcentric perspective of the texts as this accurately reflects the outlook of the writers. But in my own comments, I have tried to remain "gender-neutral" in my references to God for this reflects my theological stance. This effort, at times, has made for somewhat awkward constructions, such as the repetition of the word God in certain instances.

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[35]Frederick J. Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* (Oxford: University Press, 1993), p. 8.

Chapter 1

The Biblical Account of Moses' Death

A. Biblical Explanations for Moses' Denied Entry into the Land

In the book of Numbers, we first learn of Moses' denied entry into Canaan and his approaching death. In this book, there are two distinct moments that can be used as justification for Moses' punishment, and together they comprise the priestly explanation for Moses' death. The first is found in the spy account (Numbers 13:21 - 14:43) in which, as a result of the community's apostasy, God declares:

> In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop. Of all of you who were recorded in your various lists from the age of twenty years up, you who mutter against Me, not one shall enter the land in which I swore to settle you - save Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.[1]

God's statement implicitly condemns Moses as one of the wilderness generation who must die without reaching Canaan.

Later, in Numbers 20:12, Moses' death is explicitly decreed. At Kadesh, when the community clamors for water, God instructs Moses and Aaron to assemble the people and in their presence, and order water to flow from a rock. But Moses does not obey God's instructions: instead of ordering the rock to yield water, Moses strikes the rock twice.[2]

> Moses and Aaron assembled the congregation in front of the rock; and he said to them, "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you

[1]Numbers 14:29-30.

[2]According to W. Gunther Plaut in The *Torah: A Modern Hebrew Commentary* (New York: UAHC, 1981), "The miracle was to have lain in the power of the word spoken to the inanimate stone in God's name" (p. 1155).

> out of this rock?" And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water and the community and their beasts drank. But the Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Because you did not trust Me enough to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people, therefore you shall not lead this congregation into the land that I have given them."[3]

But it is in the book of Deuteronomy, not Numbers, that the story of the death of Moses is actually told. Deuteronomy begins, *These are the words that Moses spoke to all of Israel on this side of the Jordan river in the wilderness.*[4] Thus, from its opening moments, the narrative reminds the reader that Moses has reached the terminus of his journey.

Much of the book is a death scene narrated by Moses himself who repeatedly refers to the episodes in Numbers:

> And YHWH heard the voice of your words. God grew wrathful and swore saying, "Not one individual of these persons of this generation will see the good land that I swore to give to your ancestors. Save for Caleb the son of Japhunneh: he will see it; and to him I will give the land...' And YHWH also was angry with me because of you (בגללכם) saying, 'even you will not go there' (Deut. 1:34-37).

This passage is one of three autobiographical statements which offer the deuteronomic explanation for Moses' death outside of the Land. Here, Moses declares that his fate was first announced to him thirty eight years earlier at the climax of the rebellion that followed the report of the spies (Numbers 14). This first reference in Deuteronomy to Moses' denial is a moment without parallel in

[3]Numbers 20:10-12.

[4]Deut. 1:1.

the earlier material of Numbers 13-14.[5] For there, in the original account, Moses is only implicitly condemned as a member of the wilderness generation and is not singled out for particular mention. Here, in Deuteronomy, Moses blames the people for his denied entry. This passage (1:34-37) enhances and adds poignancy to the the third-person narrative in the book of Numbers.

In the Numbers narrative, God's emotional state and actions dominate the descriptive foreground of the account, while in Deuteronomy, Moses' verbal and emotional reactions share the spotlight. After telling of the death of the wilderness generation (Deut 2:14-16) and the conquest of the east bank of the Jordan river, Moses recounts his petition to God at the time of these battles, and God's subsequent, blunt denial:

> Now I pleaded with YHWH at that time saying, 'My Lord YHWH, You started to show your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand, that who is a god in heaven and on earth, that can do according to your actions and to your might! Please let me cross over and let me see the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan: this good hill country and the Lebanon.' But YHWH was cross with me because of you and did not listen to me. YHWH said to me, 'That is enough out of you. Do not speak to me anymore about this matter!'[6]

This dialogue has no parallel in the Numbers narrative and, like the previous autobiographical statement (Deut. 1:37-38), gives sound to the palpable silence of the Numbers account. When Moses is explicitly condemned after the incident at Kadesh (Num. 20:12), he does not rise to his own defense. The Numbers text

[5]See Thomas Mann, "Theological Reflections on the Denial of Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 98/4 (1979), pp. 481-482.

[6]Deut. 3:23-28.

moves quickly onward into a folk etymology of the location's name and onto new events.[7] The devastating sentence issued by YHWH against Moses receives no reaction. Not until in Deuteronomy 3:23-28, are we "informed" of Moses' appeal which expresses his pain and frustration with YHWH's harsh decree.

Finally, in the third autobiographical statement (Deut. 4:21-22), Moses provides yet another account of his rejection and makes the most definitive statement that he understands his fate and is powerless to change it:

> YHWH became angry with me because of your words, and swore not to let me cross the Jordan and not to enter the good land that YHWH is giving you as an inheritance. For I am going to die in this land without crossing the Jordan. But you will cross and take, as a possession, this good land.

Within these three textual moments (Deut. 1:34-37, 3:23-28, 4:21-22), the deuteronomic author(s) creates a picture of Moses that is quite different then that found in the account of the book of Numbers. Wherein Numbers Moses is silent about his fate, in the first few chapters of Deuteronomy he is verbose: the reader encounters his pain as he lets loose his feelings. In Numbers Moses defends the community, but in Deuteronomy he stands up for himself.

B. Two Interpretive Traditions

1. The Priestly and Deuteronomic Explanations for Moses' Death

The Numbers narrative and the deuteronomic material indicate at least

[7]*Those are the waters of Meribah* (מריבה) *-meaning the Israelites quarrelled with YHWH* (Num. 20:13).

two separate textual traditions and subsequent theological differences. The priestly explanation, primarily found in Numbers, suggests that Moses' transgression -- the striking of the rock -- brings about the people's doom as well as his own. For this transgression YHWH condemns Moses and thus death is a punishment for *his* faithlessness.

This priestly perspective is the opposite of the deuteronomic strand in which the people are held accountable for Moses' plight. In the autobiographical statements above, Moses squarely assigns the blame for his predicament upon the people. The first two statements (1:37-38 and 3:23-28) are placed at two key points within Deuteronomy: at the denouement of the retelling of the spy narrative and at the end of the introductory section of the book.[8] The prominent placement of these texts calls particular attention to the language of each moment which contains a single, strong accusation against the Israelites.

And YHWH also was angry with me because of you(בגללכם) *saying, 'Even you will not go there'* (Deut. 1:37). In essence, the explanation for Moses' denial found in this first statement hangs on one word: *bglalkhem*, "because of you." It is a difficult term to understand because of its vagueness: what is Moses' specific accusation? One possible explanation sees a connection with the commissioning of the spies that is recounted earlier in the chapter. Interestingly, in the book of Numbers, YHWH commands Moses to send scouts (Num. 13:2). But, in the

[8]See Mann, "Theological Reflections,"p. 483. He ascribes these two statements to a single redactional strand. Moses' request in 3:23-25 would not make sense without the denial of entrance into the land related in 1:37-38.

deuteronomic narrative, the people suggest sending spies: *Then all of you approached me* (תקרבון עלי) *and said, 'Let us send men ahead of us and they will reconnoiter the land for us* (Deut. 1:22). As the story progresses (in both the Numbers and Deuteronomy accounts) the commissioning of the spies ultimately leads to dissent and rebellion. Thus, is Moses' accusation (בגללכם - "because of you") referring to the people's brainstorm? Within the deuteronomic retelling, even the idea serves as evidence of apostasy. The people suggest sending the spies immediately after Moses declares, *See, YHWH your God has given this land before you. Go up, take possession as YHWH the God of your ancestors spoke. Go. Do not fear and do not go down*(Deut.1:22).

A close reading of verses 21 and 22 highlights the people's lack of faith. In v. 21, Moses exhorts the group in the singular form. The land lies "before it" (לפניך); the people should "Go" (לך), "Go -up" (על), and take possession" (רש). Faith is equated to group unity in Moses speech: the entire group joins in a single action, functioning as one individual. But when the people approach Moses with their idea, their action is conveyed in the plural form, *Then all of you approached me* (תקרבון עלי)(1:22); the group's unity has been undermined by their doubt in YHWH's power. They are a collection of individuals acting in tandem but not as one, and as the request for spies becomes the "seed of doubt" that grows into a rebellion, perhaps Moses blames the Israelites for starting the process that leads to his downfall.[9]

[9]See Mann, "Theological Reflections," p. 485.

This theory gains support from the accusatory phrase found in 4:21-22: *YHWH became angry with me because of your words* (על-דבריכם). However, when the people suggest the spy mission, Moses agrees with the idea: *And the proposition was good in my eyes*(Deut. 1:23). Thus, does the cryptic statement of 1:37 (*And YHWH also was angry with me because of you saying, 'Even you will not go there*) impute Moses, along with the people for beginning the community's unraveling that led to the rebellion? Is Moses' denied entry into the land punishment for poor leadership? This is a possible interpretation (and close to the priestly explanation) when one focuses solely upon the first chapter of Deuteronomy and these three verses in particular. However, nowhere in the deuteronomic explanation of his denied entry does Moses refer to his own responsibility; instead, the people are culpable for his plight and are explicitly accused. Rather than alleging individual responsibility, the emphasis of the explanations for Moses' denied entry found in Deuteronomy 1-4, falls on the guilt of the people.[10]

Moses' accusations in Deuteronomy form a two-fold attack. Internally - i.e. within the narrative - Moses blames the people for his agony. More broadly, the author(s) conveys a larger message to the reader that goes beyond this single biblical episode. The introductory section of Deuteronomy portrays a leader who is being punished for the apostasy of his people. This conception of the relationship between a community and its leadership is different than in other

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 486.

biblical episodes where the people are punished for their leader's lack of faith.[11] Does this change suggest, as Mann writes, a "major theological reassessment within the deuteronomic school regarding the primary importance of corporate responsibility vis-a-vis the relationship between king and people in the overall history?"[12] Typically, the fortunes of the people depend upon the behavior of their king. Divine beneficence is showered upon them when their king is faithful (cf. I kgs 21:27-29: the people are spared because of Ahab's penitence); or supernatural wrath scorches them when their king is not (cf. I Kgs. 21:11-12: the people are to be destroyed because of Manasseh's sins). The redactors of Deuteronomy wrestled with the theological problem of the relationship between a leader and his people,[13] a dominant theme throughout the book of Deuteronomy, and one that will be investigated further in this chapter.[14]

2. אמן vs. מרה: Further Theological Distinctions

Two words highlight the theological distinction between the priestly and

[11]For example, in I Kings chapter 14:16, God will *give up Israel because of the sins of Jeroboam* (בגלל חטאות ירבעם) *who sinned and made Israel sin.*

[12]See Mann, "Theological Reflections," p. 491.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 492.

[14]F.M. Cross in *Canaanite myth and Hebrew epic: essays in the history of the religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 274-290, describes how the deuteronomic treatment of Israelite kings is one of condemnation (of which Jeroboam serves as the exemplar), while there is a contrasting pattern of praise for Judaite kings (David is the model for this pattern). Josiah is the only king of Judah to completely escape criticism by the deuteronomic historian (II kgs. 22:2 23:25a).

deuteronomic explanations for Moses denial: *'mn, mrh.*[15] The priestly narrative emphasizes faith/trust (אמן) (cf. Num. 20:12), and the writer *only* uses *'mn* in his explanation for Moses' punishment. Moses (and Aaron) did not trust in God and therefore cannot bring the people into the promised land.[16] In the priestly explanation, Moses breaks faith with God. The word re-occurs in the deuteronomic retelling of the spy episode (1:32) but there the term refers to the people: they are held accountable for engendering Moses' transgression.[17]

In the deuteronomic account the people are labeled as "rebels" (from the root *mrh* - "to rebel" (Deut. 1:26, 1:43)), wherein the priestly version Moses (and Aaron) is the only one who, according to YHWH, *disobeyed my command* (מריתם) (Num. 20:24). Strikingly, the word *mrh* does not appear in the wilderness narratives of Exodus and Numbers and seemingly, was introduced in to the wilderness theme by the Deuteronomist. The priestly use of the root *mrh* makes one wonder if the writer(s) knew of the deuteronomic usage and sought to deliberately counter the explanation that the community was responsible for Moses denial.[18] For, in the priestly strand, *mrh* only appears when speaking of Moses' transgression.[19]

Taken together, the priestly uses of *'mn* and *mrh* appear to be more than coincidental and even suggest a hostile attitude towards the figure of Moses. In

[15]See Mann, "Theological Reflections," p. 483.

[16]*Ibid.*

[17]*Yet for all that, you have no faith in YHWH your God* (אינכם מאמינים ביהוה).

[18]Or the reverse: the Deuteronomist defends Moses from the priestly account.

[19]See Mann, "Theological Reflections," p. 484.

the priestly strand, the language used by the Deuteronomist to describe the community as a whole (ותמרו את-פי יהוה אלהיכם - Deut. 1:26) now is utilized to indict Moses(מריתם את-פי - Numbers 20:24). And in Deuteronomy 1:32, Moses accuses the people: *In this matter you did not have faith* (איננכם מאמינים) *in YHWH your God.* Whereas, conversely, in the priestly account, God accuses *Moses* and his brother of lacking faith (לא-האמנתם בי - Num. 20:12). In his attack the writer(s) twists the deuteronomic language to explain, in effect, that Moses' denial was not on account of the people's apostasy, but because of his lack of faith and his rebellion.[20] A common question of the midrashists investigating the biblical accounts of Moses' denial and death is, does Moses' punishment fit his crime? For the priestly writer(s) the answer is "yes": the seriousness of Moses' sin at Kadesh merits death before entering the promised land.[21]

[20]See Mann, "Theological Reflections," p. 485.

[21]In Psalm 106, an account of various moments of communal rebellion and Moses' subsequent protective intervention between YHWH and the people, there is evidence of a harmonization of the deuteronomic and priestly explanations of Moses' denial. The psalmist recounts the striking of the rock at Kadesh (Num. 20): *And they caused God to be wrathful at the waters of Meribah. Then it went ill with Moses for their sins, because they caused his spirit to rebel* (המרו את רוחו)*and he sinned with his lips* (Ps. 106:32-33). In this biblical interpretation culpability for Moses' plight is shared between the community and Moses. The people rebelled at Kadesh and this in turn caused Moses to sin, Yet the Psalmist, unlike the Deuteronomist, ascribes a level of culpability to Moses: *his* lips sinned (see Mann, "Theological Reflections,"p 483, note 7). Moses is responsible for his actions. But the Psalmist, in contrast to the priestly writer, does not issue a severe attack against Moses because the people provoked him: they had a hand in his undoing. Psalm 106 presents a combination of the two competing theological views that are the backdrop for the final events of Moses' life as narrated in the end of the book of Numbers and throughout Deuteronomy.

C. The Death Account

The death account is a tripartite narrative consisting of three scenes: Num. 27:12-33, Deut 31:1-23, and Deut. 34:1-12. Although there are references to the reasons for Moses death and denial found in these scenes, they do not occupy the foreground of this account and this is one of several reasons why this narrative strand requires separate analysis from the texts investigated above. The theological debate as to why Moses deserves to die is not central to these three texts. Rather, the three scenes focus upon the how and where of Moses death, leadership succession, and the future of a people denied of their paragon. Taken together, the three scenes form a tradition recounting the death of Moses that is separate from the Moses traditions of the exodus, Sinai, and the wilderness.[22] Yet each scene describes Moses' final moments differently and this, perhaps, reflects different stages in the tradition's history.[23]

1. Numbers 27:12-23

A central theme of 27:12-23 is succession and qualities of leadership, and the death account in Chapter 27 appears immediately after the land dispute involving Zelophehad's daughters. This disjunctive placement raises questions

[22]See George Coates, *Moses: heroic man, man of God* (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1988), p. 148.

[23]See George Coates,"Legendary Motifs in the Moses Death Reports," CBQ 39 (1977), pp.34-44.

as to why the scene is found here. Does the topic of future land distribution lead the redactor to create a thematic linkage to Moses viewing the land that he has divided amongst the tribes?[24] In verses 12-13, Moses sees the land in place of actually entering it: *YHWH said to Moses, "Ascend the heights of Abarim* [25] *and see the land that I have given to the Israelites. Then you will be gathered to your kin just as your brother Aaron was.* Theses verses mark explicitly the parallel with the death of Aaron, and the rationale for Moses' early death appears to be his transgression at the waters of Meribat-Kadesh (v. 14). This scene relies on the priestly explanation that holds Moses -- rather than the people -- responsible for his transgression.[26]

In verse 15 the scene moves to issues of leadership succession:

> Moses spoke to YHWH saying, Let YHWH, the God of the Spirits of all flesh, appoint someone over the community, who may go out before them, and who may go in before them, who shall take them out and bring them in, so that YHWH's community may not be like sheep who have no shepherd.[27]

The idiom "to go out and to come in" is rather general and can refer to the activities of a priest (Ex. 28:35), king (II kgs 11:8, Jer 17:19) or a prince (Ezek. 44:3-10). Each role involves "going out and coming in" and the ability to do this indeterminate action seems to be a central quality or skill of leadership that

[24]Moses' involvement in inheritance procedures and land distribution could be evidence of the Moses tradition being rooted originally in the theme of conquest, See Coates, *Moses:heroic man*, 146-148.

[25]הר האברים - the mountains beyond the Jordan - written from the perspective of one already dwelling in Canaan. Parallel found in Num. 21:11.

[26]Coates, *Moses:heroic man* , p. 149.

[27]Num. 27:15-17.

separates the official from his laity. As Solomon asks: *Now YHWH my God, You have made your servant king in place of David my father. But I am just a little child who does not know how to go out or come in* (I Kgs 3:7).

The hiphil form of the phrase found in 27:17(ואשר יוציאים ואשר יביאים) is unique and asserts that Moses enables the general activity of the people to occur. His ability to bring out the people and take them in, suggests leadership skills that extend beyond a particular role as priest or as king. In Moses' case, the very vagueness of the phrase bespeaks his power. Aaron "goes out and comes in" when he is involved in a priestly role (Ex. 28:35); Joshua's ability "to go out and come in" is apparent in war (Josh. 14:11); but it is only Moses who *causes* others "to go out and to come in" at all times, regardless of the context. This description of Moses' relative omnipotence is reinforced by the simile found at the end of v. 17: without Moses, the people will be like a flock without a shepherd. This pastoral image provokes many associations of attachment between a people and a leader, of "stability and life in his presence in contrast to chaos and death in his absence."[28] Just as the shepherd facilitates the lives of the sheep, so too Moses provides numerous resources, physical and spiritual, for the people. Moses' shepherding abilities have evolved: in Exodus 3:1 he tends the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, but here in Numbers he tends YHWH's flock.[29]

[28]Coates, *Moses:heroic man* , p. 149.

[29]The comparison of a leader to a shepherd is given its fullest expression in Ezekiel 34 (though applied in a negative way to David): The leader must feed and heal the people, defend the weak and crippled, he seeks out the lost, and rules not with harsh oppression, but with care.

In this scene, YHWH commands that Moses transfer his authority to a new leader:

> Single out Joshua son of Nun, a person who has the spirit in him and lay your hand upon him. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the whole community, and commission him in their sight. Invest him with some of your authority so that the whole community may obey. But he shall present himself to Eleazar the priest who shall on his behalf seek the decision of the Urim before YHWH. By such instruction they shall go out and by such instruction they shall come in he and all the Israelites, the whole community.[30]

The laying on of hands facilitates the transfer of leadership, and, in this case, is an explicit validation – performed within a very public setting -- of the new leader's ability to lead. But there are conflicting biblical accounts as to the strength of Joshua's authority. Definitively, the laying on of hands by *Moses*, gives Joshua the congregation's obedience. In Joshua 1:16 the people vouch: *All that you command us we will do. And wherever you send us we will go.* In this account (in the book of Joshua), the new leader's authority commands the same respect as that of Moses. The congregation pledges, *Just as we listened to Moses so shall we listen to you* (Josh. 1:17).[31] But the Numbers narrative describes a more complicated relationship between Joshua and the people. The community will obey him (v.20b), even though Joshua's authority is derived from only a partial transfer of

[30]Num. 27:18-21. Martin Noth in *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1972), labels this scene as a Priestly narrative along with Deut. 34:9 (p. 176).

[31]The people's obedience receives its divine confirmation in Josh. 4:14: *On that day YHWH magnified Joshua in the eyes of all of Israel and they feared him as they feared Moses all the days of his life.*

Moses' power (v.20a).

The nature of this leadership commission gives rise to two possible interpretations. First, because of the immense magnitude of Moses' power, even a partial transmission insures the obedience of the people. A similar pattern appears in the account of the succession of Elisha to the position of leadership occupied by Elijah (2 kgs 2.9), but Elisha needs a "double-portion" of Elijah's spirit in order to take up his mentor's mantle of leadership. Additionally, in Num.11:17, God withdraws a part of Moses' spirit and places it upon the seventy elders. The particular nature of this commission in Numbers is highlighted by the language: Moses is instructed to give part of his "authority"and not of his "spirit," as Joshua already possesses *ruah* (v.18).

A second interpretation is that Joshua's leadership role is compartmentalized: because he only receives a fraction of Moses' authority, he is responsible for only one facet (the militaristic undertakings of the community) of what had been Moses' role. The explicit delineation of Eleazar's role (v. 21) lends credence to this theory and gives greater definition to Joshua's relationship with God.[32] Unlike Moses, Joshua will not have unfettered access to YHWH. And although Joshua will facilitate the "going out and coming in" of the people as Moses had done, noticeably the phrase found here (v. 21) is *not* in the hiphil as it was when describing Moses' power (Num. 27:17). Joshua will lead according to book of the Torah (Josh. 1:7-8) which Moses bequeathed to him, and will not rely

[32]See Coates,*Moses:heroic man*, p. 151.

on his personal interpretation or meditation of God's words as Moses had done.[33]

2. Deuteronomy 31:1-23

In contrast to Numbers 27 and Deuteronomy 34 (see below), Deuteronomy 31 presents Moses at the time of his death as an old man incapable of leading: *I am one hundred and twenty years old and I am no longer able to go out and to come in. Moreover, YHWH said to me, "you will not cross over the Jordan"* (v. 2). Although the verse offers a partial justification for the death of Moses (he is old and debilitated) it is vague as to the reasons for his death at this juncture and his denied entry into the land. Is Moses dying for the sake of the people or for his own transgressions? In any case, the portrayal of Moses in this chapter is particularly non-heroic while creating, in opposition, a heroic image of Joshua.[34]

Joshua will carry out the functions that Moses can no longer fulfill and v. 3 gives greater definition to the particular leadership role he is to perform: *Joshua is the one who will cross before you* . The first part of the verse promises that, *YHWH, your God , will crossover before you. He will destroy the nations that lie before you and you shall dispossess them.* Until now, Moses had been the Divine's partner on earth. Now, Joshua stands in his place and his responsibilities are clearly articulated: *You shall go with this people to the land that YHWH swore to their ancestors*

[33]See Dennis Olson,*Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses: a Theological Reading* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1994), p. 168.

[34]See Coates,*Moses:heroic man*, p. 152.

to give them. And you will cause them to inherit it (תנחילנה) (v.7). The causative case is used and suggests that within at least one area Joshua will be a masterful leader; conquest will be Joshua's leadership forte.

3. Deuteronomy 34

Chapter 34 of the book of Deuteronomy is the final scene in the narrative and describes Moses' death and burial. This scene begins in the same fashion as Num. 27, in which Moses is shown the land to which he has been denied entry:

> Then Moses went up from the steppes of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the summit of Pisgah, opposite Jericho. And YHWH showed him all of the Land: Gilead to Dan; All of Naphtali and all of the land of Ephraim and Manasseh; and all of the land of Judah to the Western Sea; the Negev and the Plain – the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees -- as far as Zoar. YHWH said to him, "This is the land that I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, to Jacob, saying, 'I will give it to your seed.' I have shown it to your own eyes but you will not cross there." (Deut. 34:1-4)

Verses 5-6 move beyond the Numbers episode to give the explicit death report:[35]*Then Moses, servant of YHWH, died there, in the land of Moab, by the command of YHWH. YHWH buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beith-Peor. And no one knows his burial place even until this day.* The location where he scopes out the Land may also be the place where Moses dies, but the verse (v. 5) contains two allusions to the locale – "there" and "the land of Moab"-- provoking the

[35]According to Noth the tradition of the grave of Moses "is the most original element of the Mosaic tradition still preserved... A grave tradition usually gives the most reliable indication of the original provenance of a particular figure of tradition" (*A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, p. 169-170).

questions: does "there" (שם) refer to Mount Nebo/the summit of Pisgah?[36] Or, is "there" meant more generally as in the land of Moab? It is difficult to know. The second assertion -- an unspecified locale (*in the land of Moab*) -- functions as an effective parallel with the statement *no one knows his burial place even until this day*. Reading "there" as in the land of Moab creates an interpretation in which *both* the place of his death and the location of Moses' grave remain unknown. But although the second statement (v.6) itself is definitive -- no one knows where Moses was buried-- the absence of a confirmed report as to the location of his grave, will provoke continuous interpretive exploration, even though the hidden nature of Moses' grave is in keeping with Deuteronomy's own laws forbidding ancestor cults and the creation of shrines devoted to the dead (14:1; 18:11; 26:14).[37] Remarkably, this halakhic explanation does not appear in any of the midrashim describing the death of Moses.

But here too (v.6), as seen in verse 5, one finds contradiction. The first part of the verse offers at least a partial answer to where Moses' grave lies: YHWH buried Moses in *the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beith-Peor* . However, despite a general description of the locale no one has found Moses' grave.[38] Verse 5 induces an additional question: was Moses alone at the time of his

[36]"Mount Nebo" and the "summit of Pisgah" could be one and the same mountain but given different names by different traditions.

[37]See Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, p. 167.

[38]Noth writes: "According to the present context, [the verse] can only mean that it was in this well-known valley that the grave supposedly was to be sought, but the grave itself could no longer be pointed out or visited" (*A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, p. 171).

death? If he died on the summit of a mountain then no member of the Israelite community witnessed Moses' death, while the more general locus allows for the possibility of witnesses. As I will investigate in later chapters, these ambiguities provide the textual bases for continious adaptation of this story.

Other elements of the death report are more definitive: at the command of YHWH, Moses dies (v.5). In Hebrew, Moses literally dies "by the mouth of YHWH." The midrashists seize upon the physicality of the phrase and create an intimate encounter between Moses and YHWH in which Moses' soul is taken by a Divine kiss.[39] Through a *peshat* interpretation -- a literal, straightforward reading of the text -- the deuteronomic account describes a moment of absolute faith. Moses, the servant of YHWH, obeys the command of his master and in return, YHWH buries Moses (v.6); the Divine's presence at the time of Moses death and burial confirms Moses' life and ministry. The unadorned, straghtforward account (v. 5-6a) engenders many questions, and the midrashists explore at length this unparalleled, biblical moment. They ask, why did YHWH participate in Moses' burial? Why was he deserving of such special attention? What happened in the actual moment of death? Why was his grave hidden?

Unlike the Numbers account which makes explicit the reasons for his death -- the sin at Kadesh -- Deuteronomy 34 offers no rationale: the text simply reports the time of his death and the reader does not hear Moses' supplications

[39]See Chapter 6, p. 176, n. 17.

(see Deut. 3:23-26).[40] And in a departure from Deuteronomy 31, which portrays Moses as old and debilitated, this chapter describes a tragic death: *And Moses was one hundred and twenty years old at the time of his death and his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated* (Deut. 34:7). Moses dies in perfect health, physically still a young man. He left his people when he could have continued to lead them.[41] And the people mourn Moses' death, as they had done for Aaron, his brother (Num. 20:29): *And the Israelites cried for Moses in the Steppes of Moab for thirty days* (v.8a).

Like Num. 27, this account shifts from the death description to the question of leadership:

> The days of mourning for Moses came to an end. Now Joshua the son of Nun, was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands upon him. And the Israelites heeded him, doing as YHWH had commanded Moses. (Deut. 34:8b-9)

This account does not present the act of commission because, building upon the Num. 27 narrative, it is a *fait accompli*. The earlier scene (Num. 27:15-23) depicted

[40]The absence of a specific reference to Moses' sin leads to a conclusion that this is not a priestly text. Nor is it a deuteronomic text, for it does not follow the explanation that Moses died as a result of the people's sins. Most likely the Deuteronomist and the priestly author followed a received tradition, for which the original narrative context has been lost. We do not know how this older tradition explained the wrath of God against Moses. Additionally, confronted with Deuteronomy's own laws forbidding ancestor cults coupled with the leitmotif of God's wrath directed against Moses found in both the P and Dtr sources, one begins to wonder if the later conceptions are reacting against the existence of a cult of Moses that was evidenced in earlier traditions. Did P originally, and subsequently D, strive to obliterate a prevailing custom of their contemporaries? See, in this regard, Noth,*A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, p. 170.

[41]See Coates, *Moses:heroic man*,p. 152.

preparations for life after the death of Moses which has now occurred. And perhaps indicative of a tradition that creates a heroic portrayal of a powerful Joshua, this final version of leadership transition places Joshua, at least in his relationship to the people, on an equal par with Moses. The congregation obeys Joshua's orders as they had followed Moses' directives. The Bible evidences multiple descriptions of Joshua's authority that at times portray an omnipotent leader like Moses, while at other moments limit Joshua's abilities and purview. However, there is no equivocation within the Bible regarding Joshua's relationship to YHWH; Moses possessed unfettered access to the Divine, while Joshua's interactions with God are not, primarily, through personal encounter. Joshua will lead according to Moses' interpretations of God's commands now recorded in the Torah (Josh. 1:7-8).

The final three verses of the chapter (34: 10-12) are thought to be one of the latest additions to the Pentateuch:[42]

> And never again did a prophet arise in Israel like Moses whom YHWH knew face to face, for signs and portents that YHWH sent him to do in the land of Egypt - for Pharaoh and all his courtiers and for his entire country; and for all the great might and awesome power that Moses did before the eyes of all of Israel.

This eulogy highlights Moses' singular relationship with YHWH.[42] Moses was the only prophet to know YHWH "face to face." In Hebrew,"to know" another person denotes an intimate relationship, and too know "face to face" pushes the

[42]See Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, p. 169.

level of intimacy even higher, towards near equality.[43] As we will see in Chapter Two, Moses' near parity with God provokes rabbinic anxiety and there is evidence of an effort to downplay the apotheosis of Moses explicit in these final verses. In this passage, Moses' uniqueness derives not only from his intimacy with YHWH but also from his unmatched power. Notably, the technical terms used to describe his actions are, throughout Deuteronomy, applied to YHWH alone(4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 11:3). But here, it is principally Moses' might, and not YHWH actions, that save Israel.[44]

D. Conclusions

The biblical accounts of the punishment and death of Moses contain a series of thematic tensions which serve as the template for the midrash. The different perspectives originate in a theological debate between two dominant narrative sources. While the Deuteronomist explored the perceived, complex connection between individual and corporate guilt (a theme expressed throughout

[43]See Ex. 33:11 where YHWH speaks to Moses, *face to face, as a man speaks to a friend."*

[44]See Olson, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, p. 169. Mann in "Theological Reflections" (pp. 492-493), tentatively proposes a dating of the redactional passages dealing with Moses' denial to the tumultuous period following Josiah's death. One finds striking parallels between the glowing eulogy of Moses in Deuteronomy 34 and those of Hezekiah (2kgs. 18:5) and Josiah (2kgs. 23:25). This is, perhaps, evidence of a redactional effort to place the reformer king Josiah and Hezekiah alongside of Moses. Thus, the end of Deuteronomy becomes linked with the Deuteronomistic History placing Josiah alongside of Moses. They became the framework of the Deuteronomistic History.

the deuteronomic histories (Deut. - II Kings), the priestly writer sought to invoke a theology in which each individual dies for his own sins.[45] In the deuteronomic conception, Moses fails to reach his lifelong goal of entering Canaan because of the apostasy of the community. But in the priestly view, a man who is nearly an object of faith, cannot complete his life's mission because of a single transgression: he dies because of his own iniquity. Both are attempts by the writers to explain the reasons for Moses' denial to their contemporaries.[46]

What is clear from a close examination of both perspectives is that Moses does not die outside of the land in place of the wilderness generation, nor does his death provide them with any hope of salvation. His suffering is not redemptive for there is no indication that his death benefits the people. In Deut 1:37 and 3:26, the tradition says that Moses failed to enter the land *because of* the people and not *in place* of them.[47] Deuteronomy does not suggest that Moses suffers in the place of his people so that they can be guilt free. This is quite different than the vicarious suffering of the servant in Second Isaiah (53:5), subsequent midrashic portrayals in which Moses' death effected healing for the greater community, and Christian readings that view Moses' suffering as a typology for Christ's.

These attempts to provide reasons for Moses' death produce several

[45]The contrasting priestly and deuteronomic explanations for Moses denial have a parallel in the explanation of Josiah's death. See, in this regard. Mann, "Theological Reflections,"p. 485, n. 12.

[46]See Mann, "Theological Reflections," p. 494.

[47]*Ibid.*, p. 487.

leitmotif that lend power to the accounts through their innate opposability.[48] Deuteronomy repeatedly weaves the death of Moses into the fabric of the book as a whole, for his death is intertwined with the death and exile of the people of Israel.[49] The individual's process of coming to terms with his mortality is counterposed against the future standing of the group: his death outside the land of promise is a central metaphor for the reality of human finitude at both an individual and a corporate level.[50] And this metaphor becomes heightened when the individual is Moses, the paragon of the tragic hero.

The biblical portrayal of Moses emphasizes the characterisitics of a tragic hero as described by Hillel Barzel:

> An analysis of the characterization of tragic heroes reveals that all of their customary linking circuits - to themselves, their family, their people, and their tasks - are shattered. The inevitable consequence of cutting all these links is death.[51]

An examination of Moses' lifelong journey reveals that these links begin to be severed from the moment he flees to Midian after killing the Egyptian (Ex. 2:12-15). This event propels his ascendancy to hero-status, but ironically it is also the

[48]Hillel Barzel explores this idea at length in his article "Moses: Tragedy and Sublimity" (in Kenneth R.R. Gros Louis, James S. Ackerman, Thayer S. Warshaw, eds., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974). Barzel defines sublimity as "the perception of a totally boundless, supremely forceful experience which awakens in us a certain kind of feeling" (p. 132). Moses' life evokes this perception as well as emotions of "pity and terror, compassion and awe" which, as Barzel notes, are described in Aristotle's definition of tragedy (p. 124).

[49] See Olson,*Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*, p. 7.

[50]*Ibid.*, p. 17.

[51]Barzel, "Moses: Tragedy and Sublimity," p. 125.

inception of his tragedy. Moses must leave behind his homeland and family in order to become the future savior of the people, and this double edged process of Moses' gaining leadership stature and near apotheosis while losing personal connections to family and community continues throughout the Exodus accounts and reaches its zenith in Deuteronomy 34.

Moses' reward for his personal sacrifice is intimacy with God: as distance builds between Moses and other individuals, his relationship with YHWH gains closeness and dynamism. Exodus 33:7-11 may serve as a model for these moments of intimacy with YHWH and estrangement from the people:

> Now Moses would take the Tent and pitch it outside the camp, at some distance from the camp....Whenever Moses went out to the Tent all the people would rise and stand, each at the entrance of the tent and gaze after Moses until he had entered the tent. And when Moses entered the Tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the Tent, while he spoke with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud poised at the entrance of the Tent, all the people would rise and bow low, each at the entrance of his tent. YHWH would speak to Moses face to face as one man speaks to another.

The moment highlights the competing poles of Moses' interactions. As he approaches the Divine, his human companions become static and mute. They gaze in awe of this mortal who is able to stand in God's presence and survive to tell about it. The scene vividly captures Moses role as intermediary between YHWH and the people: he moves from the human encampment to God's tent, from the profane to the sacred. Each encounter with YHWH, which typically occurs at a remove from the people, highlights these countervailing processes. And the emotional distance between Moses and the people is greatest at the two

crowning moments of intimacy between Moses and YHWH: Sinai (when Moses leaves the people for forty days and nights)and at his death.[52]

A literary analysis of the scenes from Numbers and Deuteronomy examined above from a source-critical perspective, reveals the continual tension between the personal tragedy and heroism that are emblematic of Moses' leadership. As he leads the people towards the eastern boundary of Canaan, Moses' painful quandary becomes more acute. As a result of his sin at Kadesh, Moses' brother is condemned to die. Aaron's death leaves Moses without siblings and co-leaders. And when the physical journey stops,[53] Moses' ties to his life's work are destroyed in several steps that lead to his death.

In a sense, the transmission of his authority to Joshua is a death in and of itself, for his leadership is the defining characteristic of Moses' life. In the absence of family, and in possession of the knowledge that he will not experience the fulfillment of his mission, all that is left to Moses is his position as incumbent. But in Num. 27:15-23 -- the first transmission of leadership account -- Moses is rendered a lame duck. As noted however, Moses does not voice his anguish; in fact, in this scene Moses recommends that YHWH search for his successor. It is

[52]In Exodus 24:1-2 God describes what will be the prevailing hierarchy of intimacy during the wilderness generation: God said to Moses, "Come up to YHWH with Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel and bow low from afar. But only Moses shall come near YHWH. The others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him at all."

[53]In Num. 22:1 the Israelites camp in the plains of Moab on "this side of the Jordan, opposite Jericho." It is similar language to that of Deut. 1:5. The camp does not move on again until Josh. 3:15-17.

later, in Deuteronomy, that Moses vents his frustration. For now that his physical progress has stopped, so too has the emotional process of gaining intimacy with God. Movement on both the physical and metaphysical level is obstructed and this second threshold is seemingly more painful for Moses than reaching the boundary of Canaan. Here again, is his plea:

> Now I pleaded with YHWH at that time saying, 'My Lord YHWH, You started to show your servant Your greatness and Your strong hand, that who is a god in heaven and on earth, that can do according to your actions and to your might! Please let me cross over and let me see the good land that is on the other side of the Jordan: this good hill country and the Lebanon.' But YHWH was cross with me because of you and did not listen to me. YHWH said to me, 'That is enough out of you. Do not speak to me anymore about this matter!'[54]

Realizing that the succor that has sustained him through his personal tragedies (his unparalleled intimacy with God) is being withheld from him at the moment of his greatest torment, Moses entreats God to allow him to "cross over" to the "good land." The request may function metaphorically: Moses begs to arrive at greater intimacy with God, but YHWH withholds this access even from the paragon of faith.

The midrashim enlarge upon both Moses' entreaties and YHWH's responses. The midrashists, like ourselves, were struck by God's seeming lack of compassion shown towards YHWH's greatest human partner. Searching for a redemptive message within a biblical scene that offers little hope for the faithful Jew living in exile, the rabbis will enhance and extend the dialogue of Deut.

[54]Deut. 3:23-28

3:23-28, creating a detente between YHWH and Moses which engenders closer ties between this mortal and the Divine. This scene from Deuteronomy may reflect the beginning of this interpretive process of discovering hope where there is none, as it creates dialogue where one finds only silence in the Numbers death account. For, as Barzel writes, "if there is no forgiveness, there is at least the redeeming quality of the dialogue itself."[55]

But despite redactional efforts, the biblical portrayal of the death of Moses remains stark. Moses' death challenges one's faith: for even *Moses* cannot call upon the merciful qualities of YHWH in order to extend the physical limits of his life, and adherence to God's commandments cannot transcend all spiritual boundaries and physical limitations. The priestly writer(s) response to this dilemma is to impute Moses for transgressing a commandment. This perspective implies that had Moses listened to YHWH's instructions more carefully at *Meribah-Kadesh*, he would have been allowed to enter Canaan. But for most readers, and certainly for the rabbis of the first to fifth centuries, this response did not satisfy them. An interpretation that suggests that even Moses was not allowed to enter the land would not seem to give much hope to the average exile. It is more likely that the reader identifies with the people and not with the paragon, seeing himself through the Deuteronomist's lens as being part of the "evil generation" responsible for Moses' plight,[56] and subsequently deprived of his unparalleled leadership.

[55]Barzel, "Moses: Tragedy and Sublimity," p. 124.

[56]See Mann, "Theological Reflections," p. 488.

In Deut. 18:15 Moses promises, *YHWH will raise up a prophet from amongst you who is like me.* The midrashim dealing with the death of Moses from the first to the sixth century, will portray the exilic community as pining for their former leader, because his replacement has not arrived. The midrashim describe a community striving to return to the Land and looking for a glimmer of hope of redemption. As a result of their futile search for a redemptive message in these death accounts, the rabbis use their creativity to rewrite these biblical scenes. But compounding their difficulties, will be competing Christian claims to the authoritative interpretation of the Bible.

Chapter 2

First Century Jewish Descriptions of Moses' Death

On a wall inside the Dura Europas Synagogue in Syria is an illustration of a man with white hair and a beard that Erwin Goodenough identifies as Moses.[1] The portrait represents Moses in his old age ascending to heaven. Although the synagogue itself was built after the first century C.E., this portrait offers a visual summation of the Hellenistic, Jewish beliefs regarding Moses' death, and provides an illustration for the first century texts discussed below.

In the portrait, Moses wears Greek clothing and behind his head is a black rectangle.[2] He stands on the ground with an arc above his head, demarcating the heavens. Above this line the moon, stars, and sun are depicted. The sun, with its ladder-like rays may indicate the Hellenistic conception that God reveals Himself "in a light-stream which offers a means of ascent to God."[3] This visual juxtaposition of Moses and the heavens does not have a textual parallel in the biblical accounts of his life. In the biblical record, Moses is not, in any sense, a celestial being. He was born in this world, and dies and is buried in this world. Although Moses journeys to the heights of the physical world (Mt. Sinai), he goes no further. God alone can cross from the metaphysical plane to the terrestrial one.

Jewish and Christian first century texts present a very different paradigm in which Moses also bridges the gulf between mortality and immortality, the

[1]See E.R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953- 1968), vol. IX, p. 116.

[2]*Ibid.* Apparently to set off his white hair, though it could have another meaning.

[3]*Ibid.*

cosmic and the human. He will die on one plane only to be resurrected on the other, and he is accorded this resurrection because of his virtuous behavior. In this manner, first century texts not only present new conceptions of what occurred to Moses at the moment of his death, but they also describe a different Moses. Absent from these texts is the priestly perspective that Moses is punished for his own iniquity.[4] In these versions (particularly in the Jewish texts), Moses is redrawn as a paragon of virtue, and is nearly apotheosized. In order to allow for his resurrection, the biblical descriptions of his transgressions needed to be edited-out or re-imagined. And as will be explored, the first century Jewish writers recast and redeem Moses to serve their particular ideological goals.

A. Resurrection: A Common Theme

The idea of resurrection as a reward for righteousness did not exist within ancient, Israelite thought. In the ancient, Hebrew world there was no distinction between the body and the soul, and thus the idea that something of importance could survive death was not prominent.[5] The first unequivocal reference to resurrection found in biblical writings appears in the final chapter of the Book of Daniel (12:2),[6] a text that dates from the Maccabean Revolt (166-164 BCE). The

[4]See Chapter 1, pp. 19-25.

[5]See A.F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 60.

[6]"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever."

historical context of this verse lends credence to the theory that the doctrine of bodily resurrection developed in response to the problem of righteous suffering and martyrdom.[7] Daniel 12:2 evinces a belief not in immortality but in the resurrection of the many after death, which is in keeping with the biblical (particularly prophetic) concept of justice that "those who suffered and died in remaining true to God's Torah will be vindicated."[8]

Certain apocalyptic and pseudepigraphical works describe a second aspect of the tradition of resurrection: the theme of ascension -- without experiencing death – to the "eternally constant, deathless heaven where the most deserving and righteous go."[9] In the first century of the common era, two intertwined ideas emerged regarding immortality:

> First, that a hero, ruler, or extraordinary individual can obtain immortal heavenly existence; second, the more general dualistic notion that the souls of all humankind, although bounded by mortal conditions, can obtain an immortal heavenly life.[10]

Greek writers articulated the foundation for this belief to which Jews and Christians grafted their particularistic readings, joining to the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul, the belief in the possibility for the resurrection of the

[7]See Segal, *Rebecca's Children*, p. 63.

[8]*Ibid.*

[9]*Ibid.* See, in this regard, the story of the seven sons in 2 Maccabees 7, and 1 Enoch where the motif of the journey to heaven is particularly pronounced.

[10]See James D. Tabor, '"Returning to the Divinity': Josephus's Portrayal of the Disappearances of Enoch. Elijah, and Moses," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108/2 (1989), p. 230.

body.[11] Josephus articulates the prevalent Pharisaic view:

> Every soul, [the Pharisees] maintain is imperishable, but the soul of the good alone passes into another body, while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment.[12] [The Pharisees] believe that souls have power to survive death and that there are rewards and punishments ...for those who have led lives of virtue and vice; eternal imprisonment is the lot of evil souls, while the good souls receive an easy passage to a new life.[13]

This statement, merging Platonic dualism with the belief shared by the Essenes and Pharisees in the resurrection of the body, are paradigmatic of Hellenistic Judaism.

Only after Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism began to dominate the Jewish scene in the second and third centuries, did resurrection become a general belief and a possible reward to all who led virtuous lives. In the first century, however, the idea of resurrection was one of the more extreme views of the culture, and the privilege of ascension to an eternal life in heaven was reserved only for the greatest leaders who had accomplished heroic deeds.[14]

B. Moses in the Diaspora: Philo's and Josephus's Interpretations

1. Philo

Moses was the one person in the Jewish tradition who was known to the pagan world, and he received ambivalent treatment from Greek and Roman

[11]See, for example, Cicero's *Republic* 6.9-26.

[12]*Jewish Wars* 2.8.14 par. 163.

[13] *Ant.* 18.1.3 par. 14.

[14]See Segal, *Rebecca's Children*, p. 64.

writers.[15] In his *De Vita Mosis*, Philo seeks to burnish Moses' reputation. He acknowledges Moses' fame, but feels that many do not know him as he really was because Greek authors did not want to grant him honor (*De Vita Mosis* 1.1.1-2). For Philo, an Alexandrian Jewish philosopher, Moses was the spiritual hero par excellence, who, by ascending Mt. Sinai and receiving the commandments from God, deserved special treatment at the time of his death.

Stating, "He who is to obtain excellence as a legislator should possess all the virtues fully and completely" (*De Vita Mosis* 2.2.8), Philo recasts the biblical portrayal of Moses to present him as a perfect, Greek king who embodies the four cardinal virtues of character: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice, as well as the spiritual quality of piety.[16] In order to do this, Philo borrowed a method of interpretation from the Greeks: allegory.[16] The Greeks used allegory to understand Homeric epics and hymns; Philo applied allegory to the Bible and interpreted the events of its narratives as symbolizing the development of the soul's moral virtues. For the purpose of appealing to Gentile proselytes, Philo interprets the biblical Moses as one who continually strove for moral perfection and ultimately achieved this goal. He downplays the aspects of Moses' behavior that were so troubling to the priestly writers of the Book of Numbers and defends

[15]For an in-depth discussion of Greco-Roman writers' comments on Moses, see Louis Feldman's *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World: Attitudes and Interactions from Alexander to Justinian* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), Chapter 8.

[16]See Howard M. Teeple,*The Mosaic Eschatological Prophet* (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1957), p. 34.

[16]See Segal, *Rebecca's Children*, p. 55.

Moses' murder of the Egyptian. In contradistinction to biblical descriptions, Philo's Moses exercises command of his passions and is a model of temperance. And as a result of attaining moral perfection, Philo's Moses is accorded the appropriate death for being the "most holy man who ever lived."[17]

a. Philo's Descriptions of Moses' Death: The Death Scenes in the *De Vita Mosis*, and *De Virtutibus*

In Philo's interpretations of the final moments of Moses life, Moses undergoes radical, physical transformations:

> When he was about to depart from hence to heaven, to take up his abode there, and leaving this mortal life to become immortal, having been summoned by the Father, who now changed him, having previously been a double being composed of soul and body, into the nature of a single body, transforming him entirely into a sun-like mind.[18]

Likewise, in the *De Virtutibus* we read:

> [He was changed] from mortal existence into immortal life and noticed that he was gradually being disengaged from the elements with which he had been mixed. He shed his body which grew around him like the shell of an oyster, while his soul which was thus laid bare desired its migration thence.[19]

In both descriptions Moses is transformed from mortal to immortal being without dying. In *De Vita Mosis,* Moses' physical self is seemingly subsumed by his

[17]Philo *De Vita Mosis* ii. 192.

[18]*De Vita Mosis* iii. 39. Translation from Nahum N. Glatzer (ed.),*The Essential Philo* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), p. 269.

[19]*De Virtutibus* 76. Translation from E.R. Goodenough, *By Light, Light.* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1969 (reprint of 1935 edition)), p. 197.

soul.[20] In *De Virtutibus,* the physical self falls away to reveal Moses soul which will ascend to heaven. In these scenes, Philo presents two different images of transformation. The first is unique in descriptions of Moses death, while the scene from *De Virtutibus* in which the body and soul separate, becomes a leitmotif in later midrashic versions of the death of Moses.

In preparation for his ascension, both transformations begin before Moses moves from the physical world to the metaphysical one. Yet in *De Virtutibus,* even before his body falls away to reveal his soul, Moses wields power over the celestial world. While still existing in the terrestrial plane, he gathers together "the most important parts of the cosmos" and in the midst of these elements he "composed hymns in every type of mode and interval in order that men and ministering angels might hear."[21] While still in mortal form, Moses bridges the heavenly and earthly worlds, and effects change in both spheres. He sings "the perfect song while yet in body, and even the faith of the angels has been strengthened."[22] Only after this performance is Moses transformed: he sheds his body to reveal his soul which tarries long enough to offer final prayers for Israel.

The version from *De Vita Mosis* offers a parallel to *De Virtutibus* in which Moses' bridges the mortal and immortal entities. After Moses was transformed into a "most sun-like mind," he,

> Predicted to each tribe separately what would happen to each of

[20]Goodenough writes, in this regard:"Moses had been a dyad, but now was wholly transformed into a monad, that is, into Mind with especially sun-like brilliance"(*By Light, Light,* p. 195).

> them, and to their future generations some of which things have already come to past and some are still expected, because the accomplishment of these predictions which have been fulfilled is the clearest testimony to the future.[23]

This description, in effect, is the mirror image of *De Vertitubus.* Moses has been transformed into a metaphysical "being" (he is "sun-like mind") and now prophesies to the people.

b. Philo's Interpretive Difficulties

In the scene from *De Vita Mosis,* Philo seeks to align his descriptions of Moses' transformation to the biblical text and resolve some of its interpretive difficulties. In Deuteronomy 33 -- performing his last task before his death -- Moses tells of the past and the future of each tribe; in *De Vita Mosis*, this, too, is Moses' last act before his ascension. Philo summarizes the biblical blessings:

> For it was very appropriate that those who were different in the circumstances of their birth and in the mothers from whom they were descended, should differ also in the variety of their designs and counsels, and also in the excessive diversity of their pursuits in life.[24]

At this juncture, Philo provides his own solution to the interpretive problem of Deuteronomy 34:5-6 of how Moses could have written of his own death? Here is Philo's answer:

> For when he was now on the point of being taken away...and complete his journey to heaven, he was once more inspired and filled with the Holy Spirit, and while still alive, he prophesied

[21]Translation from *By Light, Light*, p. 196.

[22]*Ibid.*, p. 19.

> admirably what should happen to him after his death, relating that is how he had died when he was not as yet dead, and how he was entombed not by mortal hands, but by immortal powers, so that he was not placed in the tomb of his forefathers having met with particular grace which no man ever saw.[25]

In the scene from *De Vita Mosis*, Philo remains more connected to the text of Deuteronomy 34, than the relatively "unanchored" interpretation found in *De Virtutibus*. Philo even concludes *De Vita Moses* with an acknowledgment of Moses' death and his (Philo's) interpretive reliance on Deuteronomy.[26] But this conclusion is problematic for it creates a bifurcation within the final chapter of *De Vita Mosis*. As described above, in the opening scene of Philo's chapter, Moses is transformed into something completely ephemeral: "a sun-like mind." Yet, when Philo returns to the biblical text to solve the problems of Deut. 34:5-6, Moses regains some attributes of his physical self: "For when he was now on the point of being taken away, [he] was *standing* at the very starting place... of his journey to heaven."[27] Additionally, as the first part of the chapter emphasizes ascension to an immortal existence, in the final lines of *De Vita Mosis* Philo reiterates the theme of interment. This change in interpretation perhaps hints at Philo's competing ideological desires. On one hand, Philo seeks to allegorize a text

[23]Glatzer's translation of *Mos.* iii. 39 in *The Essential Philo*, p. 269.

[24]*Ibid.*

[25]Glatzer's translation of *Mos.* iii. 39 in *The Essential Philo*, p. 269.

[26]Philo concludes *De Vita Mosis* with thse lines: "Such was the life and such was the death of the king, and lawgiver, and high priest, and prophet, Moses, as it is recorded in the sacred scriptures"(Glatzer's translation in *The Essential Philo*, p.270).

while also remaining faithful to its narrative.[28] Conversely, he is attempting, throughout *De Vita Mosis* and in the *De Virtutibus*, to enhance Moses' heroic image, creating a version of Moses attractive to Gentile proselytes.

c. Moses as Proselytizer

In the "death" scene from *De Virtutibus*, Philo calls Moses a "hierophant": an interpreter of sacred mysteries. Philo utilizes this attribute as a proselytizing device and Moses becomes a mouthpiece for Philo's ideological purpose of appealing to potential Gentile converts. Moses does not only create hymns "of praise to God" and angels, but he also interweaves with his verses,

> true emotions of good will to the Nation. He reproved them for their past sins, gave them warnings and corrections for the present, and advice for the future based upon good hopes which were bound to be fulfilled.[29]

Philo's interpretation in *De Vita Mosis* also serves a missionary purpose. Throughout the work, Philo's Moses is cast not only as a paragon of faith not only in YHWH, but also as the embodiment of Hellenistic ideals. And now, in the final chapter of this work, Philo seeks to reward Moses with a surpassing death that, presumably, would be accorded to a proselyte *if* he models his life after Moses. The ambiguities of Deuteronomy 34 facilitate Philo's allegorical goals.

[27]*Ibid.*, p. 270.

[28]See Segal, *Rebecca's Children*, p.57: "Apparently Philo knew and disapproved of a group of Jews who took allegory so far as to maintain that it was no longer necessary to observe Judaism." See Philo's *On the Migration of Abraham*, 89.

[29]*Ibid.*

For instance, the mystery that shrouds Moses' death (no one knows the location of his grave) allows him to "read-in" his belief in the immortality of the human soul and offer this as a reward to righteous individuals who follow in Moses' path. But his desire to elevate Moses leads Philo far outside of the framework of the biblical text, and thus the radical opening to the final chapter of *De Vita Mosis*.

If *De Vita Mosis* may be characterized as an example of "re-written Bible," a genre in which the author adheres to the narrative line of the biblical text while incorporating his own insights, *De Virtutibus* should understood as a philosophical work discussing the Greek virtues and their relationship to specific biblical laws.[30] This genre frees Philo from the narrative constraints of the Bible, and allows for greater creativity. While it is appropriate to label the second part of the final chapter of *De Vita Mosis* as a "death scene," what is presented in *De Virtutibus* defies this rubric, for a death does not occur. Instead, this version is a transfiguration scene: Moses is metamorphosed from mortal to immortal. He is, "disengaged from the elements with which he had been mixed." The component of his self that is mortal (his body) is removed from that which is immortal (his soul). And the manner in which Philo describes this process indicates a belief that Moses was not created in the same manner as other humans. Instead, he is a special type of incarnation that Philo more completely describes in his *De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini*:

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[30]See Goodenough, *By Light, Light*, p. 196.

> When God lent Moses to earthly things and permitted him to associate with them, He endowed him not at all with the ordinary virtue of a ruler or king...rather He appointed him to be god, and decreed that the whole bodily realm and its leader, the mind, should be his subjects and slaves.[31]

Philo's scriptural basis for calling Moses a god is probably Exodus 7:1: "Adonai said to Moses, Behold, I make you a god to Pharaoh," and Philo takes this as an indication that Moses did not undergo "the same sort of change as ordinary mortals do at death."[32] With this text in hand, the scenes in *De Vita Mosis* and *De Virtutibus* become more easily understood. Philo is not describing the death of a human; rather, it seems, the transformation of a divine being, a god, who is returning to the sphere in which he was created. Although there is scholarly debate as to whether or not Philo truly deified Moses,his absence from latter rabbinic writings suggests that his interpretation was considered extreme.[33]

2. Josephus

a. The Portrayal of Moses in the *Antiquities*

Josephus's portrayal of Moses in his *Antiquities* is an "aretalogy: a veritable catalogue of virtues that would be appreciated by a Roman audience which

[31]Goodenough's translation of *Sac.* 9, in *By Light, Light*, p. 199.

[32]Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p. 61.

[33]See *One God, One Lord*, pp. 59-64. Hurtado summarizes Goodenough's perspective that Philo really deified Moses, but rejects this position in favor of Meek's approach (see his, "Moses as God and King" in *Religions in Antiquity Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968) maintaining that Philo carefully distinguished between Moses and God. Meek sees in Philo's use of divinity language vis a vis Moses a polemic against the aspirations of pagan rulers to be regarded as divine beings.

admired the portrait of the ideal Stoic sage."[34] Josephus stresses Moses' external qualities of good birth and handsome stature, but also casts him as a Platonic philosopher king, a high priest, and prophet.

Josephus recasts all biblical characters into reflections of the Hellenistic ideal of the virtuous man and hero, yet his treatment of Moses is unique. He creates a Moses who "is the great example of a cultured [read: Hellenistic] Jew who had profound influence upon the statesmen and philosophers of other nations."[35] Josephus presents a picture of a man who exemplifies Stoic self-mastery and surpassing virtue. He stresses the selflessness of Moses, how he never took advantage of his authority, sought a life of piety, and provided for the lasting welfare of those who made him their leader.[36]

Like Philo, Josephus is addressing a non-Jewish audience. He writes that the purpose of the *Antiquities* is to satisfy the Greek world's desire to learn more about Jewish history,[37] and he appeals to his audience to learn Jewish law for,

> it is most profitable for all men, Greeks and barbarians alike, to practice justice, about which our laws are most concerned and, if

[34]Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, p. 244.

[35]Louis H. Feldman,. "Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* and Pseudo Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*," in Louis Feldman and Gohei Hata (eds.), *Josephus, the Bible and History* (Tokyo: Yamamoto Shoten Publishing House, 1988), p. 65.

[36]Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, p. 266, writes: "In Josephus's *Antiquites* Moses is called 'General' fifteen times. His listing of General before prophet -- in contradistinction to the Bible - -probably indicates an order of importance and part of an attempt to refute charges that the Jews had not produced a single celebrity or general of the caliber of an Alexander or Caesar."

[37]*Antiq.* 1.5.

> we sincerely abide by them, they make us well disposed and friendly to all men.[38]

In the *Antiquities*, Josephus re-works the Bible to appeal to this Greek audience, adding details and motifs that were popular in Greek epics.[39] The work is a defense of Judaism, and Josephus, like Philo, sees Moses as the keystone to this undertaking. He revises the biblical descriptions of Moses and enhances the heroic qualities of the man who stands at the source of Jewish tradition and is best known to the Pagan world. This apologetic stance towards the Greeks is indicated by the omission in the *Antiquities* of embarrassing episodes in the Bible, including Numbers 20:10-12, in which Moses strikes the rock at Meribah, and that forms the crux of the Priestly attack on Moses' character.[40]

But Josephus writes not only for a Greek audience but also for a contemporary Jewish one. As he reworks the biblical images of Moses, his stance is a conscious resistance to Philo and other first century treatments of Moses.[41] He takes great pains to ensure that Moses will not be worshipped as a

[38]*Antiq.* 16. 177.

[39]For example, Abraham is portrayed as a philosopher, scientist and general; the Joseph and Potiphar story is romanticized along the lines of the Hippolytus-Phaedra story; he portrays Saul as a Jewish Achilles; he heightens the erotic themes of the Samson story; and Solomon is modeled after Oedipus. See "Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* and Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*," p. 74.

[40]See Feldman, "Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* and Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*,"p.74.

[41]Although beyond the scope of this paper, Josephus, in addition to reacting against Philo's deification of Moses, might be reacting to Samaritan beliefs. Among Samaritans alone does the title "man of God" reached prominence as applied to Moses. For Samaritans, Moses is the Messiah like eschatological figure who will bring about the messianic age. See Howard Teeple's *The*

god, and he is careful not to elevate him to the status of a divinity. In this manner, he issues an internally directed polemic. He accomplishes this agenda in part, by omitting from his re-telling that Moses was to be a god to Aaron (Exod. 4:16) and would be a god to Pharaoh (Exodus 7:1). And in his reworking of Deuteronomy 34, Josephus strives for an authoritative interpretation that will put an end to the belief that Moses did not die, while at the same time creating a death scene that resonates with non-Jewish readers. Thus, Josephus uses selective editing and reworking to send carefully conceived messages to both his Jewish and Greek readers: Moses was a perfect man, but he was not a god.

b. The Death of Moses in the *Antiquities*[42]

Josephus introduces a new element into the interpretations of Deuteronomy 34:5-6: instead of being buried, Moses disappears in a cloud:

> As he was going to embrace Eleazar and Joshua, and was still discoursing with them, a cloud stood over him on the sudden, and he disappeared in a certain valley, although 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 extraordinary virtue, he went to God.[43]

Mosaic Eschatological Prophet for a detailed discussion of various sects views on the eschatological roles of Moses. Additionally see Louis H. Feldman's *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, p. 543, n. 86, for a summary of conflicting Rabbinic and Samaritan views regarding the role of Moses both before and after his death.

[42]*Antiq.* 4.8.48-49.

[43]Translation from James D. Tabor, "Returning to the Divinity," p. 227. Tabor explains that the phrase "He went back to the divinity" is a technical term meaning "to escape a normal death."

The introduction of this cloud motif seems at odds with Josephus's desire to invalidate the apotheosis of Moses,[44] for if he wants to stress that Moses did not go to God at the end of his life, then the biblical text serves this purpose more readily than his innovation.[45] However, by stepping away from the concrete particulars of Deuteronomy 34:5-6 -- that Moses died and was buried on earth -- he is able to interpose a belief in the immortality of the soul and bodily resurrection into the biblical scene. Josephus believes that Moses did not die (he says as much) and there is no mention of burial within this scene. In fact, Moses arrives not at the place of his death, but at "the place where he was to vanish" from the sight of the people.[46] His contemporary Hellenistic-Jewish audience would have accepted the diminishment of the burial particulars, for Moses, the paragon of virtue, certainly received "an easy passage to a new life."[47] But additionally, he does not include Deut. 34:6 in his re-telling, presumably because he realized the level of scepticism amongst his non-Jewish readers. For Greco-Romans, the idea that God buried Moses would be the most striking element of the death scene, and the hardest detail to believe. The burial of a great man such as Moses is completely at odds with descriptions of death found in the popular literature of

[44]According to Josephus's interpretation, Moses shared this concern.

[45]Deut. 34:5-6: So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the Land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord, and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Bethpeor; but no one knows the place of his burial to this day.

[46]*Antiq.* 4.8.48.

[47]*Antiq.* 18.1.3

the period, in which gods take away heroes to heaven and do not inter them on earth. His Greco-Roman readers understood the method of his translation (disappearing in a cloud), for this was a common motif in Hellenistic literature.

Both Roman and Greek writers used clouds to render gods and heroes invisible. In the *Odyssey*, gods "wrap" several Trojan heroes in protective clouds or mists.[48] Parallels to Josephus' account of the death of Moses may be found in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Roman writers, under strong influence from the Greeks, described the apotheosis of their own leaders in similar terms and Josephus's account of Moses' translation would have reminded Roman readers of the deaths of two founders of Rome, Aeneas and Romulus, as described by Dionysius of Halicarnassus.[49] Aspects of Josephus's account parallel Dionysius's reports and Josephus would thus seem to be equating Moses with these forebearers.[50] Yet in his final moment, Josephus' Moses refutes the notion that he was apotheosized: "He wrote in the holy books that he died...lest they should venture to say...he went to God." What led Josephus to make this extra-biblical comment?

[48]See Arthur S. Pease, "Some Aspects if Invisibility," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 53 (1942) p. 8. For example, Aphrodite hides Paris, and Apollo protects Aeneas and Antenor.

[49]See Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, pp. 259-60. As Pease indicates (*Some Aspects*, pp. 15-16) the tradition of Romulus's disappearance appears as early as Cicero (*Rep.* I. 25; II. 17).

[50]See *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, p. 260: In the case of Aeneas, Dionysius writes (*Rom Antiquities* 1.64.4) that his body could not be found, and some thought that he had been translated to the gods. As for Romulus, Dionysius recounts (2.56.2) other writers saying that as he was holding an assembly in camp, darkness descended upon him from a clear sky and he disappeared.

c. Competing Internal Ideologies

Josephus claims to have been educated in the rabbinic tradition,[51] and as I will examine in Chapters Four and Six, Josephus' stance against the apotheosis of Moses is in line with rabbinic writings of the 2nd-5th century. The outright polemic found in *Antiquities*IV.8.49 against those who say he did not die, coupled with the other instances in his writing where he refrains from describing Moses as god-like,[52] attests to a competing belief in Jewish circles (most prominently articulated by Philo) that Moses returned to heaven, escaped death, and was, to a great extent, deified.

Josephus wants it both ways: on the one hand, his writing reflects a rabbinic understanding of God and resists contemporary evaluations that deified Moses (or for that matter Romulus, Aeneas, and even Jesus), while, at the same time, he borrows motifs from death scenes in Hellenistic literature and even hellenizes Moses. Josephus's death scene is artfully crafted to appeal to the sensibilities of his Greco-Roman audience. Moses is described in Josephus's eulogy for him as having found favor with the Israelites in every way, but chiefly for his Stoic nature:

> He had a very graceful way of speaking and addressing himself to

[51]*Life* 8-9.

[52]As Feldman explains in *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* (pp. 259-260), even in moments where Josephus describes Moses as ranking higher than his own nature, he is careful to refer to him as a man. For example, see *Ant.* 3.317, 320.

> the multitude; and as to his other qualifications, he had such a full command of his passions, as if he hardly had any such in his soul, and only knew them by their names, as rather perceiving them in other men than in himself.[53]

For Josephus it is the virtue of temperance which most distinguishes Moses as the Stoic like sage.[54] And in his final exhortation to the Israelite community, Moses tells them to be moderate:

> Now as he went thence to the place where he was to vanish out of their sight, they all followed after him weeping; but Moses beckoned with his hand to those that were remote from him, and bade them stay behind in quiet, while he exhorted those that were near to him that they would not render his departure so lamentable.[55]

This exhortation would have resonated with Greco-Roman audiences who prized temperance and moderation.[56]

When Josephus describes the impact of Moses' death he adds to the biblical description that his passing was lamented not only by Jews but also by readers of his laws, including non-Jews reading the Septuagint:

> nor were those that had experienced his conduct the only persons that desired him, but those also that perused the laws he left behind him had a strong desire after him, and by them gathered the extraordinary virtue he was master of. And this shall suffice for the declaration of the manner of the death of Moses.[57]

[53]*Antiq.* 4.8.49.

[54]Feldman (*Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World*, p. 274) writes: "The opposite of the Stoic sage, in that he does not have command of his passions is Pharaoh." According to Feldman, Josephus repeatedly contrasts the sobriety of Moses and the intemperance of Pharaoh.

[55]*Antiq.* 4.8.48.

[56]See Feldman, *Jew and Gentile in the Ancient World* , p. 274.

[57]*Antiq.* 4.8.49.

Within the final lines of his eulogy for Moses, Josephus summarizes his apologetic goals in reshaping the biblical image of Moses. He does not elevate Moses to the status of a god; instead, he places him on a pedestal as the embodiment of surpassing virtue. Josephus indicates to non-Jews that they, too, may deduce from mosaic law paths to Stoic self-mastery.

It is difficult to determine if Josephus and Philo had any effect on Greco-Roman opinion about the Jews. They did, however, influence later interpreters of Scripture. Josephus's works were translated into Latin by the sixth century and he was read widely in Christian circles.[58] Origen in particular was greatly influenced by Josephus, and Philo's allegorical readings of the Bible served as a model for later Christian apologists.

Josephus marks the end of a literary era. Biblical historigraphical traditions -- of which both the *Antiquities* and *De Vita Mosis* are prime examples -- had provided one of the best avenues for the apologetic attempt to make Jewish traditions understood within a world dominated by Hellenistic culture. Of the texts studied in this chapter, these works are the most clear in their ideological goals of appealing to proselytes through the re-interpretation of the biblical Moses. Their efforts are primarily focussed externally, crafting a Moses that appeals to non-Jews. As we will see, the texts from first century Palestine evidence a very different ideological purpose.

[58]See H.W. Attridge, "Josephus and his Works," in Michael E. Stone (ed.), *JewishWritings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus* (Netherlands: Van Gorcum, Assen, 1984), p. 231.

C. The Death of Moses in Texts from First Century Palestine: *Biblical Antiquities*, II *Baruch*, and the *Assumption of Moses*

The *Biblical Antiquities* (*Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*, hereafter abbreviated *LAB*) was composed shortly before or after the destruction of the Temple in 70, and seemingly reflects the understanding of the Bible in Palestinian synagogues during the first century of the Common Era.[59] It stands as the earliest witness for motifs frequently repeated in Jewish tradition and is considered one of the oldest substantive midrashic works.[60] The book is closely related to rabbinic tradition and contains numerous, precise citations of biblical passages like that found in classical midrash.[61] There are 53 occasions where the writer supplies detailed information regarding names and numbers that are not found in the Bible, perhaps suggesting that one of *LAB* 's aims was to provide such information in order to answer sectarians.[62]

LAB seems to occupy an intermediate position between Josephus and rabbinic tradition and serves as a good bridge to the works written in Palestine in the first century.[63] In content, *LAB* is a biblical history from Adam to the death of

[59]See George W.E. Nickelsburg,"The Bible Rewritten and Expanded," in *JewishWritings of the Second Temple Period: Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran Sectarian Writings, Philo, Josephus*, p. 109. Also Frederick J. Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* (Oxford: University Press, 1993), pp. 6.

[60]See Feldman, "Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* and Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*,"p.59.

[61]*Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

[62]*Ibid.*, p. 76. This is the rabbinic view according to BT *Baba Batra* 91a.

[63]Although originally ascribed to Philo, this provenance cannot be sustained

Saul and like the *Antiquites,* may be categorized in the genre of re-written Bible. Like Josephus, the writer of *LAB* builds his account primarily around interpretations of great biblical leaders. He, too, seeks to create models of righteousness through recasting biblical descriptions of the patriarchs.[64] Both writers represent the Pharisaic outlook. But whereas Josephus wrote his *Antiquities* for a primarily non-Jewish audience, *LAB* is a popular history intended for Jews.[65] This is indicated by, for example, its preaching against intermarriage, the avoidance of the erotic details that Josephus found to be of interest to his Hellenistic readers, and its avoidance of the political in favor of moral issues.[66] *LAB* stresses the theological points of view of the rabbis, which are present in *LAB's* treatment of the death of Moses.

(thus the secondary name of the book: "Pseudo-Philo"). The work does not employ Philo's allegorizing, it was written originally in Hebrew and not in Greek, and in several points "Pseudo-Philo" explicitly contradicts the views of Philo. See, in this regard, *Pseudo-Philo* (*Biblical Antiquities*),translated into English by D. J. Harrington, in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.),*The Old Testament Pseudapigrapha* (New York, 1985), Vol. 2, pp. 299-300.

[64]See Feldman,"Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities* and Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities,*" p. 76.

[65]*Ibid.*, p. 73.

[66]*Ibid.*, p. 75: "Perhaps we may summarize these divergences by noting the difference in etymologies of the name of Samson. For Josephus, the political historian, seeking to impress his non-Jewish readers with the fact that the biblical heroes possess the qualities of the great epic heroes of Greek literature, the name is derived from the word meaning "strong," thus conjuring up a picture of a Jewish Heracles. Pseudo-Philo, the theologian and moralist, on the other hand, derives the name from the word meaning "holy," a unique etymology unparalleled in rabbinic or other literature."

1. The Death of Moses in *Biblical Antiquities* , Chapter 19

In *LAB*, a new explanation is given for Moses not being allowed to enter the land:

> Now I will show you the land before you die, but you will not enter it in this age lest you see the graven images with which this people will start to be deceived and led off the path.[67]

This explanation is predicated upon a different reasoning from that found in the biblical accounts and leads to a new portrayal of Moses. According to *LAB*, Moses is not allowed to cross over the Jordan not because of his trangressions, but rather because he would be as susceptible to idolatry as any other Israelite. This explanation has a two-fold result. On the one hand, it humanizes Moses, portraying a Jewish leader who reflects the public at large. Moses is not the Stoic described by Philo and Josephus; he too, may fall prey to temptation like any other individual. Yet the writer of *LAB* shares Philo and Josephus's desire to ensure Moses' reputation. Like them, he does not refer to Moses' transgressions as the reason for his denial. And thus, ironically, the very detail that humanizes Moses, also serves to elevate him. He is given special treatment: the denial is a privilege protecting Moses from the taint of sin that will fall upon the rest of the community.

Before he dies, God promises to show Moses the Temple, the place that will be,

> turned over into the hands of their enemies, and they will destroy

[67]*LAB* 19:7. All translations are from Harrington's version found in J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudapigrapha*, *op. cit.*, vol. 2.

> it, and foreigners will encircle it. And it will be on that day as it was on the day I smashed the tablets of the covenant that I drew up for you on Horeb; and when they sinned, what was written on them flew away.

By making a parallel between the coming destruction of the Temple and the people's worshiping of the golden calf in Exodus 32, *LAB* offers the rabbinic explanation for the Temple's destruction: the community's idolatry. And although the people are imputed for this catastrophe, Moses' reputation remains unblemished.

In reaction to God's revelation, Moses models Pharisaic piety: he *prays* to God to save his people from the coming destruction.

> Behold I have completed my lifetime; I have completed 120 years. And now I ask, "May your mercy with your people and your pity with your heritage, Lord, be established; and may your long-suffering in your place be upon the chosen race because you have loved them before all others."[68]

In *LAB*, Moses does not see his death as tragic. He accepts God's decree with pious equanimity; he prays for the welfare the people and not for himself. But there is an additional purpose to this prayer: the writer of *LAB* uses the moment for polemics.

2.The Death of Moses in *LAB* and it's Polemical Intent

LAB was composed when most of the New Testament writings were also taking shape, a time of political and religious destabilization for Jews. The theologian writing *LAB* was sensitive to Christian claims to the authoritative understanding of the Bible and to religious ascendancy. As described in the

Introduction, Moses' character and the events of his life provide fertile ground for polemics. Since he stands at the root of Jewish tradition, Jewish writers used him to defend their religious claims while Christian apologists polemicized him, and thereby attacked Judaism. Here, the writer of *LAB*, who protected Moses from any accusation of involvement in the destruction of the Temple (after all, he never entered the land), uses this unimpeachable source to make a defense of Judaism: Jews are the chosen ones and God has loved them longer than any other group.[68]

In his prayer, Moses argues that God's selection and love of Israel was predicated upon God's primary choice of Moses:

> And you knew that I was a shepherd...you called me from the bush and I was afraid and turned my face. And you sent me to them and you freed them from Egypt...And you gave them the Law and statutes which they might enter as sons of men.[69]

Throughout the Torah, Moses functions as the intermediary between God and the people and he enjoys unparalled access to, and influence over, YHWH. Moses is able to affect God's action through appeals to Divine mercy.[70] He often appeases YHWH's wrath by arguing that were God to destroy the people Israel, God would undermine Divine authority by destroying the greatest proof of God's

[68] This polemic continues in the next chapter when Joshua speaks to the Israelites as their leader, "For even if the gentiles say, 'Perhaps God has failed, because He has not freed his people' - nevertheless they will recognize that He has not chosen for Himself other peoples and done great wonders with them"(*LAB* 20:4).

[69]*LAB* 19:9.

[70]See, for example, Ex. 32:31-21.

power.[71] This argument forms the final part of Moses' prayer:

> *For who is the man who has not sinned against you?* (I Kgs. 8:46) And unless your patience abides, how would your heritage be established if you were not merciful to them? Or who will yet be born without sin? Now you will correct them for a time, but not in anger.[72]

It is difficult to overlook the attack on Jesus imbedded in this segment of the prayer. The Christian claim that Jesus was born without sin served as a trump to Moses' righteousness; regardless of any miracles he performed during his life time, Moses was born from sin and thus Jewish claims regarding the perfection of his deeds were undermined.

But in *LAB*, the writer rejects the Christian defense of Jesus' perfection, re-asserting the primacy of the relationship between Moses and YHWH, and the people Israel and YHWH. In response to Moses' prayer, God affirms the unique relationship He has with both Israel and its leader Moses by showing him the future:*Then the Lord showed him the land* and all that is in it and said,*"This is the land that I will give to my people ."*[73]

> God continues by revealing to Moses the "infra-structure" of the heavens:
>
> And he showed him the place from which the clouds draw up water to water the whole earth...the place in the firmament from which only the holy land drinks, the place from which manna rained upon the people, even unto the paths of paradise.[74]

Just before Moses dies, God will even reveal to him how much time has passed

[71]See, for example, Num. 14:13-20.

[72]*LAB* 19:9.

[73]*LAB* 19:10. The verse incorporates Deut. 34:1,4.

[74]Ibid.

in history and how much time remains.[75] As one of the oldest midrashic works, this scene from *LAB* serves to "introduce" Moses to the heavens and over time Jewish and Christian interpretations will elaborate upon the role he plays there.[76] This scene also provides evidence of a further stage in the idealization of Moses: the belief that he would return in the messianic era functioning as an eschatalogical prophet.[77] God promises Moses:

> You are to be buried until I visit the world. And I will raise up you and your fathers from the land of Egypt in which you sleep and you will come together and dwell in the immortal dwelling place that is not subject to time. [78]

This Jewish belief in the return of Moses during the Messianic age will appear in later midrashim as well as in the New Testament.

In addition to revealing the future to Moses, God collects Moses' staff, saying:

> Your staff...will be a witness between me and my people. And when they sin, I will be angry with them, but I will recall your staff

[75]*LAB* 19:14-15.

[76]In II *Baruch* (59: 5-11) Moses is also shown the future. Charles notes that here Enoch's functions are transferred to Moses. According to Charles, The *Apocalypse of Enoch,* like the Septuagint, was embraced by Christians, and therefore the *Apocalypse* fell into disuse by the Jews. Additionally, in the *Apocalypse* the measures of paradise are taken by the angels for him (Enoch). Here, God provides the facts and figures to Moses. Moses enjoys greater access to the Divine. Ironically, Enoch is one of two biblical characters who did ascend (Genesis 5:24) and the textual support for Moses' ascension is comparatively weak. The writer of II *Baruch* destabilizes Enoch's stature in the heavenly realm, replacing him, in a sense, with Moses.

[77]See Howard M. Teeple, *The Mosaic Eschatological Prophet* (Philadelphia: Society of Biblical Literature, 1957), p. 43.

[78]*LAB* 19:12-13.

and spare them in accord with my mercy.[79]

Moses staff, which facilitated God's miracles throughout the Exodus, now plays a new role as a guarantor of God's participation in the covenant God made with Israel. The writer of *LAB* thus introduces' Moses staff into Jewish interpretations of his death. And whereas in the Bible the staff was used to show heavenly power to mortals, in this midrashic tradition, the staff wields power that affects only celestial beings.[80] Additionally, by equating the staff to the rainbow that served as a sign of the covenant with Noah,[81] the staff, too, becomes a sign of covenant, and its transfer to heaven becomes an opportunity for further polemics. During Moses' life the staff remained in his hand and served as a constant, visual representation of the unique covenant between God and the people Israel. Now as Moses dies, the staff passes into God's keeping where it will serve for God as a visual reminder of this covenant. Tellingly, the staff is not placed in the hand of any other individual proclaimed to be God's prophet and in possession of a new covenant; it remains in the heavenly abode reserved for God's chosen leader.

3.The Death Scene in *LAB*

Like Josephus and Philo, the writer of *LAB* creates a death scene for the paragon of the particular Jewish values that he esteems:

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[79]*LAB* 19:11.

[80]See, for example, *Petirat Moshe Rabbeinu Alav Ha-Shalom* (PM Jellinek-B).

[81]Genesis 9:13.

> [Moses] was filled with understanding and his appearance became glorious; and he died in glory according to the word of the Lord. And He buried him as He had promised him. And the angels mourned at his death, and the lightnings and the torches and the arrows went all together before him. And in the day the hymn of the heavenly hosts was not sung because of the passing of Moses, nor was there such a day from the one on which the Lord made man upon the earth, nor shall there be such forever, that the hymn of the angels should stop on account of man; because He loved him very much. And He buried him with His own hands on a high place and in the light of all of the world.

Motifs introduced in this description reappear throughout the later midrash on the death of Moses. In *LAB*, Moses' death impacts the angels and for one time only they stop their singing and mourn. Later interpretations enhance this description of the effect Moses' death has on the heavenly world, while simultaneously enlarging the description of the mourning of humans. Over time, mourning in the heavenly world will come to reflect the mourning occuring on the terrestrial plane. God and angels will mourn as humans mourn. And, as aspects of grief become more prominent in later interpretations, so, too, do descriptions of God's love for Moses, a motif which is introduced here into the midrashic traditions of Moses' death.

The writer of *LAB* closely aligns his account with Deuteronomy 34:5-6. The final scene of the chapter begins and ends with the key component of the Deuteronomy account which will be highlighted throughout rabbinic writings on the death of Moses: God *buried* Moses. It is likely that the writer aimed to combat the view that Moses did not die at all and *LAB* emphasizes the fact that Moses died "in the light of the world," and his body was buried. The writer of

LAB, like Josephus, interposes the Pharisaic belief in the immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body into the biblical text. But the writer of *LAB* is more orthodox in conforming to rabbinic opinion and does not utilize Hellenistic literary devices. Instead of disappearing in a cloud, Moses dies or "sleeps" and is interred in the earth, to be revived during the Messianic era. Later accounts will not accord Moses any respite: he is translated straight to heaven where he begins to fulfill his eschatalogical role.

4. II *Baruch* 59:3-12 and the *Assumption of Moses*

Jewish interpretations of the death of Moses from this period appear to fall into three categories: accounts in which Moses might temporarily ascend to heaven but quickly returns to earth where he dies;[82] those in which Moses ascends instead of experiencing death; and a third category which seeks to harmonize these views by presenting both death and ascension after the moment of death.[83] As shown, *LAB* is an example of the first category. Two additional interpretations from the Palestinian milieu are examples of the second and third categories and will complete this survey of first century Jewish accounts.

The version of Moses' death found in II *Baruch* is quite brief, with one verse explicitly mentioning his death, serving to classify this text as an ascent

[82]The emphasis on burial serves to identify this category.

[83]See Teeple, *The Mosaic Eschatological Prophet*, pp. 42-43. Philo's interpretations fall neatly into the second category; Josephus' account is not easily categorized. Although he follows Deuteronomy by writing that Moses died, the Hellenistic motifs and the omission of God burying Moses makes classification difficult.

version:

> At that time the heavens were shaken from their place, and those who were under the throne of the Mighty One were perturbed, when He was taking Moses unto Himself.[84]

This interpretation in which Moses is taken up to heaven and placed under God's throne is unique within these first century accounts, but God's safekeeping of Moses will reappear in later versions.[85] Whereas in *LAB*, Moses' *death* causes mourning in the heavens, here in II *Baruch* his *ascension* provokes cosmic upheaval. Despite the differences in interpretation, both versions create the same outcome: the end of Moses' existence impacts the cosmos.

The *Assumption of Moses* seeks to harmonize the competing perspectives as to what happened at the moment of Moses' death. The text, dating from before 30 C.E.,[86] is comprised primarily of a running dialogue between Joshua and Moses at the time of Moses' death.[87] It is also a composite work which may be one reason for the presentation of two different intepretations.[88] References to Moses'

[84]II *Baruch* 59: 3. Translation from Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament., op. cit.*,p. 513.

[85]See my comments regarding *Avot de Rabbi Natan* in Chapter 6, pp. 160-173.

[86]See Charles, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, p. 411.

[87]In chapter 11 of the *Assumption*, Joshua delivers a lengthy plea to Moses telling of his doubts as he assumes the leadership of the community. This text is the earliest extant material dealing with this dialogue which will be extended in the medieval midrashim, particularly in *Midrash Petirat Moshe Alav Hashalom.*

[88]Charles, in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (pp. 407-409), concludes that the present *Assumption of Moses* is composed of two originally independent works subsequently put together and edited as one during the first century. The earlier work was the*Testament of Moses* upon which

death are found in several places in the text, climaxing with the final verses of the work.

The first statement in the text regarding Moses' death is linked to a declaration about his birth:

> Accordingly He designed and devised me before the foundation of the world, that I should be the mediator of His covenant. 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 in the presence of all the people.[89]

By emphasizing the unique nature of how Moses' life began, the author enhances the description of Moses' death. God formed him before the creation of the world in order to fulfill a specific -- and timebound-- role. And as his "birth" was unique, concomitantly so will be his death.[90]

As in *LAB*, these verses of the *Assumption* emphasize death rather than ascension. In *LAB* Moses died "in the light of all the world;" here, Moses' death

the*Assumption* was grafted. Verse 11:13 evidences this editorial attempt at harmonization ,"For from my death [assumption] until His advent there shall be CCL times." the final editor inserted the word "assumption" in order to prepare the reader for the main subject of the added work, the *Assumption of Moses*. The material from the *Testament* presents the perspective of death and burial, while the *Assumption* offers elements of both ascension and burial and is the closing scene to the composite work. Priest, although agreeing with Charles' dating, rejects his theory regarding a composite work (See Priest's *Testament of Moses* , p. 925). The relationship beteween these two works is not clear. It has been proposed that they were either two distinct works, a single work consisting of two sections, or two separate works which were subsequently joined together (see *ABD* Vol. IV, p. 920).

[89]*Assumption of Moses* 1:14-16.

[90]The polemical nature of this text becomes clearer when compared to similar statements describing Jesus found in the Book of John. See Chapter 3, pp. 96-98, for this comparison.

is witnessed by the entire community. Both extra-biblical comments demystify the Deuteronomic account in which no one is present to witness God's burying of Moses in order that no one will know the site of his grave.

In a further distancing from the authoritative statement of Deut. 34:6 ('no one knows his grave to this day"), the author of the *Assumption* has Joshua ask, rhetorically:

> What place shall receive thee? Or what shall be the sign that marks thy sepulchre? Or who shall dare to move thy body from thence as that of a mere man from place to place? For all men when they die have according to their age their sepulchres on earth; but thy sepulchre is rising from the setting sun, and from the south to the confines of the north: all the world is thy sepulchre.[91]

His question seeks the "missing information" that gives the Deuteronomic account of Moses' death a mystical quality and allows for Philo's radical interpretation. Additionally, while continuing the emphasis on death and burial rather than ascension, Joshua's statements also imbue Moses' death with a unique quality and power that rival the characterization of his birth. Whereas every other individual's grave occupies a space on earth, Moses' grave fills the world. This description -- not found in any other interpretation -- also gives this account an all pervasive sense of mourning: if Moses' tomb occupies the entire world, then we go about our lives inside of Moses' grave. In Moses' absence, our existence is funereal and we mourn Moses no matter who or where we are.

For all of its emphasis on death and burial, the final scene of the *Assumption* also presents the competing belief that Moses ascended at the end of his life, thus

[91] *Assumption of Moses* 11:6-9.

uniting both perspectives. This concluding section of the original text is missing in the extant Greek versions and is therefore not included in most translations. Charles reconstructs this scene from Greek fragments and the events of this description are as follows:[92]

> 1. The angel Michael is commissioned to bury Moses.
> 2. Satan opposes the burial of Moses because (a) he was the lord of matter and that accordingly the body should be rightfully handed over to him; (b) that Moses was a murderer, having slain the Egyptian.
> 3. Michael, having rebutted Satan's accusations proceeds to charge Satan with having instigated the Serpent to tempt Eve.
> 4. Finally, after all opposition has been overcome, the assumption takes place in the presence of Joshua and Caleb. Moses' figure is doubled and one presentation of Moses 'living in the spirit' is carried up to heaven by angels; the other, the dead body of Moses, is buried

[92]See his *The Assumption of Moses* ed. by R.H. Charles , 1897. Determining the relationship of this material to the *Assumption* or to the *Testament* is a very difficult problem. See, in this regard, Richard Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1990), chapter 5, where he investigates the material describing the debate between the angel Michael and Satan for control of Moses' body in relationship to the Epistle of Jude. Bauckham also proposes (based on manuscript studies) that two versions of the story existed: one that Charles describes (and assigns as the end to the *Assumption of Moses*) and the following version, that Bauckham assigns to the*Testament of Moses*:

> Joshua accompanied Moses up Mount Nebo, where Joshua showed Moses the land of promise. Moses then sent Joshua back, saying, 'Go down to the people, and tell them that Moses is dead.' When Joshua had gone down to the people, Moses died. God sent the archangel Michael to remove the body of Moses to another place and to bury it there. But Samma'el, the devil, opposed him, disputing Moses' right to honourable burial. (The text may also have said that the devil wished to take the body down to the people, so that they would make it an object of worship.) Michael and the devil engaged in a dispute over the body. The devil slandered Moses, charging him with murder, because the slew the Egyptian and buried his body in the sand. But Michael, not tolerating the slander against Moses, said, 'May the Lork rebuke you, Satan!' At that, the devil took flight, and Michael removed the body to the place commanded by God. Thus no one saw the burial place of Moses(Bauckham, *op. cit.*, pp. 238-239).

by angels in the recesses of the mountain.

This version of Moses' death, in which Moses' soul or body "living in the spirit" experiences ascent while his physical body is buried, serves to harmonize competing beliefs and introduces the theme of angelic participation in the burial and/or ascension of Moses. Rabbinic writers will expand upon the angelic role in Moses' death, but in relationship to the treatment of his corpse. They will serve as pallbearers for Moses' bier. Moses' soul, rather than being "escorted'" to heaven by angels, will be taken up by a kiss from God.[93] Notably, all later versions maintain -- as seen in Deut. 34:5-6 -- that God buried Moses even though, within these accounts, the narrative never reaches the actual moment of interment.

In the *Assumption* however, the primary point is to highlight the extreme virtue of Moses in the eyes of God. Like Josephus and Philo, the writer of the *Assumption* was concerned with at least one apparent blemish on Moses' record: the killing of the Egyptian (Exod. 2:11-12). In this story from the *Assumption*, the devil, in his traditional role as Accuser, brings this event forward to challenge his worthiness of honorable burial. Michael, as Moses' advocate, appeals to God's judgement to vindicate Moses.[94] Both versions of this story, in which angels are introduced as God's agents in actions which the Bible attributes directly to God, are typical of intertestamental (pre-rabbinic) Jewish literature. Representing

[93]See Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10 and PM Jellinek-B.

[94]See Bauckham, *Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* , p. 239.

the earliest strata of interpretation, the *Assumption of Moses* presents events and motifs that subsequent versions will utilize and enhance.[95] Christian writers will explicitly refer to this text, while Jewish interpreters will continue to elaborate upon the struggle between Satan and Michael for Moses' body and soul.

D. Conclusions: Ideological Differences

A comparison of first century accounts of the death of Moses written in Palestine with those of the Diaspora - Philo's and Josephus' versions -- reveals stark, ideological differences. As described, Philo and Josephus utilize the moment of Moses' death to enhance his reputation amongst non-Jews, reflecting the world in which they lived. Writers in Palestine, on the other hand, directed their work towards Jews living in primarily Jewish communities. However, both groups are unified through their use of the mysterious nature of Moses' death to accomplish their particular ideological goals.

By reshaping the Deuteronomic death account so that it reads more like the death scenes of heroes presented in Hellenistic literature, Josephus demystifies the nature of Moses' death. To accomplish this goal, he edits out the most unusual detail (in the eyes of a Greco-Roman reader) of the account -- God burying Moses -- while adding to the narrative the cloud motif as an explanation for how Moses ends his life on earth. By having Moses disappear in this manner, Josephus implicitly compares Moses to heroic figures like Romulus, Aeneas, and

[95]II *Baruch* used the *Assumption of Moses* as a source. See, in this regard, Teeple, *The Mosaic Eschatological Prophet*, p. 42.

Oedipus. But while incorporating this Hellenistic literary motif, he resists the deification that, within the Greek world, is the typical endpoint of these cloud-ascents; Josephus' Moses remains an earthbound Greek hero. Josephus thus pursues a dual purpose: to recast Moses as a Hellenic hero, while maintaining aspects of the rabbinic tradition that Moses was buried and did not ascend to heaven. Josephus probably believed that Moses' deification would lead to the destabilization of monotheism and this concern accounts for his editorial remark that "Moses wrote in the holy books that he died, lest they venture to say that because of his extraordinary virtue, he went to God."[96] Josephus's resistance to Moses' ascension can also be interpreted as directed against Christian belief of the period.[97]

Additionally, Josephus' editorial comment may be responding to Philo. As I noted, Philo's interpretation of the Death of Moses is more radical than Josephus' version. Philo's Moses, as a reward for his extraordinary virtue, ascends to God and is given god-like qualities. Philo, a leader of the Alexandrian community, sought to justify the importation of Greek culture into Hebrew thought,[98] and Moses -- the most renowned Jewish figure in the Greco-Roman world -- plays a central role in this undertaking. He recasts Moses as a paragon of Stoic self-mastery, a hero who achieves moral perfection in a manner comprehensible to Greeks. He imposes a Hellenistic value system onto the biblical text: Moses' attainment of

[96]*Antiq.* 4. 8. 48.

[97]See the discussion in my next chapter.

[98]See Segal, *Rebecca's Children*, p. 55.

the four cardinal virtues, which he accomplishes through the adherence to God's commandments, renders him holy. And being "the most holy man who ever lived,"[99] Moses is accorded an easy passage to a new life in heaven.

But Philo's statement in *De Sacrificiis Abelis et Caini* complicates matters considerably and raises questions regarding Philo's perspective. In *De Vita Mosis* and *De Virtutibus*, is Philo presenting accounts of a human, who at his death, ascends to God? Or is Philo describing a god re-ascending to the heavens, from which it initially descended? The belief that Moses ascended at the end of his life was popular within the Jewish communities of the Diaspora, but Philo's near, if not total, deification of Moses pushed his version beyond accepted belief outside of the Alexandrian community. For this reason, Philo's perspective on the death of Moses was troubling to Josephus and was not embraced by later rabbinic writers. But, as will be investigated in the next chapter, echoes of Philo's ideas regarding the death of Moses will be heard in Christian descriptions of the transfiguration of Jesus.

The versions of the death of Moses written in Palestine during the first century share ideological goals that, differentiate these accounts from those composed in the Diaspora. And although each Palestinian interpretation might present a different opinion regarding what happened to Moses when he died, the ideological messages of all of these texts are similar and are directed internally: these versions are intended for Jewish audiences and not for potential Gentile

[99]*Mos.* ii 192.

proselytes.

Predominantly written during a period of religious and political destabilization, these versions seek to strengthen the Jewish community by using Moses' death to present a model of ideal Jewish behavior appropriate for these troubling times, while simultaneously consolidating the ideological boundaries of the Jewish community. In contrast to Philo and Josephus's portrayal of Moses as a General, the accounts written in Palestine present Moses as a pietist: when faced with persecution, Moses does not fight, he prays.[100] Additionally, in each text Moses is either shown (*LAB* and II *Baruch*) or envisions (the *Assumption*)a future which holds rewards in the Messianic age for those who maintain their faith in God during the present, difficult times. In these death scenes, the Palestinian writers use Moses as a spokesperson to articulate the tenets of Pharisaic piety: Moses advocates a faith based on the belief in the coming messianic age, bodily resurrection, and an aversion to militant Judaism. But the writers also utilize the witnesses of his death -- whether in heaven or on earth -- to promote an additional, communal-identity marker: suffering. All of these versions were written before the destruction of the Temple, with *LAB* being the one work that anticipates most clearly this event, and post-destruction accounts of the death of Moses will

[100]All of these first century Palestinian texts express the outlook of Pharisaic piety and portray Moses as its paragon. See, for example, *LAB* 19:8; the *Assumption of Moses* 11:17, in which Joshua describes Moses as "the great messenger who every hour day and night had his knees fixed to the earth praying and looking for help from Him that rules all of the world with compassion and righteousness, reminding Him of the ancestral covenant"; and II *Baruch* 59:3.

place greater emphasis on this theme.[101] The writers aim their most strident polemical attacks against the force that, before the destruction of the Temple and the Roman wars, was the most destabilizing development in the Jewish community: the emergence of Christianity. Of all of the interpretations of the death of Moses, those written in Palestine during the first century, particularly *LAB*, are the most anti-Christian in tone. The writers clearly use Moses' death as an opportunity to assert Moses' primacy as God's prophet. Yet, it is difficult to determine what precisely spurs these anti-Christian polemics. But in order to better understand how these Jewish and Christian interpretations interplay with each other, it is necessary to examine the interpretations of Moses' death that comprise the other side of this debate.

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[101]See Chapters 4 and 6.

Chapter 3

Moses' Ascension in the New Testament

This chapter will explore how early Christian writers portrayed the death of Moses, and how they used these portrayals to further their own ideological purposes. In order to set these writings within the context in which they were composed, it is necessary to review briefly how their Jewish contemporaries utilized interpretations of Moses' death.

As discussed in Chapter Three, first century Jewish interpretations of the death of Moses may be classified into three categories: those that describe an ascent without death; those that emphasize death and burial (which also might contain a temporary ascent);[1] and versions that seek to harmonize these different perspectives. Despite these differences however, all the versions surveyed share a fundamental similarity: to exalt Moses as God's chief agent on earth.

Josephus and Philo's treatments of the death of Moses highlight how the representative significance of a patriarchal figure was important when competing for religious adherents in the ancient world. The elevation of Moses to this role would have signified to non-Jews that the Jewish tradition -- which Moses transmitted to the people Israel -- represented the

> highest, most authentic, revelation of God's purposes - indeed the only genuinely valid tradition. Although this supremacy might not be demonstrable in the earthly realm, ancient Jews would have seen the heavenly exaltation of [Moses] as signifying, in the highest realm of reality....[that] their religious tradition had been given

[1]These versions are most likely connected to traditions which revolve around the theophany at Sinai.

prominence.[2]

Within the Jewish community, the special treatment that Moses received at his death --- and in some case coupled with a heavenly reward of enthronement or an immortal existence -- served as assurance for Jews of the eschatological reward for which they themselves hoped.[3] In *LAB,* God promises Moses: "I will raise up you and your fathers from the land of Egypt in which you sleep, and you will come together and dwell in the immortal dwelling place that is not subject to time."[4] Jews would have understood this promise to Moses as an assurance of the ultimate vindication of the Jewish faithful.

Moses' treatment at death prefigured the reward for those who patterned their lives after his virtuous example. Although there was continuous rabbinic concern that the exaltation of Moses would lead (and perhaps already had) to a modification in Jewish devotion to one God, the elevation of Moses to the role of God's chief agent was seemingly a widely accepted idea within Judaism.[5] As the texts show, controversy existed as to the extent of Moses' exaltation, yet within

[2]Larry W. Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), p.66.

[3]*Ibid.*, p.66.

[4]*LAB* 19:12. Harrington's translation, p. 328.

[5]See W.A. Meeks,*The Prophet King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology*(Novum Testamentum Supplements, Leiden: Brill, 1967),p. 214: "It has now become quite clear from rabbinic as well as non-rabbinic sources, that in some circles of Judaism over an extended period of time, from at least the second century B.C. until the middle ages, Moses was regarded as Israel's ideal king as well as prophet. In isolated traditions the two titles were found closely connected as the basic offices of Moses."

the Jewish descriptions of his death, the pre-eminent status of Moses as God's prophet is not challenged; it is defended. As seen in *LAB*, for example, the writer re-asserts Moses' status as God's sole mediator on earth. Is this writer's stance a reaction to a Christian claim that God exalted Jesus over Moses as God's one true prophet? The investigations of this chapter will aid in answering this question and explore how Christian texts of the same period use Moses' death to elevate Jesus as the primary patriarchal figure.

Like their Jewish contemporaries, Christian writers sought to protect and enhance the reputation of their religious leader, and the manner in which Christian writers of the New Testament exalted Jesus has some similarity to the way Jews exalted Moses and other biblical patriarchs.[6] For example, whereas Jews saw in the death of Moses a promise of an eschatological reward, Christians viewed Jesus's suffering and ressurection as prefiguration of an ultimate vindication for Christians. And like that of Moses, the ascent of Jesus to heaven serves as the paradigm for all the righteous mortals who follow: "Just as he was raised from the dead, made immortal, and ascended to the Father, so will followers experience the same at his return."[7]

Although the exaltation of Jesus represents a religious development with features of its own (obviously Jesus was not a venerable figure of established representative significance for Jews), the Jewish tradition "supplied the language

[6]See Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, p. 68.

[7]David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (*ABD*) (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. III, p. 93.

and conceptual models for articulating Jesus's exaltation by God as chief agent of the divine will."[8] And writers of the New Testament utilized Jewish conceptions of the death of Moses to serve this ideological purpose by attacking the belief in Moses' ascent.

A. The Death of Moses in the NT

New Testament references to Moses' death are limited to descriptions of his ascension (or not) to heaven,[8] therefore only one side of the Jewish intercommunal debate (death and burial vs. ascension) is present in the NT. The exclusion of references to Moses' death and burial can be attributed to two principle reasons. First, as evidenced by descriptions of death and immortality, the New Testament is much more a product of the Hellenistic environment than the Palestinian-Jewish works studied in the previous chapter. Descriptions of Jesus' ascent to heaven embrace fully Hellenistic literary influences. His apotheosis is rendered similar to that of Greek heroes: "When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."[9] The NT is fully part of the process of Hellenization in which notions of resurrection from the dead, immortality of the soul, and ascent to heaven are the norm rather than

[8]With the exception of Jude 9, there is no discussion of Moses' burial. Jude 9 reads, "But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a slanderous accusation against him, but said, "The Lord rebuke you!"

The similarity of this text to that of the *Assumption of Moses* indicates that Jude of this Jewish text.

[9]See Acts 1:9.

the exception;[10] within the Hellenistic world, gods did not bury great leaders.

The second reason for the absence of a burial description of Moses is a product of the first. Not only was ascension seen as the only fitting death for a leader, these descriptions serve an apologetic function. Within the Hellenistic world ascension of a leader to heaven signified the authenticity of the entire group. Thus by calling into question elements of Moses' ascent, the writers of the NT introduce a powerful tool for underming claims of religious pre-eminence. This process can be seen in several scenes from the Gospel of John and in the Transfiguration accounts. By questioning and destabilizing Moses' ascension, the NT seeks to undermine the authenticity of Judaism.

1. The Transfiguration Scene

The Tranfiguration scene of the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 17:1-9, Mark 9:2-10, Luke 9:28-36)begins with the Jewish belief that Moses ascended to heaven and did not "die" at the end of his career on earth. But ultimately, through this story, Moses dies a second, metaphoric death -- the death of his authority. Moses is taken by God in a cloud (as in Josephus' account),[11] but when the scene concludes, Jesus alone remains, challenging belief in the eschatological Moses. Not only has the earthly Moses been subsumed, so too, has the heavenly figure.

The Transfiguration accounts utilize the biblical imagery of the theophany at Mt. Sinai to destabilize Moses and establish Jesus' pre-eminence as God's

[10]*Ibid.*

[11]See *Antiq*. 4.8.48.

agent on earth, and the narrative structure of the Tranfiguration is reminiscent of Moses' ascent on Mount Sinai. In this scene, Jesus takes Peter, James, and John up a high mountain (Matt. 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28). There, Jesus is transformed in front of the disciples: his face "shines like the sun and his clothes became a dazzling white" (Matt. 17:2).[12] The description of Jesus' face recalls Moses' visage when he comes down from Mount Sinai holding the tablets of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 34:29). The whiteness of Jesus' clothes establish the heavenly setting or context that is intrinsic to the Exodus account (vv. 15-18).[13] After the transformation has occured, the disciples see Elijah and Moses talking with Jesus (Matt. 17:3; Mark 9:4; Luke 9:32). Then -- in a parallel to Exodus 24:13 in which Joshua accompanies Moses further up the mountain than the other witnesses -- Peter suggests to Jesus that he should build three shelters: one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah (Matt. 17:4; Mark 9:5; Luke 9:33). While he is making this suggestion, a cloud covers them and a voice calls out from the cloud, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him" (Luke 9:35). Then the cloud disappears and Jesus remains alone with his disciples (Matt. 17:8; Mark 9:8; Luke 9:36).

In Exodus 24, Moses is instructed to take Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, as well as the seventy elders, to serve as witnesses to the covenant made on Sinai

[12] All NT translations unless otherwise noted are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

[13]In Mark (9:3), Jesus' clothes are described as becoming a "dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them."

(vv. 1-8). Only Moses ascends, but the witnesses see the "God of Israel"(v. 10) from afar. Moses ascends Mt. Sinai as a cloud -- representing God's glory -- covered it. (v. 15). The cloud covering lasted six days (v.16), which, according to the NT, is the amount of time between the Transfiguration and the previous narrative events in both Matthew(17:1) and Mark (9:2).[14] At the end of six days, God calls to Moses from the midst of the cloud (24:16), and Moses enters (v. 18).

Both scenes utilize the same motifs of master, three disciples, mountain, cloud, vision, and the hearing of a heavenly voice.[15] But the Transfiguration contains one key addition: the appearance of two eschatological prophets (Moses and Elijah). Unique to the version of the Transfiguration scene from Luke is an interpretation as to what Jesus, Moses, and Elijah discussed: Jesus' "departure which was about to be accomplished at Jerusalem" (Luke 9:31). This statement suggests that Elijah and Moses are foretelling Jesus' death and his selection as Messiah. Elijah had long been identified as an eschatological prophet who would return from heaven as a precursor to the Messiah. A belief in Elijah's ascension to heaven is attested to in the Bible,[16] and Malachi 3:23-24 forsees him as the annunciator of the arrival of the Messiah. Elijah's eschatological role is elaborated in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha,[17] and his role as precursor to the Messiah

[14]*ABD*, vol. VI, p. 640.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 641.

[16]II Kings 2:11. See BT *Sukkah* 5a in which R. Jose seems to be conducting a polemic against the belief that Elijah and Moses ascended to heaven.

[17]See *Ben Sirach* 48 and the *Apocalpyse of Elijah* .

is maintained in the NT.[18]

It is a more complex undertaking, however, to explain Moses' participation in this scene. There does exist a pre-Christian tradition of two messianic precursors.[19] Outside of the New Testament, Enoch is most often identified as the second messianic precursor, for according to the Bible, he, like Elijah, did not die.[20] Although there is no mention of Moses' ascension in the Bible, post-biblical portraits of Moses, such as those studied in Chapter Three, ascribe to him a role as eschatological prophet, which was predicated predominantly, on a belief that he, too, had ascended to heaven.[21] Additionally, in the NT, there are references to a belief that Moses would return as a prophet telling of the Messiah's coming, or as the Messiah himself. In these eschatological references, Moses is frequently

[18]See, for example, Matt. 11:10-14; Luke 1:15-17. Mathew 17:10-12, a discussion that occurs immediately after the Transfiguration scene, states: "And the disciples asked him, 'Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?' He replied, 'Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things, but I tell you that Elijah has already come and they did not recognize him.'"

[19]See *ABD*, vol. II, p. 465.

[20]This a belief based on a cryptic verse (Genesis 4:24): "And Enoch walked with God. And he wasn't, because God took him." Teeple in *The Mosaic Eschatological Prophet* explains (p. 41): In the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha there are traditions that Moses, Jeremiah, Baruch and Ezra have each 'entered paradise during their lifetime' or were 'taken up without tasting death.' The growing esteem in which Moses was held made it inevitable that he would be amongst those who received this distinction."

[21]At least momentarily. In each of the texts from Palestine examined in the previous chapter, Moses, at moments, functions as an eschatological prophet or is shown an eschatological vision. In the*Testament (Assumption) of Moses* , a text which emphasizes burial, Moses tells of the "day of recompense when the Lord will surely have regard for his people." See also 1:18, 12:4; *LAB* 19:12-13.

mentioned along with Elijah (e.g. John 1:21),[22] and one such statement appears in the narrative preceding the Transfiguration.

Six days before ascending the mountain,[23] Jesus arrives in Caesarea Philippi and asks his disciples,

> "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." He asked them, "But who do you say that I am?" And Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." [24]

If "Son of Man" refers to one who is a messianic savior figure, then this exchange between Jesus and the disciples establishes the context for the events of the Transfiguration by presenting vying beliefs regarding the identity of the Messiah as being Elijah, Moses ("one of the prophets") or Jesus.

[22]Also see John 6:14; 7:40. Additionally, the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3-13 are identified implicitly as Moses and Elijah. Revelation 11:6 reads: "These men have power to shut up the sky so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want." This description is in accordance with the biblical descriptions of Elijah and Moses. This story is probably a union of two rival concepts as to the identity of the Messiah, either Moses or Elijah, or both prophets are functioning here as precursors to the Messiah (see Teeple, *The Mosaic Eschatological Prophet*, pp. 44-46). The pairing of Elijah and Moses as eschatological prophets also occurs in the rabbinic literature. See Exodus Rabbah 2.4; Deuteronomy Rabbah 2.9; Sifre Deut., Piska 355.

[23]In Luke, eight days separate the previous discourse from the Jesus' ascent of the mountain.

[24]Matt. 16:13-16. The parallel in Luke 9:18-20: "Who do the crowds say that I am?' They answered, "John the Baptist; but others, Elijah; and still others, that one of the ancient prophets has arisen." Mark 8:27-29: "Who do people say that I am?" And they answered him, "John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets." But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah."

Elijah's and Moses' treatment in the Transfiguration scene subsequently resolves this dispute. Their disappearance in the cloud visually establishes Jesus as God's chief agent by removing his prophetic competition. But it is the *bat qol*, or heavenly voice, that is the key literary tool used in this polemic. At Mt. Sinai, the event that confirms Moses' pre-eminence as God's prophet, a heavenly voice calls to Moses from the cloud (Exod. 24:16). Here, in a scene composed from similar literary elements, that "same" heavenly voice authenticates Jesus' position, with one important difference: in the Transfiguration, the voice is heard by both the prophet *and* the three disciples. At Sinai, the three witnesses are "excluded from the pivotal moment of divine disclosure,"[25] leaving Moses alone to vouch for his divine mandate.

2.The Gospel of John: Jesus's exaltation over Moses

The primacy of Jesus as God's chief agent is also asserted throughout the Gospel of John, primarily through comparisons with Moses: "The Law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."[26] From the first verses of the Gospel of John, the writer places Jesus in the role occupied by Moses in the biblical and rabbinic traditions.

In the *Assumption of Moses*, Moses is described as being created even before the creation of the world(1:14), while in the Gospel of John, Jesus is ascribed this

[25]*ABD*, vol. VI, p. 641.

[26]John 1:15 New International Version (NIV).

primeval existence:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God. He was with God in the the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing has been made that has been made.[27]

Much of the biblical description used to highlight Moses' unique relationship with God is utilized here with respect to Jesus. In the Torah, Moses is the one individual who glimpses God; in the Gospel of John only Jesus is accorded that privilege: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only [in some manuscripts: 'the only Son'], who is at the Father's side."[28] And, if intimacy with God is the the central quality that distinguishes Moses' relationship with God from God's relationship with any other being, in the Gospel of John Jewish claims of Moses' unparalled proximity to God are rejected in favor of Jesus.

In the Torah, Moses' closeness with God predicated his role as mediator. In Deuteronomy 5:5, Moses refers to the theophany on Mt. Sinai and recalls his role there: "I stood between the Lord and you at that time to tell you the word of God." The mediation at Sinai is the zenith in Moses' career as mediator -- for there he received God's Torah -- and establishes him as Israel's ultimate prophet. Subsequently, in preparation for his death, Moses promises the Israelites that God will raise up a prophet from amongst the people who will replace him as mediator (Deut. 16:16).[29] God affirms this Mosaic promise: "I will raise up a

[27]John 1:2-3, NIV.

[28]John 1:18, NIV.

[29]Jesus changes this message into a polemic against the Jews: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me

prophet for them from amongst them, like you [Moses]. And I will put my words in his mouth."[30]

In an effort to draw legitimacy from the Old Testament, Jesus is portrayed as this new prophet in the Gospel of John. His prophecy functions in the same manner as the Torah was given through Moses, while in effect supplanting it.[31] Jesus delivers a new commandment: "Love one another. As I have loved you, you must love one another."[32] Through obeying this commandment, one becomes Jesus' disciple,[33] just as through study and obedience to Torah one becomes a disciple of Moses.

In John 17 Jesus prays for his disciples:

> I have revealed your name to those whom you gave me out of the world... Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. ...Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name - the name you gave me - so that they may be one as

to have life...But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?" (John 5 :39-40, 45-47)

[30]Deut. 18:18.

[31]See Meeks,*The Prophet King*, p. 290.

[32]John 13:13, NIV.

[33] "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my father's commands and remained in his love" (John 15:9-10). And "If you hold to my teaching you are really my disciples, Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32). See also 14:15, 21.

we are one.[34]

This scene serves as a summation of Jesus' mission and here, the writers of the Gospel of John connect Jesus' mission with the Sinai theophany. As God revealed his name to Moses, so too, is the divine name revealed to Jesus; as Moses stood as the primary link between God and the people at Sinai, now Jesus stands conveying the "new commandment." And, just as the quality of this new teaching is greater than the old, the quality of the new prophet who is one with God, enjoys an intimacy that surpasses Moses'.

3. Heavenly Ascent in the Book of John

One of the central themes of the Gospel of John is the notion that Jesus "ascend[ed] to the Father,"[35] and a key component of this theme is the incorporation of a prior descent.[36] Ascension, in the Fourth Gospel, is a *return* to heaven. This pattern of descent/ascent is utilized by the NT writers to substantiate Jesus' doctrine and give it authenticity.[37]

In Chapter 6, Jesus is teaching in a synagogue in Capernaum and compares

[34]John 17:6-8, 11.

[35]See Meeks,*The Prophet King*, p. 296. See John 6:62; 20:17; 3:13. It is described less specifically in 7:34, 13;33, 17:11.

[36]The idea of a heavenly messenger descending from heaven is found in Greek literature. See, in this regard, T.M. Greene, *The Descent from Heaven. A Study in Epic Continuity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), pp. 26-103.

[37]Pattern of descent/ascent of a heavely messenger has no direct parallel in Moses traditions save for an isolated statement in Philo(*Sac*. 8-10).

himself to the manna that rained from heaven:[38]

> Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth it is not Moses who has given you the bread from heaven, but it is my father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world...I am the bread of life...and I have come down from heaven not to do my will, but to do the will of Him who sent me.[39]

In his teaching Jesus gives the biblical miracle a christological reading, and the polemical nature of this statement is clear: Moses is reduced to a mere mediator of a gift that is far inferior to its Christian counterpart, while Jesus is the "real bread" given by God.[40] Jesus predicates the authenticity of his teaching on his descent from heaven. Although Jesus' claim to be doing God's will -- operating as an agent for the Divine -- is similar to Biblical prophets' statements which establish their legitimacy, his emphasis on descent from heaven as the *sine qua non* of prophetic authority differentiates Jesus from Jewish conceptions of prophets. By establishing this prerequisite for genuine prophesy, the Gospel of John effectively deligitimizes Moses' voice.

This polemic against Moses foments arguments in the synagogue. First, the Jews debate amongst themselves: "They said, is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know, how can he now say, 'I came down from heaven'?"[41] In response, Jesus reiterates that he is the one who is "from

[38]Ex. 16:4.

[39]John 6:32-33, 35, 38.

[40]See Meeks,*The Prophet King*, p. 291.

[41]John 6:42.

God" the only one who has "seen the Father," and bases the truth of his doctrine on the fact of his descent from heaven. His disciples also resist Jesus' command to eat his flesh and blood which Jesus calls the source of eternal life.[42] They say to Jesus, "This is a hard teaching, who can accept it?"[43] In response, the chapter continues:

> Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, 'Does this offend you? What if you see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life.[44]

Jesus offers ascent to heaven as the ultimate confirmation of his claims. Conversely, the Gospel of John attacks the validity of the Mosaic teachings by denying Moses' ascent to God. This ascent was not possible, for Moses, according to the Gospel of John, did not first *descend* from the heavens.

The most pointed of the polemical attacks against Moses' ascent is found in John 3:13: "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man." The statement comes at the end of a discussion between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus, who, significantly, is identified as a member of the Jewish ruling counsel (3:1), and the "teacher of Israel" (3:10). Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night and asks, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could do these signs that you do

[42]John 6:53-58.

[43]John 6:60.

[44]John 6:61-63.

apart from the presence of God."[45] Jesus responds, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."[46] In his discourse, Jesus sets forth the necessity of being born again if one wants to enter the kingdom of God:

> Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the spirit is spirit.[47]

Jesus description of the man who is born "from above" and thereby able to "see" and"enter" the Kingdom of God, is in effect a description of himself.[48]

Nicodemus does not contest the ability to ascend to heaven and see God, rather, he questions the necessity of being born again, or born in heaven, as a prerequisite for heavenly ascent (3:4). Taken together with verse 3:13, these three statements (3, 5, 13) form a polemic against the Pharisaic circle represented by Nicodemus, for whom Moses' ascension was a central tenet.[49]

[45]John 3:2.

[46]John 3:3.

[47]John 3:5-6.

[48]See Meeks,*The Prophet King*, p. 298.

[49]As we have seen, Josephus' polemicized against the belief that Moses ascended. We will see that this belief provoked anxiety in the rabbinic period as well. Meeks notes (*The Prophet King*, p. 286): "Traditions, [including a belief in his ascent to eternal life], were cultivated by groups that exalted Moses as the center of their religious concerns, as the intermediary, in some sense, between them and God. There is considerable evidence to support this assumption: the secrets revealed to Moses were the source of apocalyptic knowledge and legal regulation; his enthronement was sometimes the model for mystical ascent and for the elevation of the righteous at death; his leadership in the Exodus and the wilderness was the model for expectations of final redemption." E.R. Goodenough argues for the existence of a Moses-centered

B. Comparisons and Conclusions: *LAB* and The Gospel of John

An exploration of the socio-historical contexts of the Gospel of John and *LAB* reveals some interesting points of comparison. And while one work exalts Moses, and the other seeks to diminish his reputation, both texts utilize the death of Moses for the similar ideological purpose of asserting the unique relationship with God enjoyed by one particular religious group over all others.

Written in the last two decades of the first century C.E., the Gospel of John is believed to have been addressed towards the members of a Christian community in order to strengthen their faith in the midst of a conflict. Although there are differing opinions regarding the nature of this conflict, a prominent hypothesis maintains that the Gospel was written for a group of Christians who had been expelled from its synagogue home and now were "set in conflict with those who until recently had been colleagues in faith."[50] Textual references suppport this theory which explains the anti-Jewish polemic evident throughout the work. In three instances the phrase "put out of the synagogue" is found in the gospel,[51] and the term "the Jews" is used pejoratively in several passages.[52]

piety in *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1969 (reprint of 1935 edition)). The polemic expressed in John 3:3,5,13 clearly implies that circle represented by "teachers of Israel" (3:10) did think such a heavenly ascent was possible.

[50]*ABD*, vol. III, p. 918. See also T.L. Brodie, *The Quest for the Orgin of John's Gospel* (Oxford: University Press, 1993), pp. 7-24. Brodie summarizes the different hypotheses regarding the historical and source critical origins of the Gospel of John.

[51]9:22; 12:42; 16:2.

Additionally, as discussed above, the superiority of Christian revelation to the Old Testatement is asserted,[53] and in several instances Jesus is made to attack the Jews, describing them as unfaithful to their heritage for not believing in him.[54] These references reflect a context of Jewish-Christian debate and other features of the Gospel support the proposal of an expulsion from the synagogue:

> Existing as a newly independent religious community set over against Judaism would account for the radical exclusivism of the gospel (e.g. 14:6), for the 'sectarian quality' of the self perception of the community as set in opposition to the 'world'(e.g., 16:33), for the dualistic scheme which construes reality in terms of either one or the other allegiance (e.g. 1:5), and for the tendency to see Jesus in terms of a foreigner in the earthly realm.[55]

Similar characteristics of sectarianism-- although of a distinctly Jewish cast -- appear in *LAB* generally, and in chapter 19 in particular (which contains Moses' farewell prayer and death). The book appears to be serving a similar purpose to that of the Gospel of John: maintaining and strengthening a community's faith during a period of crisis. Additionally, like in the Gospel of John, there is textual evidence reflecting a context of Jewish-Christian debate. The narrative of *LAB* presents a perception of a Jewish community set in "opposition to the world": in the narrative, the people are constantly confronted by their enemies, located inside and outside their community.[56] *LAB*"s emphasis on God's selection of

[52]9:18; 10:31; 18:12, 36-38 and 19:12.

[53]1:18; 6:49-50; 8:58; cf 2:1-22.

[54]E.g., 8:42-44.

[55]*ABD*, vol. III, p. 918.

[56]19:2; 19:4; 19:7.

Israel and the creation of a covenant between Israel and God articulates the importance of followers' allegiance to one particular group,[57] and it is only through maintaining this allegiance, especially during troubling times, does an adherent receive rewards at the end of time.[58] As the gospel in John is described in exclusivistic terms, so too does *LAB* treat God's "statues" and "laws." The Torah is a possession held only by the Jews, and while the gospel is a source of life for its adherents, God's commandments serve as an "eternal light" solely for the people Israel.[59] And as the writers of the Gospel of John describe Jesus in "terms of a foreigner in the earthly realm," saying that Jesus descended from heaven and is thus God's principle agent on earth, the author of *LAB* glorifies Moses, not to the extent of describing a being from heaven, but the Moses of *LAB* is not quite of this earth.[60]

Although it is always debatable whether the interpretation of a work reflects accurately the author's thought and intention, it seems safe to conjecture that the author of *LAB* rewrote the Bible with respect to the issues of his time and that the readers of *LAB* understood the events of his narrative to be analogous to historical events of the contemporary period.[61] Written around the time of

[57]19:4.

[58]19:3; 19:12.

[59]Compare *LAB* 19:4, with John 14:6.

[60]See Chapter 2, pp. 68-68.

[61]See Frederick J. Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible* (Oxford: University Press, 1993), p. 263.

the destruction of the Temple, it is believed that *LAB* represents "fairly mainstream scribal Judaism in first century Palestine."[62] Frederick Murphy suggests that the author of *LAB* chose particular narratives from the Bible that allowed for analogies to be made with the turbulent events of the period:

> [During the first century] the existence of Israel did not always seem secure, neither could God's commitment to Israel have always gone unquestioned. The author's decision to give extensive treatment to the period of the judges may have been influenced by the fact that both during that era and during the first century, Israel found itself subject to foreign occupation, with unsettled leadership, and with foreign religious influences a danger.[63]

During this period, Jewish society was confronted with the problems of foreign oppression and internal division. And in general, the author portrays relations between Jews and Gentiles as problematic.[64] For the writers of *LAB*, upholding the representative significance of Moses -- as the paragon of Pharisaic piety -- was crucial in maintaining group solidarity during a turbulent period that challenged Jewish identity. The writer of *LAB* interpret Moses' death and God's promise of future ressurection as a reward for maintaining a covenant with God, and the readers of *LAB* 19 would have made an analogy to their own lives: if they too remain loyal to God they will be rewarded with resurrection at the end of time.

Although it is difficult to determine if the Gospel of John was responding directly to *LAB*'s anti-Gentile polemic, it does attack Jewish beliefs regarding the

[62] See Murphy, *Pseudo-Philo: Rewriting the Bible*, p. 7.

[63] *Ibid.*, p. 264.

[64] *Ibid.*

death of Moses, thus undermining his representative significance for the Jewish community that sent the Johannine community into internal exile. The writers of the Gospel of John deny that Moses ascended to heaven -- which within the Hellenistic world would have invalidated his leadership --and thereby deny their opponents of their claims to religious authenticity.

C. Comparisons and Conclusions:*Witnessing* in the Accounts of Jesus' Ascension and Moses' Death

In the Deuteronomic account of Moses' death, Moses ascends Mount Nebo, is shown the entire land, dies on top of the mountain, and is buried by God in a valley, and *"to this day no one knows his burial place."*[65] A notable difference between the biblical account and those of the first century, is the latter versions' emphasis on the witnessing of Moses' death in both ascent versions and burial accounts. In *De Vita Mosis*, Philo conflates the location where Moses offers his final blessing to Israel with the place of his ascension,[66] thus implying that the entire community witnessed his "journey to heaven."[67] In Josephus' account, Eleazar and Joshua are speaking with Moses, when a cloud suddenly covers him and causes him to "disappear in a certain valley."[68] Josephus might be borrowing this motif from the Sinai account. There, Joshua is the most proximate witness to

[65]Deut. 34:1-6.

[66]In Deut. 34:1, Moses ascends from the plains of Moab -- where he blessed each of the tribes (Deut. 33) -- to the summit of Mt. Nebo.

[67]*Vita Mosis* iii.39.

[68]*Antiquities* 4.8.48.

Moses' envelopment by the cloud (Exod. 24:13), as here he (and Eleazar) is about to be embraced by Moses when a cloud takes Moses away. In *LAB*, Moses' burial by God occurs "in the light of all of the world,"[69] and the *Assumption of Moses* also emphasizes the public nature of his death: "I am passing away to sleep with my fathers in the presence of all of the people."[70] But mortals are not the only witnesses in the first century C.E. accounts of Moses' death. They are joined by heavenly counterparts who, by their mourning, acknowledge the death/ascension of God's principle agent on earth. For instance, in *LAB*, on the day of Moses' death, the angels suspended their singing.[71] In the *Assumption of Moses* angels bury Moses' body in the recesses of a mountain, and escort his soul to heaven.[72]

New Testament accounts also place mortal and immortal witnesses at the scene of Jesus' ascension as a validating element. In Acts 1, in a scene reminiscent of Josephus' account of Moses death, Jesus is taken to heaven in the presence of his apostles after finishing a discourse:

> When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you to into heaven, will come in the same way that you saw him go into heaven.[73]

[69]*LAB* 19:16.

[70]*Assumption of Moses* 1:16.

[71]*LAB* 19:16.

[72]See chapter 2, pp. 76-80, and n. 89.

[73]Acts 1:9-11, NRSV. Luke 50:51 evidences similarities to Philo's and Josephus'

The two men in white robes, who are understood to be celestial beings, confirm the vision of the apostles. And as in the Moses death accounts, the pairing of heavenly witnesses with mortals serves to underscore the unparalleled quality of Jesus' passing from life on earth to life in heaven, a unique translation accorded only to God's heavenly messenger on earth. Finally, the Transfiguration scene used aspects of the theophany at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 24) placing disciples as witnesses to Jesus' transformation just as Aaron Nadab and Abihu witnessed Moses' ascent.

Within the Jewish, intra-communal debate as to the particulars of Moses' death (burial vs. ascension), it is possible to understand the emphasis on witnessing to serve as support for a given side of the debate: heavenly and mortal witnesses saw Moses' ascension (*De Vita Mosis*) and may vouch for it, just as heavenly and mortal witnesses were present at his burial (*LAB*). Additionally, as explored in the Transfiguration scene, witnesses are used for an inter-communal polemic to undermine a Jewish belief in Moses' future eschatological role. Notably, this scene does not attack a belief in Moses' ascension, but rather the apostles witness an event that serves to diminish his reputation as God's chief agent: Moses is not the messiah (nor is Elijah), as Jesus alone fulfills this role. Certainly, during the first century Jews and Christians were engaged in a debate as to which group was truly God's chosen and as shown, both Jewish and Christian descriptions of Moses contain elements of this ideological debate. Yet, the similarities in the use of witnesses at the moment of both Jesus' and Moses' "death" speak to a shared

accounts which temporally conflate Moses' blessing and departure: "Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up to

apologetic stance on the part of Jews and Christians during the period against a common foe: the Roman empire. Understanding the representative significance of a leader, both Christians and Jews utilized similar motifs when describing the deaths of the two individuals who served as symbols of their religious claims. The lives of Moses and Jesus, which climaxed in glorious deaths, were interpreted to their followers as models of conduct for these contemporary communities who were in the midst of persecution by foreign oppressors. The Romans viewed the claims of both Christians and Jews to be God's chosen as ludicrous, proven false by the supremacy of the empire.[74] As will be examined in the following chapter, rabbinic interpretations of the death of Moses will reflect this historical reality. Writing after the destruction of the Temple, the Roman wars, and the Bar Kochba revolt, the ideological messages found within these rabbinic versions reflect a community in turmoil.

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[74]Hirshman, *Jewish and Christian Biblical Interpretation*, p. 1.

Chapter 4

Tannaitic Interpretations of Moses' Death

The early rabbinic interpretations of Moses' death show a development towards an emphasis on death and burial. These Palestinian versions, from the second and third century C.E., represent -- both chronologically and interpretively -- a transitional period in conceptions of Moses' death. In the first century Hellenistic and apocryphal versions, examined in Chapter Two, the focus is on Moses himself. He is described in heroic terms, assumes mythic proportions, and his death leaves a cosmic impact.[1] All of the first century versions stress the singularity of Moses, and the unparalleled treatment he received at death. As depicted in *LAB*, the angels stopped singing for the first and only time when Moses died. The *Assumption of Moses* describes how different Moses' grave is from those of all other individuals':

> For all men when they die have according to their age their sepulchres on earth; but thy sepulchre is rising from the setting sun, and from the south to the confines of the north: all the world is thy sepulchre.[2]

The midrashic versions of the second and third century, however, are more concerned with the human side of Moses' character and the universal phenomenon of death. Although they stress the greatness of Moses and the fact that he was buried by the hand of God, they diminish the differences between Moses and other mortals. These versions appear to be the earliest examples of a

[1]Rella Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), p. 50.

[2]*Assumption of Moses* 11:6-9.

midrashic tradition that asserts Moses' mortality; in the later versions (after the 6th century), Moses is afraid of his approaching death, begs to be allowed to enter the Land, and repeatedly prays to God for mercy.[3] Within these accounts, the central difference between Moses and other mortals lies principally in the final resting place of his soul in the hereafter: under the Seat of Glory.[4]

The midrashim of the second and third century also continue the emphasis, found within the Hellenistic first century accounts, on Moses' disappearance or concealment, which Rella Kushelevsky terms *Genizah*:

> *Genizah* literally means the hiding and storing of something precious to its owner. In [this] specific context... 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, the *Genizah* connotes eternal life on high, in proximity to, and under the protection of, God Himself. By definition, the elusive term of the *Genizah* also suggests invisiblity - a hidden enigmatic existence outside this world, which is indiscernable to mortals and far beyond the grasp of human reason.[5]

In her thorough literary study of the midrashim on the death of Moses, Kushelevsky examines how the versions incorporate aspects of both Death and *Genizah*, shifting between these concepts. Kushelevsky notes that the versions found in second and third century rabbinic literature emphasize Moses' concealment, while simultaneously incorporating references to Death. Instead of mentioning disappearance by name in a straghtforward manner like that in

[3]See, for example, *Deuteronomy Rabbah* (DTR) 11:5; DTR 11:10; *Petirat Moshe Rabbenu 'Alav Hashalom* '(= PM Jellinek-A).

[4]See Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p. 51.

[5]*Ibid.*, p. xix.

Antiquities or in *DeVita Mosis*, these texts do not explicitly mention disappearance and hence the term *Genizah* is particularly useful here.

Whereas Kushelevsky analyzed the literary themes of these midrashim, I am interested in exploring their ideological implications. Thus far, this paper has postulated various ideological reasons for stressing either pole of belief, *Genizah* or Death. In this Chapter I will study the second and third century midrashim and how they differ from the earlier versions in this respect. In particular, I will search for possible answers to these questions: What caused the shift from an emphasis on *Genizah* towards the pole of Death in the accounts from the second and third century? Why do the second and third century descriptions of Moses' death not contain aspects of a belief in his eschatological role? And, why do the rabbinic versions move away from the mythic descriptions of the first century towards a more human portrayal of Moses? Although it is impossible to give precise answers to these questions, an examination of these early rabbinic texts will elucidate theories that offer insight into the socio-religious context that provoked the shifts in the literary themes traced by Kushelevsky and the ideological implications of these themes.

A. The Portrayal of Moses in the Death Accounts in *Sifre Deuteronomy* and *Midrash Tannaim*

The similar accounts of Moses' death found in *Sifre Deuteronomy* piska 305 (hereafter, *Sifre*) and *Midrash Tannaim* (hereafter MidrTann), both exegetical midrashim containing traditions from the second or early third century, are

comprised from two sets of competing tensions that highlight the transitional quality of these versions. First, Moses is described in *both* human and supernatural terms. And second, the descriptions of his death found in these accounts point simultaneously to both thematic poles: *Genizah* and Death. Judging from its more complete exegesis, yet with almost point for point similar structure, MidrTann is a slightly later version than *Sifre* , and in most cases simply enhances the description of *Sifre* rather than creating a new narrative. Therefore, I will examine principally the earlier account, using the MidrTann version to elucidate certain points of the text found in *Sifre*.

The midrash in *Sifre* begins:

> God said to the Angel of Death, "Go and bring me Moses' soul." He went and stood before him 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 went out in anger, and reported the matter before the Great One. Once again, God said to him, "Go and bring me Moses' soul." He went to his home and asked for him and didn't find him. He went to the Sea and said to it, "Moses, have you seen him?" The Sea said to him, "Since the day he led Israel through me I have not seen him." He went to the mountains and the heights and he said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "Since the day Israel received the Torah on Mount Sinai we have not seen him." He went to Gehinom and said to it, "Have you seen Moses?" It replied, "I heard his name, but did not see him." He went to the ministering angels and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "Go to the place of the humans." He went to Israel and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "God knows his path. God has concealed him for life in the world to come, and no creature will know of it." As it is said, *And he buried him in the valley ...and no one knows his burial place unto this day*(Deut. 34:6).

As discussed in Chapter Two, the Angel of Death appears in versions of the

Assumption of Moses and the *Testament of Moses*.[6] In these earlier interpretations, Moses is already dead when the Angel of Death/Samma'el appears. In both these accounts and in Jude 9, he and Michael argue as to who will obtain Moses' body. *Sifre* introduces a new theme (which becomes a common component of the midrashim) in which Moses and the Angel of Death are placed in direct conflict with each other. Kushelevsky believes that this theme of Moses confronting the Angel of Death is introduced here in order to portray the human aspects of Moses and his death. Implicit in his rebuke of the Angel of Death is Moses' fear of death and his struggle with the Angel suggests "a strong, desperate will to live on."[7] In fact, this very human fear of death is the departure point for the midrash.

Although describing Moses as fearful of death imbues the midrash and Moses himself with a universal pathos, Moses is also characterized within this conflict as possessing superhuman attributes. The scene portrays a disparity in power and prestige between Moses and the Angel of Death which is first visually described ("[The Angel of Death] went and stood before him"), and then explicitly confirmed by Moses' rebuke, "Where I sit you have no right even to stand."[8] What emerges in the *Sifre* account is an inverted image: "Moses is portrayed as a sort of angel, while the Angel of Death is presented in his almost-human

[6]See Chapter 2, pp. 76-80, note 89.

[7]See Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p. 63.

[8]In later accounts (see PM Jellenik-B, and DTR) Moses, in addition to rebuking the Angel of Death, physically attacks him with his staff.

limitations."[9] The Angel of Death's power and knowledge is limited: he searches for Moses but cannot find him; he must return to God without completing his mission. And although Moses' knowledge is also limited or "humanized" -- he does not know that he is to be concealed -- he is, however, able to defeat the Angel of Death. *Sifre Deuteronomy* thus presents a dual-natured description of Moses: in his fear of death, he is like everyman, but in his power over the Angel of Death, he is like no other mortal.

In this account these two competing qualities (mortal vs. superhuman) appear, but are not equal. The more dominant description found in the *Sifre* version is one that stresses Moses' uniqueness and his supernatural qualities, not his more human characteristics. The uniqueness of Moses emerges from the biblical prooftexts as well as from the narrative itself. Each unsucessful moment in the Angel's search, which comprises the "action" of the midrash, serves to highlight Moses' super-human qualities while further diminishing the Angel of Death's power. The Angel of Death's futile search takes him to places where, in the biblical narrative, Moses performed miracles. The Angel of Death asks the Sea, "Moses, have you seen him?" The Sea said to him, "Since the day he led Israel through me I have not seen him." The Sea's response intensifies the irony of the situation (as do the words of the mountains and heights): Moses was able to complete his mission of crossing the Israelites through the Sea(and receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai), while the celestial being cannot complete his mission of

[9]See Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p. 63.

bringing Moses' soul to God.[10]

Perhaps the greatest emphasis on Moses' supernatural attributes is found in the biblical allusions to Job in the *Sifre* version:

> He went to Israel and said to them, "Have you seen Moses?" They said to him, "God knows his path. God has concealed him for life in the world to come, and no creature will know of it."

The Israelite's response alludes to Job 28:23, "God understands its way and God knows its place." This reference connects the Angel of Death's search for Moses to Job's quest for supernal wisdom, a connection that is made more explicitly in the MidrTann version.[11] In fact, Job 28 forms the biblical foundation for the version of the Angel of Death's search for Moses found in MidrTann:

> He went to Israel and said to it, "Perhaps Moses' soul is here?" They said to him, "[*Wisdom*]*will not be found in the land of the living*"(Job 28:13). He went to the place of the clouds of Glory. He said to them, "Perhaps Moses' soul is here?" They replied, "*Seeing it is hid from the eyes of all the living* "(Job 28:21). He went to the ministering angels. "Perhaps Moses' soul is here?" They said to him, "*It is hidden from the birds of the heavens*"(Job 28:21)...He went to the Depths. "Perhaps Moses' soul is here?" The Depths replied, "No." As it is written, *The Depths said, 'It is not in me'*(Job 28:14).

Job searches for wisdom in all the elements of Creation and cannot find it; similarly, in MidrTann the Angel of Death searches for Moses in the heavens and in the Depths and cannot find him. By association then,

> Moses becomes identified with the supernal wisdom which is the Torah. Nature [here represented by the Angel of Death] is powerless against Moses, just as it is powerless against the Torah. Both the Torah and Moses (who transmitted the Torah to Israel) are above

[10]See Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p. 61.

[11]*Ibid.*

nature found in proximity to God Himself. [12]

By creating these parallels between the Job material and the Angel's search, the midrashists recast Moses as a completely metaphysical entity: he is equated to supernal wisdom or Torah and thus is not subject to death.[13]

The duality of character presented in *Sifre* is modeled upon the descriptions of Moses found in the Torah. There too, he possesses both human weakness and supernatural power. This is a change from first century accounts of Moses' death, in which Moses' human weaknesses are not described. In fact, as stated in Chapter Three, Josephus and Philo edit-out the biblical scenes that portray Moses in non-heroic terms. However, the second century approach adopted in *Sifre*, which integrates these two diametrically opposed notions of Moses -- Moses the man and Moses the superman -- becomes the prevalent method of characterizing Moses in the midrashim.[14] Later accounts will enlarge upon descriptions of Moses' weaknesses, while concurrently enhancing his supernatural attributes; within these later accounts, there is a balanced presentation of Moses as human, and Moses as metaphysical being.[15]

The *Sifre* emphasizes the supernatural over the human characteristics of Moses' personality. The MidrTann version, however, creates a slightly more balanced presentation of Moses character which might indicate that this version

[12]See Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p. 61.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 62.

[14]*Ibid.* p. 65.

[15]See, for example, PM Jellenik-B.

belongs to a later stage in the development of the midrashim. Rather than diminish his supernatural qualities, the account in MidrTann elaborates upon Moses' human characteristics by inserting the following dialogue, that immediately precedes the Angel's search:

> Moses said before the Holy One, Blessed be God, "Master of the Worlds, since you decreed my death, do not pass me into the hand of the Angel of Death."
> God said to him, "By your life! I will care for you and conceal you." Then God showed him his seat, just as he had showed it to Aaron his brother. When he saw his seat in the Garden of Eden he was satisfied.

This dialogue, which gives Moses greater knowledge of his fate, accentuates the angel - human inversion seen in *Sifre* by ascribing to Moses an omniscience that the Angel is lacking. Additionally, it heightens the absurdity of the entire confrontation between Moses and the Angel of Death which, as I will argue below, serves a particular ideological purpose. But the dialogue serves a further intent by humanizing Moses. His plea to God not to be handed over to the Angel of Death resonates as a universal supplication. And his desire for knowledge of what will happen to him at his death, which is implied by his plea, displays a helplessness and fear that is typical of any mortal approaching death. Certainly God's specific promise to care for Moses and God's revealing to Moses where he will dwell after his death serves to highlight Moses' uniqueness, yet the comfort that Moses derives from the knowledge of his fate renders him like most humans.

B. The Death Scenes in *Sifre Deuteronomy* and *Midrash Tannaim*

The descriptions of Moses' death found in both the MidrTann and *Sifre* versions are inextricably linked to the portrayal of Moses himself. The descriptions of Moses' character and the accounts of his death are comprised of the same opposite exegetical orientations: one realistic, and the other mystical. The realistic orentiation underscores the pole of Death: Moses' burial in a valley is the central event of a narrative strand that focuses on Moses' human qualities. The mystical approach stresses Moses' *Genizah*, while concentrating on his supernatural characteristics.

Within these versions, Israel's response to the Angel of Death signals the end of the search and a shift to accounts of Moses' departure and the mourning of God and Joshua. Ironically, neither account provides a direct description of Moses' death.[16]

> ***Sifre* Version**
> They said to him, "God knows his path. God has concealed him for life in the world to come, and no creature will know of it." As it is said, *And He buried him in the valley ...and no one knows his burial place unto this day*(Deut. 34:6).
> And when Moses had died, Joshua wept and cried bitterly, saying, "My father, my father, my teacher my teacher! who brought me up and taught me Torah." And he mourned for him for many days until God said to him, "How long will you continue to mourn as if for you only Moses died? Does not his death truly affect me? For from the day that he died there has been great mourning before Me," as it is said, *My Lord, God of Hosts, summoned on that day to weeping and lamenting* (Is. 22:12). But he was assured of the world to come. As it is written, *And God said to Moses, "Behold, you shall sleep with your fathers...and will rise up* (Deut 31:16).

[16]Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p. 62. A key difference between *Sifre* and*MidrTann* is that in the latter there is a direct description of Moses' death: he disappears in a cloud in Joshua's presence.

MidrTann Version

They said to him, "God know's his path, and knows his place (variation on Job 28:23). God reserved him for life in the world to come, and no creature will know of it. As it is said, *Where shall wisdom be found? Man doesn't know its price.*. The Depth said, *'It is not in me.' And the Sea said, 'It is not with me'* (Job 28:12-14). *Abadon and Death said, 'With our ears we heard the report'* (Job 28:22).

When Joshua was grieving for Moses, the pillar of cloud descended, formed a partition between them, and shouted out saying, *"Set me as a seal upon your heart, Many waters cannot extinguish love"*(Song of Songs 8:6-7). When it disappeared, Joshua stood, cried greatly, tore his clothes, and said *"My father, my father, the chariot of Israel and its horsemen"*(II Kings 2:12). *"Where shall wisdom be found?"* (Job 28:12). God said to him, 'How long will you continue to look for Moses? *Moses my servant is dead*(Josh. 1:2). Moses did not die for you, he only died for me."

Aspects of both accounts point to *Genizah*, yet within the same scenes statements are made that support the idea of Death. In the *Sifre* version, the Israelites inform the Angel of Death that God has concealed Moses, but then this statement is contradicted by the use of Deuteronomy 34:6: *And He buried him in the valley ...and no one knows his burial place unto this day.* Conversely, in the MidrTann version, Moses disappears in a cloud, but then the pericope comes to establish death and not concealment.

These conflicting death reports are intertwined with statements that describe Moses' character in either supernatural or human terms. In both accounts the Israelites state that Moses is being "reserved for a life in the world to come," which implies a transformation from the physical to the metaphysical, confirmed by the prooftexts from Job (found in the MidrTann version) which equate Moses to supernal wisdom. In the exegetical orientation towards *Genizah*

Moses is exalted beyond human portions.[17] Yet Joshua's mourning indicates an orientation towards Death found in both scenes. Joshua's tears and the rending of his clothes, coupled with his statement (in *Sifre*), "My father, my father, my teacher my teacher! who brought me up and taught me Torah," serve to juxtapose Moses' metaphysical characteristics with his human dimensions. Joshua grieves the loss of a creature of flesh and blood.

Despite Joshua's mourning and God's statement, "Moses did not die for you, he only died for me," -- which is indicative of the pole of Death and points towards the human Moses-- the MidrTann account does not utilize Deuteronomy 34:6 as a prooftext for the events at the end of Moses' life. Instead, in its use of the cloud motif and the reference to Elijah's ascent (II Kings 2:12), as well as an emphasis on the association of Moses with supernal wisdom, The MidrTann version is ultimately weighted more heavily towards a *Genizah* orientation.

The *Sifre* version is constructed of confounding paradoxes that place this account between the poles of *Genizah* and Death. God's statement, "How long will you continue to mourn as if for you only Moses died? Does not his death truly affect me?" highlights the interstitial position of the Midrash. God's rhetorical questions support simultaneously the conceptions of *Genizah* and Death, while also describing Moses, in the same moment, in both human and metaphysical terms. God's response to Joshua's mourning and the report that Moses is dead, confirms the human dimensions of Moses, while upholding the pole of Death.

[17]See Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p. 64.

However, God's use of the personal pronoun "Me" conveys an intimate relationship with Moses and reveals the cosmic impact of Moses' death.[18] This testimony indicates a supernatural characterization of Moses, for he enjoyed a singular relationship with God which, in turn, diminishes Moses' human nature. Yet the account remains oriented towards Death. And even more ambiguously, God describes Moses as dead and mourns his loss, but the account itself never reveals what happened to Moses at the end of his life. Both death and concealment are reported, but neither is ever portrayed. In this manner, the *Sifre* version recreates or aligns itself with the Deuteronomic account, in which Moses is said to have been buried, pointing to his physical self and the pole of Death. Yet God alone sees to his interment and no one knows where his grave lies, which seemingly support a supernatural characterization of Moses as well as a reading of Genizah. And finally, as in the *Sifre* version, what happens to Moses in Deuteronomy 34:6 is not shown (no mortal witnessed his death) but only reported.

C. An Ideological reading of the *Sifre* and *Midrash Tannaim* Accounts

In the wake of the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., the Pharisees emerged as the ruling class of the Jews living in Palestine. The Temple had been the center of Jewish religious experience, and after its loss, the Pharisees created a system of religious ideas that served to restore the solidarity and the national aspirations of the Jews. As the Pharisees promoted an agenda of religious

[18]See Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*,.p. 62.

unification within the Jewish community, the Patriarchate established itself as the political leader of the nation.[19] The power of the Patriarchate reached its zenith with Rabbi Judah I, who completed the redaction of the Mishnah in, ,approximately 220 C.E.[20] Both *Sifre* and MidrTann contain traditions from this period.

The leaders of the Pharisees -- who became known as the "Sages" or the "Rabbis" -- emphasized the sanctity of the oral Torah and used it as a mechanism to fashion a durable religious system that was not reliant upon a central religious institution and its functionaries. The Mishnah was the crowning achievement of the initial stages of this process. This text, which served as a reference for halakhic decision-makers, served to unify a way of life for the Jewish people, while also allowing for flexibility in determining law within individual communities. Whereas during the second Commonwealth, religious authority was held by an elite class of priests, after 70 C.E. the Rabbis attempted to democratize religious decision-making. Certainly, the Sages sought to consolidate power into the hands of the Patriarchate and aspects of their religious innovations point to self-serving political goals, but before the destruction of the Temple, the Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees or the *Soferim*, were the party of the people.[21] And after the destruction

[19]Originally, the Patriarchate was the presiding officer of the High Court and the head of the Academy (*Rosh Yeshivah*). During the Tannaitic period one individual occupied both positions. During the Amoraic period, these powers were separated.

[20]See Gedalia Alon, *The Jews in Their Land in the Talmudic Age, 70-640 C.E.* (English edition, Cambridge: University Press 1989), p. 25.

[21]Alon, *The Jews in Their Land*, p. 24.

of the Temple, the Pharisees created a more populist Judaism which in turn, consolidated support for their innovations.

The *Sifre* and MidrTann descriptions of Moses' last actions and his death evidence aspects of the religious agenda undertaken by the Sages during the second and early third centuries. In these traditions that date from the period after the destruction of the Temple, the Sages utilize Moses' death as an opportunity to reassert God's continued love for Israel. But additionally, the Sages interpret the death of Moses in a manner that vouches for the durability and flexibility of the Oral Torah, and that substantiates their position as leaders of the Jewish community.

Remaining aligned to the sequence of events in the biblical narrative, the writers of *Sifre* place a scene depicting the transition of power from Moses to Joshua preceding the Angel of Death's search for Moses' soul and his death. In the biblical descriptions of this leadership transition (Numbers 27:15-23), Joshua is chosen principally for his ability to lead the people as a military general.[22] This aspect of Joshua's power is substantiated by his first action as leader of the people: he exhorts them to prepare for the conquest of Canaan (Josh.1:10-18). In *Sifre*, Joshua is appointed to be the people's teacher:

> And God said to Moses: *'Single out Joshua the son of Nun'* (Numbers 27:18). Single out - a valiant one like yourself.....*A threefold chord is not quickly broken* (Ecc. 4:12). God said to him: "Appoint Joshua as an interpreter, and he will ask, interpret, and teach instructions during your life. So that when you depart from the world, the Israelites will not say to him, 'During the life of our teacher you

[22]See, in this regard, Chapter 1, pp. 31-32.

> did not speak, but now you do?!'" And there are those that say that Moses placed Joshua between his knees. Then Moses and Israel inclined their heads to listen to Joshua's words. What did he say? "Blessed are you God who gave Torah to Israel through the hands of Moses our Teacher." So were the words of Joshua.

The writers of *Sifre* conceived of authority and power in a very different manner than the biblical writers. As a result of the conflicts of the period that left the Jews as a subjugated population without an army, control of taxation, and territorial integrity, the Sages could not derive power from military might. Bar Kochba's defeat had put an end to Jewish political independence, and although the Romans granted the Jews a form of national autonomy, in no sense could the Patriarch and the Sanhedrin have been considered a territorial sovereignty.[23] The Patriarch possessed a socio-political type of leadership, and his and the authority of other Sages was derived, in great part, from their mastery of the Oral Torah. Throughout the midrashim on the death of Moses, the Rabbis repeatedly stress this tenet.

In this scene from *Sifre*, Joshua -- who in the Bible is portrayed as the paradigmatic general, is recast as a pharisaic Sage. In a public ceremony that serves as a parallel to Num. 27:22 (in which Moses' elevates Joshua in the presence of the entire congregation), he is established as a teacher of Torah and represents the writers of the scene. By placing Joshua betweeen his legs, Moses effectively adopts Joshua as his son.[24] Essentially, the Sages were teachers of the meaning

[23]See Alon, *The Jews in Their Land*, p.5.

[24]This rite is known from elsewhere in the ancient near East. See I.J.Gelb, et al., *The Chcago Assyrian Dictionary* 2b(1965), p. 256 s.v. *birku*. Cited in

of Torah and they, as Joshua is portrayed here, conducted public instruction. But furthermore, the Rabbis positioned themselves as the final link in the chain of transmittors of the Oral Torah.[25] Moses, having received the Oral Torah directly from God stands at the other end of this tradition. The Rabbis saw themselves as Moses' progeny. In Numbers 27:20, God instructs Moses: "Put some of your majesty upon him, in order that the congregation of the children of Israel will listen." Perhaps what is passed from Moses to Joshua in the *Sifre* version, is the Oral Torah: this is the "part" of Moses' majesty that is placed upon Joshua and will compel the congregation's obedience. This understanding is reflective of how the Rabbis derived authenticity for their own authority. Since they now were in possession of the Oral Law, they, too, commanded the esteem of their communities. The account of the transition of leadership in *Sifre* will function as a template for later versions of this scene. Over time, the midrashim on the death of Moses will enhance and enlarge the descriptions of both Joshua and Moses as transmittors of the Oral Torah. Already in this early midrash, they are portrayed as ideal teachers, and in Joshua's case, as the perfect student who mourns the loss of his teacher.[26]

Encyclopedia Judaica, v. II, p. 299.

[25]See *Avot* 1.1.

[26]Within the *Sifre* (piska 305) account, there is only one moment where Moses explicitly teaches Joshua: As it is said, *"Then Moses called Joshua in the sight of all of Israel and said to him, 'Be strong and resolute for it is you who shall go with this people into the land that Adonai swore to their fathers to give to them and it is you who shall apportion it to them'* (Deut 31:7). "Be strong and resolute," Moses said to him, "For this people that I am handing over to you they are still young animals, they are still babies. Don't lose your temper with them over

As I have interpreted this scene from *Sifre*, the sages utilized the biblical account of Joshua's elevation to leader of the Israelite community in order to substantiate rabbinic claims to authority. Yet the enigmatic verse from Ecclesiastes (4:12 -*A threefold chord is not quickly broken*) which refers to the relationship between God,Moses, and Israel, suggests additional messages embedded in this scene, and in the Tannaitic accounts as a whole. Chapter Four of Ecclesiastes begins with a verse that suggests associations with the historical context of the writers of *Sifre* and MidrTann:

> So I returned and considered all the oppressions that are done under the sun. And behold the tears of those oppressed and they did not have a comforter. But on the side of their oppressors there was power, but they had no comforter.[27]

This verse connotes the theological outlook of the writer of Ecclesiastes: God exists, but gives no comfort to the oppressed. God deals with the just and unjust alike: handing out blessings and judgements capriciously. Although it was most likely written in the third century B.C.E., the fatalistic perspective of the book may have had renewed relevance in the decades following the destruction of the Temple when Jews felt abandoned by God. The midrash of the period interweaves themes of mourning and loss with a consistent avowal that God has not truly

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everything that they do, for even their Master did not lose His temper over everything that they did." And then he said to him, "I fell in love with Israel when he was still a child."

Later versions will state explicitly that Moses taught Joshua the Oral Law. And in some cases, will invert the relationship: Moses will be a servant and student of Joshua. See, in this regard, PM Jellinek-A.

[27]Ecc. 4:1.

abandoned the people and that their Covenant endures. These intertwined themes are apparent in the death account found in MidrTann:

> When Joshua was grieving for Moses, the pillar of cloud descended, formed a partition between them, and shouted out saying, *Set me as a seal upon your heart, Many waters cannot extinguish love*(Song of Songs 8:6-7). When it disappeared, Joshua stood, cried greatly, tore his clothes.

This scene may be understood as depicting the departure of Moses as well as God.[28] Within the biblical widerness account, a pillar of cloud signifies God's protective presence: it proceeds in front of the people during daylight guiding the tribes across the desert.[29] Additionally, the descent of a pillar of cloud declared God's presence in the Tent of Meeting and a voice would issues forth from the cloud addressing the people.[30] In this scene from MidrTann, it is unclear who recites from Song of Songs. And the biblical text is rich with allusions

[28]This interpretation is substantiated by an additional text in*Midrash Tannaim* -- an exegetical comment on Deuteronomy 34:8 -- which describes how the presence of God (the pillar of cloud) departed from Israel on the day Moses died:

And the children of Israel wept for Moses For thirty days (Deut. 34:8) For three months they mourned him. Rabbi Yehudah said, for four months they mourned for him...Three benefactors stood for them, for Israel, and these are they: Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. And three gifts were given to Israel by them and these are they: the well, the pillar of cloud, and the manna. Miriam died and the well went away, but returned because of the merit of Moses. Aaron died, and the pillar of cloud went away, but returned because of the merit of Moses. Moses died and all three [gifts] went away, but they didn't return. As it is said, *But I lost the three shepherds in one month*(Zech. 11:8), and so in one month they died. But behold, Miriam died in Nissan, and Aaron in Av, and Moses in Adar! But what does the verse teach? *I lost the three shepherds in one month*. Rather, on the day Moses died the three [gifts] left and they never returned again.

[29]See Exodus 13:21.

[30]See Num. 12:4-6.

which permit a "bi-directional reading" allowing for either God or Moses to be the speaker.

The departing speaker leaves Joshua with a commandment and a message of comfort (*nehemta*), just as the bride instructs and comforts her beloved in Song of Songs:

> Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm. For love is strong as death, jealousy as cruel as the grave. Its coals are coals of fire, which have a most powerful flame. Many waters cannot quench love nor can the floods drown it.[31]

The commandment, "Set me as a seal" creates an association with Deuteronomy 6:5-9 in which God commands the Israelites, through Moses, to love God and to make the commandments a sign upon their arms. Both Deut. 6:5-9 (the *v'ahavta*) and the verses in Song of Songs describe covenantal commitment: in the first, between God and Israel and in the latter, between two lovers. The Rabbis viewed the poems of Song of Songs as allegorical expressions of the love that existed betwen God and Israel (as opposed to the Church), and frequently, in classical midrashim, the covenant between God and Israel is cast in terms of a passionate, human relationship that is equated to marriage.[32]

In Song. 8:6-7, the bride vouchs for the enduring quality of her love. This verse, when placed within the narrative of the midrash, becomes a parting message: as God removes the Divine presence from Israel, God vouches for the

[31]Song of Songs 8:6-7.

[32] For example, Exodus Rabbah 29:9, which describes the transmission of the Torah at Mt. Sinai: "As the words of Torah emanated forth it passed from the ear to the mouth; it kissed the mouth and then rolled again to the ear, and called to it: 'I am Adonai your God.'"

enduring nature of God's love for Israel. And when interpreting this midrash in the context of the historical events of the period, the Rabbis may be understood as imparting the message that although the Temple has been destroyed (i.e. the pillar of cloud no longer occupies the the Tent of Meeting) and thus God's presence is no longer visible, God's love for Israel endures; the vicissitudes of history cannot quench the flames of God's love. Conversely, the verses from Song of Songs may be intepreted as not issuing from God but from Moses: as he disappears in a cloud he calls out in love to Joshua. The departing teacher/father calls out to the crying student/son. His declaration and, as discussed above, the intensity of Joshua's reaction to his departure, create a more human portrayal of Moses.

The deliberate ambiguity of the MidrTann account, which allows for the version to be read simulataneously as a departure by God or Moses, points towards additional ideological messages, helpful in interpreting the rabbinic use of the Ecclesiastes verse in the *Sifre* version. As examined, the MidrTann account supports the belief in Moses' ascension and concealment or *Genizah*. A core component of the pole of *Genizah* is a belief in Moses' immortality. At his death, Moses joins God in heaven, which indicates his unparalleled intimacy with God. Within the inter-communal debate between Christians and Jews, ascent accounts may be interpreted as an apologetic that established Moses' pre-eminent status with God, over and against Jesus.

The overall scope of the death accounts in both MidrTann and *Sifre*

suggests, however, that the ideological messages of these two texts were not part of Christian-Jewish polemics, but were directed internally towards Jews.[33] The deliberate ambiguity of MidrTann, which creates blurred distinctions between God and Moses, conveys that Moses remains intimately connected with God even after his death, and this intimacy connotes his uniqueness. Also, although neither may be seen, both Moses and God remain in covenant with Israel despite the loss of the Temple and national sovereignty. Ultimately, the MidrTann version serves as a message of comfort to the Jewish community that has been deprived of the visible representation of God's presence on earth, and is pining for heroic leadership. Within this time, *Genizah* accounts aided in assuaging the communal trauma by creating a theological construction that allows for the continued hope of redemption through the return of the Jews' paramount leader.

The Ecclesiastes verse in the *Sifre* version performs a similar function to that of the Song of Songs verses in MidrTann: it vouches for an enduring covenantal relationship between Israel, Moses, and God (the "threefold cord"). But notably, the Ecclesiastes verse originates within a textual context void of the poetic lyricism inherent to Song of Songs:

> Two are better than one, in that they have greater benefit from their ownings. For should they fall one can raise the other; but woe betide him who is alone and falls with no companion to raise him! Further, when two lie together they are warm; but how can he who is alone get warm. And if a man prevail against him that is alone,

[33]Historical considerations also support this analysis. See "Introduction," pp. 4-10.

two shall withstand him; and a threefold chord is not quickly broken.[34]

These verses from Ecclesiastes are imbued with a pragmatism which is also apparent in the scene from *Sifre*. As Moses approaches his death, God indicates that it is important for Joshua to teach during Moses' life in order that "the Israelites will not say to him, 'During the life of our teacher you did not speak, but now you do?!'" The comment portrays God as being concerned with the community's perception of Joshua as an authentic leader. In a psychological reading of this particular moment God's instruction might be interpreted as a reflection of rabbinic anxiety regarding their own feelings of authenticity or lack thereof. But the Ecclesiastes verse points to a less facile interpretation.

As stated above, the theological outlook of the writer of Ecclesiastes, which is invoked at the outset of Ecc. 4, is that God is distant and impartial. This perspective is the antithesis of the theological construction expressed allegorically in Song of Songs. Judging from verses 4:9-12, the writer of Ecclesiastes suggests that in light of God's distance, one must rely more heavily upon fellow humans. As the Sages created a religious system permeated with humanism, it is not difficult to imagine their attraction to these verses and their utility when teaching in communities during the second and third centuries.

The scene from *Sifre*, which depicts a transition in leadership, also adds a *nehemta* contained in Joshua's first public teaching to the pragmatic message of Ecclesiastes. Joshua's words introduce the central ideological message of the *Sifre*

[34]Ecc. 4:9-12.

and MidrTann accounts which is then woven into the narratives through the Angel of Death's search for Moses. Recall that in the *Sifre* account,

> Moses placed Joshua betwen his knees. Then Moses and Israel inclined their heads to listen to Joshua's words. What did he say? "Blessed are you God who gave Torah to Israel through the hands of Moses our Teacher." So were the words of Joshua.

Joshua's blessing reminds the second century listener that, in the absence of God's presence and Moses' leadership, hope for salvation remains in the enduring quality of the Oral Torah.[35] As described above, the midrashim equate Moses to the supernal wisdom or Torah for which Job searches. The Oral Torah is a completely metaphysical entity not subject to the limits of space and time. And the Angel of Death's futile search for Moses, who has now been "transformed" into Oral Torah conveys its eternal quality.

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[35]See the beginning of PM Jellinek-A, and DTR 11:4: *"And this is the blessing that Moses, the man of God, blessed the children of Israel* (Deut. 33:1): 'this' indicates the Torah..., 'with which Moses blessed' indicates Moses, 'the man of God' indicates God...And why all this? In order that the scriptural verse may be fulfilled, 'And a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

Chapter 5

Second and Third Century Patristic References to Moses' Death

Throughout the Patristic writings of the 2nd to 6th century, one finds many interpretations of Moses character and his life, yet there are few descriptions and comments regarding his death. However, within the writings of Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215) and Origen of Caesarea (ca. 185-253/4), the dominant Patristic figures of the second and third centuries, one sees the incorporation of Jewish descriptions of the death of Moses in order to serve Christian apologetic purposes. As both of these major Patristic figures lived in cities with large Jewish populations and were heirs to the same exegetical tradition as their Jewish contemporaries, Clement's and Origen's discussions of the death of Moses provide a fruitful opportunity for comparison with contemporary Jewish texts.[1]

A. Clement's Portrait of Moses in the *Stromateis*

According to scholars, the Patristic interpretations of Moses fall roughly into several categories:

> Moses as a model of a devout, believing Christian whose exemplary life is set before the faithful as an ideal; Moses, viewed typologically as a type of Christ, and the events of his life as type of redemption. There is also another approach, derived particularly from Philo,

[1]N.R.M De Lange, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish - Christian Relations in Third-Century Palestine* (Cambridge: University Press, 1976), p. 103. De Lange maintains that even after the break between the two movements, "Jews and Christians continued to use the same Jewish scriptures...not only in polemical discussions, but even in the day to day exposition of the Bible, both camps interpreted the Bible with a sideways glance at the activities of the other side... There was a continuing mutual flow of ideas between the two sides."

and this is an allegorical interpretation of the details of Moses' life.[2]

While the New Testament picture of Moses is closer to that of Palestinian Judaism, the 2nd and 3rd century Patristic portraits of Moses are, in their broad outlines, Hellenistic, following Philo's allegorical approach.[3] Clement and Origen's descriptions of Moses evidence the influence of Philo and Josephus: they derived their sources from a Jewish-Hellenistic environment.

A characteristic feature of Clement's work is the incorporation of borrowed material, and the *Stromateis* is the preeminent example of this reliance on earlier works.[4] In the *Stromateis*, Clement creates his own account of Moses' life, comprised of many quotations from Philo's *De Vita Mosis*.[5] Subsequently, Clement's Moses emerges as a Hellenistic philosopher king.[6] Yet, as both Philo and Clement wrote to serve separate apologetic goals, their characterizations of Moses are inevitably different.

Philo dedicated an entire work to the life and death of Moses, which

[2]Robert L. Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind: A Study of Cyril of Alexandria's Exegesis and Theology* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 144. Here, Wilken is paraphrasing Jean Danielou's study of Moses as he appears in Patristic works. See Jean Danielou, "Moses bei Gregor von Nyssa. Vorbild und Gestalt," in *Moses in Schrift Ueberlieferung*,

[3]See Wilken, *Judaism and the Early Christian Mind*, p. 144.

[4]See Annewies Van Den Hoek, *Clement of Alexandria and his Use of Philo in the Stromateis: An Early Christian reshaping of a Jewish mo del* (Leiden: E.J.Brill 1988), p.1. Clement's method is also indicated by the name of the book: in English, *Stromateis* means "patchwork."

[5]See *Stromateis* I 150-182.

[6] See Annewies Van Den Hoek, *Clement of Alexandria and his Use of Philo* , Chapter 3. Also see my Chapter 2, p. 49-51.

transforms the biblical story into a saga that renders him a Greek hero. Within this characterization, Moses is imbued with a "measure" of divine attributes, becoming, as seen particularly in the death accounts, a being both human and metaphysical.[7] In *De Vita Mosis,* Moses is clearly the mediator between God and man, "the embodiment of the perfect man to whom the functions of king, legislator and prophet are allotted by divine providence."[8]

For Clement, writing in defense of Christ and Christianity, Philo's idealization of Moses is problematic. Although Clement also describes Moses as a "prophet, legislator, organizer, general, statesmen, [and] philosopher,"[9] he stresses that Moses is not the unique and exclusive model of these roles or qualities:

> The philosophers say that the only wise man is the king, legislator, commanding officer; that he alone is just, pious, and a friend of God. *If* [italics, my own] we were to find these qualities in Moses, as can be shown from the actual scriptures, then with full conviction we could call Moses a truly wise man.[10]

Although Clement upholds Moses' potential for fulfilling a singular leadership role, he diminishes Moses' accomplishments through equating the role of legislator to that of the shepherd, a role previously attributed to Moses in the Bible:[11]

> So, just as we say skill in shepherding is care for the sheep, for the

[7]See *Mos*. iii. 39, and my comments in Chapter 3, pp. 53-55.

[8]Van Den Hoek, *Clement of Alexandria and his Use of Philo* , p. 65.

[9]*Str.* I 158.

[10]*Str.* I 168.

[11]See Exodus 3:1.

> good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep, so shall we say that skill in legislation is the provision of virtue in human beings, awakening as far as possible what is good in human beings in the process of directing and caring for the human flock. And if the flock of the Lord's parable is simply a human herd, the same person will be a good legislator for the single herd, the sheep who know his voice; he will be the single one caring for them, seeking the one who is lost, and finding him thanks to the Law and the word, if in fact the law is spiritual and leads to blessedness.[12]

For Clement, the real shepherd or "real legislator" goes beyond what Moses accomplished, and is one who not only gives the law but understands it. The real lawgiver, as Clement concludes, is God's only begotten son, Jesus, for he not only interpreted God's laws, but also interpreted "his Father's heart."[13]

In the units immediately preceding the story of Moses in *Stromateis*, Clement inserts an account of the creation of the Septuagint, which in its conclusion points to the larger apologetic intent of the book.[14] We read in *Str.* I 150: "The Pythagorean philosopher Numenius wrote directly: 'What is Plato but Moses speaking Greek?' This Moses was a theologian and Prophet and in the eyes of some, an interpreter of sacred laws."[15] In the *Stromateis*, Clement seeks to prove Plato's reliance on Moses or on the "Laws of the Hebrews," and thus that "Hebrew

[12]*Str.* I 169.

[13]*Ibid.*

[14]*Str.* I 148-150.

[15]All translations of the *Stromateis* by John Ferguson in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1991). Louis Feldman, in Louis H. Feldman and Gohei Hata, eds., *Josephus, Judaism, and Christianity* (Detroit : Wayne State University Press, 1987), writes that this remark signified the height of Pagan and Christian admiration for Moses. This dictum was widely quoted in Patristic literature of the period (see pp. 241-242).

philosophy is the oldest form of any wisdom."[17] In *Str.* II 20, he writes: "All of the doctrines I have been discussing seem to have been handed down to the Greeks by the towering figure of Moses." Through the character of Moses, whom Clement calls "law incarnate,"[17] Clement asserts that the authenticity and antiquity of the Jewish sacred writings was not questioned by the Greeks. Writing within the Pagan-Christian debate, Clement connects Christian thought to these Jewish texts in order to refute Pagan accusations that Christianity was novel and seditious.

But while Clement seeks to elevate Moses in order to establish the authenticity of Christianity, he ultimately supplants Moses with Jesus. Clement underscores explicitly Jesus' superiority:

> Moses was a man of wisdom, a king, a legislator. But our Savior surpasses all human nature, being beautiful to the point of being the sole object of our love in our yearning for true beauty....Scripture presents him greeted by Jews without faith in him or knowledge of him, and proclaimed by the very prophets...He above any is capable of giving leadership to the human race.[18]

Here Moses is described as a philosopher king, but Jesus stands alone as savior. He is transformed through his beauty into a metaphysical entity, similar to Moses' transformation in *De Vita Mosis* (ii 192). Jesus becomes the sole individual who bridges the gulf between the cosmic and human realms.

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[16]*Str.* I 101.

[17]*Str.* I 167.

[18]*Str.* II 21.

B. Clement's comments on the Death of Moses

In *Stromateis*, Clement shows high regard for the lost ending of the *Assumption of Moses*. In one instance, Clement recounts Joshua's vision of Moses' two bodies as a symbol of the privileged few to attain true gnosis.[19] He also discusses a tradition about Moses' heavenly name ('Melchi') after his ascension into heaven, a belief found in the *Assumption*.[20] Clement's written testimony implies that by the end of the second century, religious elites within the church valued the teachings of the *Assumption* as a "conduit for hidden, higher wisdom."[21]

[19]See William Adler, "Introduction," in James C VanderKam and William Adler, eds., *The Jewish Apocalyptic Heritage in Early Christianity* (Assen: Van Gorcum and Company, 1996), p. 22. See also Clement, *Str.* 6.15.132.2-3.

[20]*Str.* 1.23.153.1

[21]Adler in his "Introduction," writes: "Although the ultimate source of both of these references was presumably a written document, Clement names as his immediate informants a circle of religious savants whom he characterizes only as 'the initiated'" (p. 22). See *Str.* 1.23.154.1.

Origen, in *Homilies on Joshua* 2:1, derives the same allegorical significance of Moses' two bodies as portrayed in the *Assumption*, but there is a crucial difference in Origen's treatment: he questions the authority of the tradition upheld by Clement: "In a certain small book (which, to be sure, is absent from the canon), an image of this mystery is described; it is said that two Moseses were visible: one alive in the spirit, and the other dead in the body." (Translation from Johannes Tromp, *The Assumption of Moses: A Critical Edition with Commentary* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1993), p. 284.) In his "Introduction," Adler says that Origen's writing evidences a tension between the promise of higher wisdom contained in a particular Jewish book and its lack of official recognition by the church. By the fourth century, support for the book had waned (p. 23). In an epistle of Evodius to Augustine, he refers to the tradition of the two bodies as lacking in authority: "In the apocrypha and secrets of this Moses, a writing which lacks authority, (it is said that in the time when he went up to the Mountain to die, corporeal force caused that what had to be committed to earth was something different from what had to go along with an angel as a companion" (Evodius, Ep. 158.6). Translation from Tromp, *The Assumption of Moses*, p. 284.

In the fragments of the lost conclusion to the *Assumption* Moses' body is the object of a dispute between Michael and the angel of Death. In his comments on the Epistle of Jude 9 -- which provide extant textual support for reconstructions of the lost *Assumption* text -- Clement writes:

> *When Michael, the archangel, disputing with the devil, debated about the body of Moses.* Here he confirms the assumption of Moses. He is here called Michael, who through an angel near to us debated with the devil.[22]

This belief in Moses' ascent is reiterated in the *Stromateis*. Near the beginning of his account of Moses' life, Clement explains the etymology of his name:

> Then the Princess gave the child the name Moses, an etymological derivation from the fact that she had rescued him from the water into which he had been put to die...at his circumcision his parents had given him a name and he was called Joachim. According to the mystics (Adler: "the initiated"), he had a third name in heaven after his assumption - Melchi.[23]

It is difficult to ascertain to whom Clement refers as the "mystics" or "the initiated," though Adler suggests that they were a group of allegorical exegetes living in Alexandria.[24] Following Adler's reasoning, this group provided much of the information included in Clement's account of Moses' life and death. As Clement continues his narration of the early biblical events of Moses' life he inserts the exegetes' explanation of how Moses killed the Egyptian.[25] And, as

[22]From *Adumbrationes*, translated in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson eds., *The Ante Nicene Fathers* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), vol. II, p. 573.

[23]*Str.* I 152-153.

[24]See above, n. 21.

[25]The mystics say that he eliminated the Egyptian simply by speaking" (*Str.* I 154).

will be seen below, Clement refers to this group of exegetes again in his conclusion to his account of Moses' death.

In *Str.* VI 15, Clement offers an account of Moses' death that bears elements of the *Assumption* version and it appears that he was referencing the text:

> Joshua, the son of Nun, saw a double Moses being taken away, one who went with the angels and the other who was deigned worthy to be buried in the ravines.[26]

The broad outline of Clement's description in which Moses' body is doubled, serves as support for Charles' and Bauckham's reconstructions of the ending to *Assumption*. In these reconstructions, the body of Moses is buried in a mountain by angels, while "Moses living in the Spirit" (Charles' translation) is escorted to heaven. In Charles' version, these events are witnessed by Joshua and Caleb.

Clement places his description of Moses' assumption within a unit labelled, "Reasons for the meaning of Scripture being veiled." The passage begins:

> For many reasons, then, the Scriptures hide the sense. First, that we may become inquisitive, and be ever on the watch for the discovery of the words of salvation. Then it was not suitable for all to understand, so that they might not receive harm in consequence of taking in another sense the things declared for salvation by the Holy Spirit. Wherefore the holy mysteries of the prophecies are veiled in the parables-preserved for chosen men, selected to knowledge in consequence of their faith; for the style of the Scriptures is parabolic.

Within this *stromata*, Clement imbues Scripture with a hidden meaning that is only comprehensible to certain exegetes, a perspective that is common in mystical approaches to Scripture. The "holy meaning" of the text may only be safely

[26]Tromp's translation in *The Assumption of Moses*, p. 283.

understood by the elect. In this manner, Clement creates a hierarchy of meaning in the death account, for he views Scripture as an extended parable. There is both the plain understanding of the text -- which in rabbinic terminology is called the *peshat* --and a second layer of meaning. The narrative only serves to hint at the true meaning (or veiled meaning) of any given holy text.[27] The *stromata* continues:

> Wherefore also He employed metaphorical description; for such is the parable - a narration based on some subject which is not the principal subject, but similar to the principal subject, and leading him who understands to what is the true and principal thing; or, as some say, a mode of speech presenting with vigor, by means of other circumstances, what is the principal subject.

Clement appears to understand the account of Moses death in the *Assumption* as a parable for the double meaning of Scripture and the ability of only a select few to understand the hidden meaning. This may be interpreted from the reactions of Joshua and Caleb who were witnesses to Moses' death in the *Assumption*. Here is Clement's interpretation of what they saw:

> And Joshua saw this spectacle below, being elevated by the Spirit, along also with Caleb. But both do not see similarly. But the one descended with greater speed, as if the weight he carried was great; while the other, on descending after him, subsequently related the glory which he beheld, being able to perceive more than the other

[27]Additionally, within *Str.* VI 15, Clement articulates an understanding of scriptural traditions which is remarkably consistent with the rabbinic conceptions of Oral and Written Torah: "The Spirit prophesied that through the exposition of the Scriptures there would come afterwards the sacred knowledge, which at that period was still unwritten, because not yet known. For it was spoken from the beginning to those only who understand. Now that the Saviour has taught the apostles, the unwritten rendering of the written [Scripture] has been handed down also to us, inscribed by the power of God on hearts new, according to the renovation of the book."

> as having grown purer; the narrative, in my opinion, showing that knowledge is not the privilege of all.

In Clement's reworking of the *Assumption* material, each witness becomes an example of either a chosen one --Joshua, capable of understanding "what is true," or one who is not able to grasp the hidden meaning -- Caleb.

Moreover, Clement sees the doubling of Moses body (again from the *Assumption*) as a metaphor for the two layers of meaning presented in scripture:

> Since some look at the body of the Scriptures, the expressions and the names as to the body of Moses; while others see through to the thoughts and what it is signified by the names, seeking the Moses that is with the angels.[28]

Clement understands the doubling of Moses as representative of the plain meaning of the text (the body that was buried) and its hidden meaning (the body that ascended to heaven). He places his account in this *stromata* rather than at the close of his account of Moses' life (*Stromateis* I 150-182), for the story serves the principle subject of this passage: the double meaning of Scripture.

While it is clear that Clement uses this scene to illustrate his approach to textual interpretation, the question remains: why does Clement choose this particular text which implicitly completes his account of Moses' life. Perhaps Clement's choice of the *Assumption* – a version of Moses' death in which he ascends to God -- represents a larger philosophical aim. As Van Den Hoek suggests in *Clement of Alexandria and his Use of Philo*, Clement has Moses function

[28]The "others" refers again to the initiated: the group of Alexandrian exegetes described by Adler.

as Plato's teacher in the art of dialectics.[29] He explains: "For Clement, the aim of true dialectic, which is connected with true philosophy, is to ascend to God: that is to the God of the Cosmos and to the knowledge of heavenly affairs."[30] In his understanding of Plato, Clement maintains that a true philosopher king directs his vision and statesmanship towards God:

> When [Plato] speaks of the statesman in his book of that name, in the most authoritative sense he is referring to the Divine Craftsman towards God, and calls those who keep their eyes fixed on him, living in the active practice of righteousness combined with contemplation, statesmen as well.[31]

As seen in his description, Clement viewed Moses as a great philosopher and leader, and the *Assumption* offers a fitting end to such a life -- ascension to God.

C. Origen's Portrait of Moses in *Contra Celsum*

In his apologetic work of the third century, *Contra Celsum*, Origen defends the Jews from Pagan attacks while simultaneously protesting against the Jewish refusal to join with the Church in fighting their common foe. Understanding Judaism as the foundation of Christianity, Origen seeks to defend it against Pagan criticism, and specifically that of Celsus. Conscious of the implications of these attacks for Christianity, Origen carefully refutes Celsus' attacks on the Jews.

[29]See *Str.* I 165, 2-3 and Van Den Hoek, *Clement of Alexandria and his Use of Philo* , pp. 66-67.

[30]Van Den Hoek, *Clement of Alexandria and his Use of Philo* , p. 67.

[31]*Str.* I 165. See also Plato, *Statesman* 307 B.

Within the work, he not only defends Judaism but glorifies it.[32] He explains that Jews and Christians share the Bible and it was written by the "Divine spirit," in spite of the fact that the Christians do not observe the injunctions of the law and are divided concerning its interpretation.[33] *Contra Celsum* was designed to dispel the influence of Celsus' arguments on pagans inclined to Christianity, as well as to provide Christians with replies to the criticism and invective supplied by Celsus to anti-Christian pagans.[34] As Rokeah writes, the book,

> is a struggle to squash the accusations levelled by Celsus against the doctrine of the Jews thinking that it would be able easily to present Christianity as being fraudulent...if he were to expose its source which lies in the writings of the Jews.[35]

Contra Celsum is unusual in Christian apologetics for its lenient treatment of Judaism, and is representative of the paradoxical position of the Church within its debate with Pagans.[36] On the one hand, the Church condemned Jews for not accepting the teachings of Jesus and his disciples, and held the Jews responsible for the killing of their Savior. But the Church also recognized the Jewish origins

[32]See David Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians In Conflict* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1982), p. 70.

[33]See *Contra Celsum* V 6.

[34]The identity of Celsus is uncertain, perhaps even for Origen. He writes in his preface, "Accordingly, I have no sympathy with anyone who had faith in Christ such that it could be shaken by Celsus (who is no longer living the common life among men, but has already been dead a long time." All translations of *Contra Celsum* are from H. Chadwick,*Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965). See Chadwick's discussion regarding the identity and date of Celsus in his introduction, pp. xxiv-xxix.

[35]Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans and Christians In Conflict* , p. 70.

[36]See De Lange, *Origen and the Jews*, p. 64.

of its faith and the necessity of connecting itself to the older religion in order to support Christian claims to antiquity in the face of Pagan attacks. Within the Greco-Roman milieu, to be labeled a "new nation" was to be deemed historically insignificant and culturally irrelevant.[37] A top priority of Christian apologetic literature was thus to refute this allegation levelled by Jews and Pagans alike. Since antiquity was equivalent to respectability, and as the Church sought to position itself as the true descendant of the ancient Israelites, it found itself needing to defend, in a sense, its Jewish attackers; if Judaism was undermined by Pagan polemics so too would Christianity fall.[38]

In the first half of the third century, the Church maintained a hope in reconciliation with Jews, or at least, a desire for Jews to cooperate with the Church in a defense against Pagan attacks. In this period, relations between Jews and Christian were not yet so bad as to prevent the hope of reconciliation and Origen, judging from *Contra Celsum*, sought not to antagonize the Jews more than was necessary.[39] This desire, along with the apologetic strategy of linking

[37]See De Lange, *Origen and the Jews*, p. 64.

[38]For an example of this apologetic tactic, see *Contra Celsum* I 6. In response to Celsus' attack that the Jews were a barbarous, modern people (see I 2), Origen writes: "I am surprised that Celsus...does not reckon the Jews worth including with the wise or the ancient. For there are many treatises in circulation among the Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Greeks which testify to their antiquity."

[39]Origen's symphathy for Judaism might also have stemmed from his personal contact with the rabbinic circles in Caesaria. Origen lived at the end of the tannaitic period and the beginning of the amoraic (ca. 185-253/4). The Mishnah was edited in his youth and the Tosefta and Tannaitic midrashim were compiled in something like their present form in his lifetime or soon afterwards. The tannaitic traditions were part of the living Jewish tradition of his time.

Christianity to the antiquity of Judaism, might serve as an explanation for the almost wholly positive portrayal of Moses -- who was the representative figure of Judaism -- in *Contra Celsum*.

To defend Judaism from Celsus' attacks and in turn defend Christianity, Origen lauds Moses throughout the work. Origen saw Moses as an historical figure whose life continued to influence the present generation.[40] Origen goes to great lengths to prove the historicity of Moses, that Moses antedated Homer and Hesiod, and that Moses' writings are more historically accurate than other historian's works.[41] In his defense of Jewish prophecy, Origen goes so far as to say that,

> Neither Jesus nor Moses is wrong. Nor did the Father forget when he sent Jesus the commands which he had given to Moses. Nor did He condemn his own laws and change His mind, and send His

(See Delange, *Origen and the Jews*, p.7.) The late third century rabbis of Caesarea may have been influenced by Origen and his school, and in any case debate between the Church and synagogue continued to play a part in molding rabbinic thought. One is struck again and again by the similarities between Origen's ideas and those of the Palestinian amoraim of the 3rd and 4th Centuries. Origen might have known Resh Lakish and R. Samuel B. Nahman. Resh Lakish's life spans the first three quarters of the the 3rd. Rav reflects many of Origen's interests such as the interpretation of names and the symbolic exegesis of Scripture, and several of his dicta coincide with Jewish teachings recorded by Origen (see, in this regard, Delange, p. 27-28).

[40]See *Contra Celsum* I.42 -71. As Peter J. Gorday, in his "Moses and Jesus in *Contra Celsum*," in Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen, eds., *Origen of Alexandria His World and His Legacy* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1988), describes how Origen's concern for history characterizes the fundamental historical orientation of his apologetic: "Contingent events and persons are the vehicles for eternal truth precisely because they are *actual*," (p. 328).

[41]See *Contra Celsum* I 14; IV 21, 26.

messenger for the opposite purpose.[42]

But Origen is also careful to uphold Jesus' superiority to Moses.[43] He writes, for instance:

> I am saying this without raising as yet any question about Jesus, but still treating of Moses who was far inferior to the Lord, to show that, as my arguments will prove, he was far superior to your wise poets and philosophers.[44]

Writing within a similar Hellenistic society, Origen, like Josephus, positions Moses and his laws as influential to Greek philosophy.[45] He asserts Moses' superiority over and against Greek philosophers and that Moses' laws provide a blueprint for a more successful "heavenly city" (*politeia*) than those of Plato.[46] In a clear indication of the paradoxical nature of his apologetic, as Origen underscores Moses' excellence, he simultaneously emphasizes the transgression that prevented the Jews from fulfilling the promise of their progenitor:

> Would that they had not sinned and broken the law, both earlier when they killed the prophets and also later when they conspired against Jesus! Otherwise we might have an example of a heavenly city such as even Plato attempted to describe ...[47]

This quotation is representative of the implicit apologetic common to Christian statements in support of Moses and Judaism. Christians, being free of the guilt of

[42]*Contra Celsum* VII 25.

[43]See as well, *Contra Celsum* IV 4.

[44]*Contra Celsum* I 18.

[45]*Contra Celsum* IV 39. and Jos. *Contra Apion* II. 14.

[46]*Contra Celsum* V 43.

[47]See Plato, *Republic* 369-72, 427-34.

killing Jesus, are the heirs of the blessings promised to the Jews in the Bible.[48] The Jews squandered their heritage by not recognizing Jesus as the Messiah (whose selection, Christians claimed, was foreseen by Moses and the Prophets) and the loss of their capital city, Temple, and their dispersion, were punishment for their hostility towards God's true, and only, Son.[49] In general, however, Origen replies to Celsus' attacks on Judaism, and subsequently Christianity, by reiterating the antiquity of the Jewish people, the validity and wide-ranging influence of Moses' teachings, and the special relationship God maintains with His chosen people, despite their present diminished position within the historical-political realities of the period.[50]

D. Origen's comments Regarding the Death of Moses in *Contra Celsum*

In the work to which Origen responds in his *Contra Celsus,* Celsus places his arguments against Jesus into the mouth of a Jew. This was a novel tactic which enabled Celsus to exploit the prevalent and well developed Jewish polemic against Christianity.[51] And although *Contra Celsum* as a whole serves to refute Pagan attacks on Christianity, the unit in which Origen comments on Moses' death is part of larger section that is principally a Christian - Jewish debate as to the merits of Jesus over and against Moses. In this section (II 53-56), Origen

[48]See De Lange, *Origen and the Jews,* p. 63.

[49]See, for example, *Contra Celsum* I 55, 56; VI 47.

[50]See De Lange, *Origen and the Jews,* p. 67.

[51]Ibid., p. 68.

seeks to undermine Jewish belief in Moses through inverting Jewish arguments against Jesus. Or as Origen says to Celsus's Jew,

> And even if you strive energetically to defend Moses, seeing that the narratives about him are also capable of a striking and clear vindication, in your defense of Moses you will in spite of yourself establish that Jesus is more divine than Moses.[52]

In this manner, Origen inverts Celsus' strategy: he turns Celsus' Jew -- who Celsus used to make arguments against Christians -- against the Jews. By refuting the logic of this character, Origen refutes Jewish claims as to Moses' pre-eminence.

Origen's primary discussion of the death of Moses is found in *Contra Celsum* II:54, the middle section of this Jewish - Christian debate:

> After this, Celsus' Jew (to keep up the character assigned to the Jew from the beginning), in his address to those of his countrymen who had become believers, says: "*By what, then, were you induced (to become his followers)? Was it because he foretold that after his death he would rise again?*" Now this question, like the others, can be retorted upon Moses. For we might say to the Jew, "By what, then, were you induced (to become the follower of Moses)? Was it because he put on record the following statement about his own death: `And Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there, in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord; and they buried him in Moab, near the house of Phogor: and no one knoweth his sepulchre until this day?" For as the Jew casts discredit upon the statement, that "Jesus foretold that after His death He would rise again," another person might make a similar assertion about Moses, and would say in reply, that Moses also put on record (for the book of Deuteronomy is his composition) the statement that, "no man knows his sepulchre until this day," in order to magnify and enhance the importance of his place of burial, as being unknown to mankind.

As seen in the opening of this statement, throughout *Contra Celsum* Origen repeatedly acknowledges the "stock" quality of Celsus' Jew, highlighting his

[52]*Contra Celsum* II 55.

ficticious nature as a Jew who puts forward unlikely, Jewish arguments.[53] Origen's critique of Celsus' fictitious character underscores both Origen's mild treatment of Judaism throughout this apologetic as well as his experience in defending Christianity against Jewish attacks.[54]

Here in II 54, however,unlike elsewhere in the work, Origen stresses the ficticiousness of Celsus' character, but does not comment on the accuracy of the words put into the Jew's mouth. The absence of an editorial remark implies the authenticity of the question asked by Celsus' Jew. And whereas Origen's predominant tendency throughout the work is to refute Celsus' arguments within the context of a Pagan-Christian debate, here Origen responds directly to a Jewish attack. The tone of the unit seems reflective of a realistic context. This is not to say that II 54 reports an actual moment of argumentation. But rather, unlike other moments in *Contra Celsum* where Origen highlights and derides the contrived nature of Celsus' debate, here there is no evidence of that critique implying that

[53]See De Lange, *Origen and the Jews*, p. 69. Also see *Contra Celsum* I 49, II 28, 77, IV 2, V 6.

[54]For instance, in I 49, Origen critiques how Celsus's Jew attacks Jesus' authority. He writes:
For no one who was acquainted with the statements of the Christians, that many prophets foretold the advent of the Saviour, would have ascribed to a Jew sentiments which it would have better befitted a Samaritan or a Sadducee to utter; nor would the Jew in the dialogue have expressed himself in language like the following: "But my prophet once declared in Jerusalem, that the Son of God will come as the Judge of the righteous and the Punisher of the wicked."...we assert that he most inappropriately attributes to the Jewish disputant, who would not allow that He was, such language as, "My prophet once declared in Jerusalem that the 'Son of God' will come."

this debate was, to a certain extent, real.

For the sake of this investigation, I have edited II 54 into the following form in order to clarify the Jewish and Christian arguments made in this moment of debate:

> **Statement 1 - Jewish query**: By what, then, were you induced (to become his followers)? Was it because he foretold that after his death he would rise again?
> **Christian response**: By what, then, were you induced (to become the follower of Moses)? Was it because he put on record the following statement about his own death: *And Moses, the servant of the Lord died there, in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord; and they buried him in Moab, near the house of Phogor: and no one knoweth his sepulchre until this day?*
> **Jewish assertion**: Casts discredit upon the statement that, 'Jesus foretold that after His death He would rise again.'
> **Christian response**: [casts discredit on Moses] that Moses also put on record (for the book of Deuteronomy is his composition) the statement, that "no man knows his sepulchre until this day," in order to magnify and enhance the importance of his place of burial, as being unknown to mankind.

The introductory point of this debate highlights the importance of the characteristics of a leader's death in order to attract adherents to that leader's group.

This perspective gains support in II 56 where Origen responds to Celsus' accusation that stories about heroes who disappeared from "the sight of all men" and then returned in order to claim that they had risen from the dead, are fantastic tales. Origen argues that the account of Jesus being raised from the dead cannot be compared to these accounts of "the Odrysian's Orpheus, and the Thessalian Protesilaus, and the Taenarian Hercules."[55] He writes:

[55]*Contra Celsus* II 56.

> For each one of the heroes respectively mentioned might, had he wished, have secretly withdrawn himself from the sight of men, and returned again, if so determined, to those whom he had left; but seeing that Jesus was crucified before all the Jews, and His body slain in the presence of His nation, how can they bring themselves to say that He practised a similar deception with those heroes who are related to have gone down to Hades, and to have returned thence?...If we were to suppose Jesus to have died an obscure death, so that the fact of His decease was not known to the whole nation of the Jews, and afterwards to have actually risen from the dead, there would, in such a case, have been ground for the same suspicion entertained regarding the heroes being also entertained regarding Himself. Probably, then, in addition to other causes for the crucifixion of Jesus, this also may have contributed to His dying a conspicuous death upon the cross, that no one might have it in his power to say that He voluntarily withdrew from the sight of men, and seemed only to die, without really doing so; but, appearing again, made a juggler's trick of the resurrection from the dead.

As I have indicated in earlier chapters, various Jewish writers reworked the biblical account of Moses' death in order to make Judaism attractive to Gentile proselytes.[56] Furthermore, writers of the New Testament created accounts of Jesus' death that reflect the Hellenistic milieu in which they were written, likely for similar proselytizing purposes.[57] In a sense, as the final comment indicates, this debate revolves around the intentions of Moses and Jesus as authors of their own death accounts. Each side accuses the other's leader of enhancing the details of his death in order to attract adherents.

Through viewing II 54 as reflective of the genuine context of the Jewish -

[56]Particularly Philo and Josephus who rework the death account by incorporating Hellenistic literary motifs.

[57]See Acts 1:9-11, and Luke 50:51.

Christian debate in Caesaria at that time (i.e. drawn from Origen's actual experiences of debates with Jews), it is interesting to note the manner in which Origen portrays the Jewish understanding of Moses' death as being closely aligned to the biblical account -- Moses died, and did not ascend. II 54 suggests that establishing the particular details of Moses' and Jesus' death was a crucial point of Jewish - Christian debate.

Throughout their writings, Clement and Origen evidence the delicate position they occupied within the historical context of their day. Caught between Jewish and Pagan critics, these Patristic writers sought simultaneously to undermine Jewish claims to the authoritative understanding of Scripture while relying on a connection to Judaism for authenticity. The manner in which Clement and Origen approach the death of Moses is a clear example of the balance they sought to maintain: relying on Jewish texts for their basis, both authors uphold Moses' position as a worthy leader while undermining any claim to his ascendancy over Jesus.

Chapter 6

Rabbinic Versions of Moses' Death from the Fourth through the Sixth Century

The 4th-6th century Rabbinic descriptions of Moses' death are found primarily in the following three locations: Palestinian Talmud(PT) *Sotah* 1:10, Babylonian Talmud(BT)*Sotah* 13b-14a, and *Avot de Rabbi Natan* Version B, Chapter 25 (ARNB). Although these texts span a large time period and were composed in two different geographic areas (Palestine and Babylonia), the accounts are connected textually through the use of a common core of material, presented in its most unadulterated form in the Jerusalem Talmud:

> When Moses died, he was taken up on the wings of the *Shekhinah* (Divine Presence) for four *mils* from the inheritance of Reuben to the inheritance of Gad. He died in the inheritance of Reuben and was buried in the inheritance of Gad. And from where is it derived that he died in the inheritance of Reuben? As it is said, *The Reubenites rebuilt Heshbon, Elealeh, Kiriathaim* (Num. 32:37). And it is written, *Ascend these heights of Abarim to Mount Nebo which is in the land of Moab facing Jericho..you shall die on the mountain that you are about to ascend*(Deut. 32:49-50). And from where is it derived that he was buried in the inheritance of the children of Gad? As it is said, *And of Gad he said: Blessed be He who enlarges Gad! Poised is he like a lion to tear off arm and scalp. He chose for himself the best, for there is the portion of the hidden lawgiver.* And the Holy One blessed be God said, *Where the heads of the people come* . And the ministering angels said, *He executed the Lord's judgements* . And Israel said, *And His decisions for Israel* (Deut. 33:20-21). And they all said, "*Yet he shall come to peace. They shall have rest on their couches those who walked upright* (Is. 57:20).

This textual unit is comprised of exegesis attempting to unite two scriptural references containing contradictory details regarding Moses' death and burial (Deut. 33:20-21 and Deuteronomy 32:49-50 or 34:1 (BT)), by incorporating the theme of Moses riding on the wings of the *Shekhinah*.[1] Additionally, as seen in

[1]I will investigate this theme in greater detail in my analysis of the BT

earlier versions, the writer(s) imbues Moses death with cosmic significance through the eulogies by God and the ministering angels. The unit evidences a clear orientation towards the pole of Death which is the predominant exegetical perspective of the 4th-6th century accounts. The versions in ARNB and the BT add to and adapt this material, and it is within these adaptations that the various ideological principles specific to each account may be glimpsed. For this reason, I will use these two texts in my discussion.

A. Avot de Rabbi Nathan, Version B, Chapter 25.

1. The Text

The ARNB description of Moses' death contains material found in the PT version and the *Sifre* and MidrTann accounts. Like in its predecessors from the second and third centuries, the Angel of Death's search for Moses (which in ANRB is virtually a composite of the earlier versions) comprises the central narrative and provides the overall structure. Additionally, the exegetical discussion of within which territory Moses dies and is buried appears here as well. What follows is the complete ARNB version, but I have placed in boldface the textual units that differentiate this version from earlier ones. Generally, I will restrict my analysis to these excerpts, as much of the other material has already been examined in earlier chapters.

> **When Moses saw the bier of Aaron lying in a state of great honor and the ministering angels standing [around him] and**

material.

mourning, he coveted the same death. As it is said, ***Die in the mountain to which you go up and be gathered to your people as Aaron your brother died on Mount Hor*** **(Deut. 32:50)** ***When Aaron your brother died*** **you yearned for the same death.**

When the time arrived for Moses to depart from the world, the Angel of Death came, and stood before him. Moses became very angry with him and threw him out in fury. Moses said, How if in transferring my message you cannot stand? When I am sitting you cannot even stand, yet you ask to hand over my soul to you? "

The Angel of Death went to the place of the Divine Majesty and said to Him, "Master of the World, Moses your servant does not desire to hand over his soul to me."

Moses went to the place of the Divine Majesty, and said, "Master of the Worlds, tell me, for which transgression am I dying? If for the first issue it was already decreed for me a decree that I will not enter the Land. Don't say that! He will find I have sinned."

The Divine Spirit responded saying, "Moses, you possess no sin. You are only dying because of the decree made against the First Man." As it is said, ***Your first father sinned"*** **(Is. 43:27).**

God announced to Moses that He is taking his soul in this world and will restore it in the world to come. The Holy One, Blessed be God, took up Moses' soul and placed it with the souls of the righteous beneath the throne of glory for safekeeping. As it is said, ***Let the faithful exult in glory; let them shout for joy upon their beds, with paeans to God in their throats and two -edged swords in their hands, to impose retribution upon the nations, punishment upon the peoples, binding their kings with shackles, their nobles with chains of iron, executing the doom decree against them*** **(Ps. 149: 5-8).**

When Israel saw the bier of Moses made from all of the glory of the world, the wings of the Divine presence spread over an area of four miles: from the inheritance of the tribe of Reuben to that of the tribe of Gad. As it is said, *Ascend these heights of Abarim to Mount Nebo* (Deut. 32:49). And from where is it known that Moses died in the inheritance of Reuben? As it is said, *The Reubenites rebuilt Heshbon, Elealeh, Kiriathaim* (Num. 32:37).. And from where is it known that he was buried in the inheritance of Gad? As it is said, *And of Gad he said: Blessed be He who enlarges Gad! Poised is he like a lion to tear off arm and scalp. He chose for himself the best, for there is the portion of the hidden lawgiver, where the heads of the people come. He executed the Lord's judgements and His decisions for Israel* (Deut. 33:20-21).

The Angel of Death started again and searched for Moses' soul. He

said, "I know that God said to him, *Come up to me on the mountain* (Ex. 24:12). He went to the place of Mount Sinai and said, "Perhaps Moses' soul is here?"
Mount Sinai said, **"Moses carried off the Torah, which revives souls, from me. As it is said, *The teaching of Adonai is perfect, renewing life* (Ps. 19:8)."**
The Angel of Death said, "I know that the Holy One, Blessed be God, said to him, *Lift up your staff* (Ex. 14:16). He went to the place of the sea and said, "Perhaps Moses' soul is here?"
The sea responded, "No, for it is written, *He split the sea and took them through it; he made the waters stand like a wall* (Ps. 78:13)."
The Angel of Death said, "I know that he stood and prayed that he would enter into the land, as it is said, *I pleaded with the Lord* (Deut 3:23 - see also 3:25 *Let me I pray cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, the good hill country and Lebanon*). The good land is Israel. The good hill country is the mount of the king and the Lebanon is the Temple. Why is it called Lebanon? For it makes white the sins of Israel.
He went to the place of the land of Israel and said to it, "Perhaps Moses' soul is here?"
The land responded, "No, as it is said, *It cannot be found in the land of the living* (Job 25:13)."
He went to the place of the clouds of glory and said to them, "Perhaps Moses' soul is here?"
They answered, "*It is hidden from the eyes of all of the living (Job* 28:21)."
He went to the place of the ministering angels.
They said to him, "No, as it is said, *Concealed from the fowl of heaven (Job* 28:21)."
He went to the place of the deep.
The deep said to him, "No, for it is written, *The deep says, 'It is not in me'* (Job 28:14)."
He went to the place of Abbadon and Sheol. "Perhaps Moses' soul is here?"
They said to him, "No."
Abba interpreted in the name of Rabbi Shimon, the son of Yose and said, "*Abbadon and death say, We have only a report of it* (Job 28:22). With our ears we heard, but did not see."
The ministering angels, divisions by divisions, parties by parties, shouting before the bier of Moses, said, "*Yet he shall come to peace. They shall have rest on their couches those who walked upright*" (Is. 57:20).

Recalling the earlier texts, the ARNB version describes Moses in both supernatural and human terms. But whereas in *Sifre* the portrayal of Moses integrates his human and superhuman attributes in almost equal measure, in ARNB the emphasis is on the more physical, human Moses. From its opening, Moses appears to be similar to many other humans. He even "covets" the funeral given to his brother, Aaron, which suggests a universal emotion: envy.

All of the innovations of ARNB that describe Moses, do so in human terms. The Moses of ARNB approaches God fearful that his sins are the cause of his death. God's response reinforces the exegetical reading that supports a characterization of Moses as a human: he is not dying because of his transgression at Kadesh, rather because he is simply a mortal being like Adam. And the midrash is further imbued with a universal pathos by not commenting on Moses' emotional response to God's statement. In a parallel moment in MidrTann God's response to Moses' query calms his fear of death:

> Moses said before the Holy One Blessed be God, "Master of the Worlds, since you decreed my death, do not hand me over into the hand of the Angel of Death."
> God said to him, "By your life! I will care for you and conceal you." Then God showed him his seat, just as he had showed it to Aaron, his brother. When he saw his seat in the Garden of Eden he was satisfied.

In ARNB, Moses is not given a foretaste of heaven (an additional indication of his being "earthbound") and we are not informed of Moses' state of mind after God informs him that the reason he is dying is because he is mortal. The absence of a comment by the omniscient narrator leaves the reader wondering: Was

Moses relieved to hear that he was mortal? Did this information comfort him?

Although ARNB preserves aspects of the angel - human inversion seen in the second and third century accounts, in this description the Angel of Death and Moses are placed on a more equal footing. As in the earlier accounts, Moses is able to defeat the Angel of Death, yet here his knowledge is as limited as that of his nemesis. The Angel of Death does not know where Moses has been concealed and is not able to find him. But equally, Moses does not know what is to happen to him at his death. He does not fight with the Angel of Death while knowing that he is to be concealed, and this limited knowledge instills the confrontation with a genuine fear.

As a result of its reliance on earlier material, the ARNB description of Moses' death is very similar to that in *Sifre* and MidrTann. It too, may be understood as simultaneously supporting both the exegetical orientations of *Genizah* and Death. But with its emendations of the earlier material, ARNB reveals itself as a stage in the development of this midrashic tradition towards a greater emphasis on death through its more human portrayal of Moses. Additionally, ARNB presents the earliest evidence in this midrashic tradition of the motif describing a "bier of glory" carrying Moses to heaven.[2] Talmudic descriptions of his death do not expand on this theme, but later accounts create

[2]Notably, in ARNB, there is an explicit connection to images of Aaron's death, but a thorough investigation of the relationship between these two traditions is beyond the scope of this paper.

elaborate portrayals of Moses' cortege.[3] Within ANRB, the bier is carried on the wings of the *Shekhinah*, and then buried in Gad. Later versions, however, do not describe burial (the body is never laid to rest), creating, through the use of this motif, an ambiguous impression that allows for a reading of either burial or concealment.[4]

ARNB thus continues the tradition of texts which both allow for a dual reading of either *Genizah* or Death or both. It achieves this in a particular manner through emphasizing the separation of the soul from the body. While the soul is concealed under God's throne, the body receives a unique funeral. This bifurcation recalls the version found in the *Assumption of Moses* in which Moses' body is in a sense, "doubled": one body (Moses "living in the spirit") is carried up to heaven by angels, while the dead body of Moses is buried in a mountain. In ARNB, the separation of Moses' soul from his body is in keeping with early Rabbinic conceptions of what occurred to the body after death and throughout the post-Talmudic accounts, this is the prevailing description of what happened to Moses when he died. These later versions expand on each aspect of the separation. Dialogues are presented between God and Moses' soul, and Moses, too, will speak to his soul as it departs.[5] The ARNB description, in which the soul is

[3]See, for example, DTR 11:10, and*Midrash Petirat Moshe* (PM Jellinek-A).

[4]See, in particular, DTR 11:10.

[5]For example, DTR 11:5: When Moses departed, his soul was flying from him. He said to it, *Return to your rest my soul* (Ps. 116:7). His soul said to him, "How will I leave this pure and holy body and go and lie elsewhere?"He said to his soul, *Because God has been kind with you* (Ps. 116:7). His soul said, "Perhaps the Angel of Death will touch you?" Moses replied, "God forbid!

separated from the body and concealed, while presenting a spectacular burial of the body, transforms the contradictory conceptions of *Genizah* and those of Death into a unified interpretive orientation.

2. An Ideological Reading of the ARNB Version

Texts borrowed from an earlier time contain ideological messages reflective of that time, and thus it is difficult to interpret the ideological underpinnings of ARNB. This task is made more complicated by the additional problems in ascertaining the date of the text.[6] Perhaps the most straightforward method in

For God has delivered my soul from death (Ps. 116:8). He said to his soul, "Perhaps you are crying in the manner of one crying for the dead?" "God forbid! *God has delivered ...my eyes from tears* (Ibid.)" "Perhaps they pushed you away from the Garden of Eden?" "God forbid! *God has delivered...my feet from falling* (Ibid.)" Moses asked, "What did they say to you?" His soul replied, "A decree has been decreed against me. And they said, *I will walk before Adonai in the land of the living* (Ps. 116:9).

[6]See H. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* , (MN: Fortress Press, 1996), pp. 226-227, for a summary of these issues. *Avot de Rabbi Nathan* is preserved in two versions, A and B, of which B is the older. Since ARN is clearly dependent on the tractate of the Mishnah *Avot*, it is reasonable to assume that ARN can be dated no earlier than the third century, although *Avot* itself is later than the Mishnah. Additionally, it is difficult to determine how long the active development of the text continued. J. Goldin concludes in *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan (Abot de Rabbi Nathan) Version B: A Translation and Commentary* (Leiden: 1975) p. xxi, "The composition of the contents of ARNB cannot be much later than the third or following century, or at the utmost shortly thereafter." Although M. Kister in *Avot de Rabbi Nathan: Studies in Text, Redaction, and Interpretation* (Hebr.) (Diss. Jerusalem 1993), p. 214-219, considers version B to be post-Talmudic, most scholars are in near agreement with Goldin.

Because of the evident, close relationship between the material in the ARNB account with that of *Sifre* , MidrTann, and JT, I have assumed an early fourth century dating of the text. What confounds the issue, however, are the differences between ARNB and these texts. The absence of the motif

determining the account's ideological messages is to examine it within the larger context of ARNB's relationship to the Mishnah tractate *Abot*. The ARNB functions as a form of commentary to this tractate and in particular, the account of Moses' death serves to elucidate the Mishnah quoted below.

When the chapters preceding and including the description of the death of Moses (Chapters 24 and 25) are reviewed in their entirety, a remarkable shift in the characterization of both Moses and his death can be seen. This shift may be indicative of an ideological "competition" to establish the pre-eminence of Moses in reaction to a popular support for Aaron. The death of Moses account (the second part of Ch. 25), is part of a series of comments on the following statement from *Abot* which begins Chapter 24 of ARNB:

> Hillel and Shammai received the Torah from them. Hillel says: Be disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them near to the Torah.

Chapter 24 presents examples of how Aaron was a lover of peace, people, and Torah. It further describes how Aaron would go into homes to make peace between arguing couples, and how he would go to the souk and resolve conflicts between shopkeepers. Repeated in this series of scenes depicting Aaron as peacemaker, is the statement: "And this is what Aaron did his whole life until peace was made between man and his companion." Chapter 24 concludes with a description of Aaron's death:

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regarding the funeral cortege in JT and BT, but its appearance in later versions along with the description of the separation of Moses' soul from his body, points to a later dating of the ARNB account, or perhaps only that this is a later emendation.

> When Aaron died more than twenty-four thousand children bared their shoulders in mourning. Thus it is said, *All the House of Israel mourned for Aaron for thirty days* (Num. 20:29).

Chapter 25 begins with a series of responses to the question, "Why did all of Israel mourn for Aaron and only part of the community for Moses?" This discussion, which proceeds the Moses death account, creates a comparison between the mourning of Israel for Aaron and that for Moses:

> Why did all of Israel mourn for Aaron and only part of the community for Moses? Because Moses was a judge and it is impossible to judge in favor of both the claimant and defendant, rather one rewards the innocent and punishes the guilty. Aaron was not a judge, rather he made peace between man and his companion, therefore all of Israel mourned for Aaron while only part of the community mourned for Moses.
> Why did all of Israel mourn for Aaron and only part of the community for Moses? For when Aaron [was about to] die Moses stripped him of his vestments and dressed Eleazar with them.
> Why did all of Israel mourn for Aaron and all of them did not mourn for Moses? For when Aaron died Moses and Eleazar descended from the mountain crying and eulogizing and their clothes were torn. Who could see them and not mourn like them?! But when Moses died, who cried before them? [Who modeled mourning for the community?] Therefore when Aaron died all of Israel mourned for him, but when Moses died only part of the community. When Aaron died the cloud of glory departed and all of the nations of the world saw Israel broken up into their tribes. As it is said, *All of the congregation saw* (Num. 20:29). What does *they saw* teach? All of Israel mourned for Aaron and only part of the community for Moses. When Israel saw the bier of Aaron lying in state in great honor, and the ministering angels attending, lamenting for him, and their clothes torn, all of Israel knew that Aaron had died. When Moses saw the bier of Aaron lying in state...he coveted the same death...

Chapters 24 and 25 compare Aaron and Moses and their interactions with the larger community. Overall, Aaron is described in a more favorable light than

Moses and is more beloved by the people, while Moses is depicted as a strict judge who, it is implied, mistreated Aaron in the moments before his death by stripping him of his priestly vestments.[7] This negative image of Moses is reinforced by the constant repetition that the mourning for Aaron was greater than that for Moses. Furthermore, Aaron's death causes God's presence (the cloud of Glory) to depart from the people, which in turn leads to communal disintegration, witnessed by the other nations of the world. No equivalent impact is ascribed to the death of Moses.

Chapter 24 and the beginning of 25 portray Aaron as a paragon of righteous behavior. He is a lover of peace, people, and Torah; his death affects the cosmos, and he is mourned by angels and humans alike. Conversely, Moses is portrayed as a flawed judge who, in his strict interpretations of justice, creates divisions between men. Unlike Aaron, Moses sows discord and the nadir of this behavior occurs when Moses strips Aaron in front of his son, in the sight of the whole community (Num. 20:25-28).

But ARNB's extended account of Moses' death "redeems" Moses. In the material particular to ARNB, an entirely different and glorified description of Moses is presented. In these texts Moses is portrayed as the transmittor of Torah:

> Mount Sinai said, "Moses carried off the Torah, which revives souls, from me." As it is said, *The teaching of Adonai is perfect, renewing life* (Ps. 19:8).

He is declared a righteous person by God:

[7]ARN version A emphasizes how Moses even "rebuked the people with harsh words" (ARNA, Chapter 11).

> God announced to Moses that He is taking his soul from this world and is restoring it to the world to come. The Holy One, Blessed be God, took up Moses' soul and placed it with the souls of the righteous beneath the throne of glory to be for safekeeping.

And God diminishes the import of his transgressions:

> You possess no sin. You are only dying because of the decree made against the First Man. As it is said, *Your first father sinned"* (Is. 43:27).

Furthermore, in counterpoint to the account of Aaron's death, Moses is mourned by the angels which conveys the cosmic impact of Moses' death:

> The ministering angels, divisions by divisions, parties by parties, shouting before the bier of Moses, said, *"Yet he shall come to peace. They shall have rest on their couches those who walked straightforward"* (Is. 57:2).

By reiterating Moses' righteous behavior, the Angels' eulogy serves to reinforce the writer(s) agenda of (re-)establishing Moses as a paragon. If the material of Chapter 24 and the first half 25 seeks to establish the bona fides of Aaron, the teacher of Torah (recall the words of the mishnah -- "Be disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them near to the Torah") while portraying Moses as his flawed disciple, than the ARNB death account counteracts this depiction.

It is difficult to be certain if this material is indicative of a "competition" between supporters of Aaron and those of Moses, but there is textual support for this perspective in the biblical and Rabbinic descriptions of Moses' death. As stated in the account of Aaron's death in ARNB 25, God's presence, symbolized by the cloud of glory, departed when Aaron died. In MidrTann this belief is

presented as exegesis to Deuteronomy 34:8, but within a context that establishes Moses' pre-eminence:

> *And the Israelites mourned for Moses for thirty days*...Three leaders stood for Israel and these are they: Moses, Aaron and Miriam. And three gifts were given to Israel by them and these are they: the well, the pillar of cloud, and the manna. Miriam died and the well disappeared, but returned because of the merit of Moses. Aaron died, and the pillar of cloud went away, but returned because of the merit of Moses. Moses died and all three [gifts] went away, but they didn't return.[8]

In this midrash, Moses is portrayed as more powerful than Miriam and Aaron combined. He is able to cause God's presence to return after Aaron dies. In MidrTann, it is Moses' leadership and not that of Aaron, which assures God's continued presence. Only when Moses dies does God's presence leave for good.

As portrayed in the ARNB account of Aaron's death, the removal of God's presence results in communal dissolution witnessed by the Nations. But in the ARNB account of Moses' death, like in MidrTann Moses once again causes the Divine Presence to return, demonstrated by Psalm 149:

> For Adonai takes pleasure in His people, He will beautify the meek with salvation.
> [As it is said, Let the faithful exult in glory; let them shout for joy upon their beds, with paeans to God in their throats and two -edged swords in their hands, to impose retribution upon the nations, punishment upon the peoples, binding their kings with shackles, their nobles with chains of iron, executing the doom decree against them.]
> To execute upon them the judgement written is an honor to all His pious ones. Praised is God.[9]

[8]See *Midrash Tannaim* to Deut. 34:8 [Hoffman, ed., pp. 224-225].

[9]Psalm 149:4-9. The material in brackets is quoted in the midrash.

In this biblical text, placed immediately after Moses' death in ARNB, the Psalmist praises God, and exhorts God's followers to take up arms against the Nations: this vengeance is ordained by God. The militaristic tone of this psalm that advocates violence against Israel's oppressors and its incorporation into an account of Moses' death, clearly distinguishes -- on the ideological plane -- the ARNB account from the first century versions that endorse Pharisaic piety and martyrdom.[10]

Yet, when reading the psalm within the context of a competition between followers of Moses and those of Aaron, and considering its placement immediately after God has concealed Moses' soul, the following causality is possible: Moses' death will lead to revenge against the Nations perpetrated by the people, and, as verses 4 and 9 of the psalm indicate, by God as well. In ARNB, Aaron's death causes the departure of the *Shekhinah*, but Moses' death, as indicated by Psalm 149, will lead to its return and the rebirth of a nation. Finally, an interpretation of the ARNB account of Moses' death as a reaction against proponents of Aaron's preeminence over that of Moses, is further supported by the final line of the midrash,the prooftext from Isaiah:

> Yet he shall come to peace. They shall have rest on their couches those who walked straightforward.[11]

In Isaiah 57, the prophet denounces false leaders for their idolatry and that of their followers. This verse can be read as an attack against Aaron, serving to undermine his merit by alluding to his transgression as a collaborator in the

[10]See my discussion of *LAB* in Chapter 2, pp. 66-70.

[11]Is. 57:2.

building of the golden calf.[12]

The remarkable shift in the description of Moses found in ARNB, Chapters 24-25, reflects the biblical debate about Moses' character and the reasons for his denied entry into Canaan. As described in Chapter 1, the biblical accounts evidence two different exegetical perspectives, one priestly, the other Deuteronomic. The priestly perspective emphasizes Moses transgressions at Kadesh described in Numbers 20, the same chapter that forms the biblical substrata of the first part of ARNB chapter 25. For the priestly writer, Moses' sin justifies his denied entry and the writers of the first part of ARNB chapter 25, utilize the priestly material to establish Aaron's pre-eminence. Conversely, the writers of the second half of ARNB, chapter 25, utilize Deuteronomic material, in an account that upholds Moses' merit.

B. The Death of Moses in the Babylonian Talmud

1. The Text

The primary references to Moses' death in the BT are found in *Sotah* 13b-14a, which presents the following extended midrash as part of a series of exegetical comments on Deuteronomy 34, found within a larger *sugya* that begins with the mishnaic statement "Who of us is greater than Joseph?"[13] The text

[12]See Ex. 32:1-6.

[13]See also BT *Baba Batra* 17a, *Pesahim* 54a, *Sukkah* 5a and 52a, for additional references to Moses' death.

The Mishnah itself (in *Sotah* 1:10) contains a brief death account:
Who of us is greater than Joseph? Only with Moses did He busy Himself.

reads:

> It has been taught [in a *baraita*]: R. Judah said: Were it not for a scriptural citation, would not it be impossible to say, where did Moses die? In the portion of Reuben, as it is written, *And Moses went up from the plains of Moab in the Mountain of Nebo* (Deut. 34:1), and Nebo is located in the portion of Reuben. As it is written, *The Reubenites built Heshbon, Elealeh, Kiriathaim* (Num. 32:37). Nebo - there three prophets died, Moses and Aaron and Miriam. And where was Moses buried? In the portion of Gad, as it is written, *For there is the portion of the hidden lawgiver* (Deut 33:21). Now what was the distance between the portion of Reuben and the portion of Gad? Four *mils*. Who carried him for the these four *mils*? This teaches that Moses was carried on the wings of the *Shekhinah* (the Divine Presence), and the ministering angels proclaim: *He executed the Lord's judgement's and His decisions for Israel* (Deut. 33:21). And the Holy One blessed be God says, *Who will rise up for Me against doers of Evil? Who will stand up for me against the workers of iniquity?* (Ps. 94:16). Samuel said, *Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?* (Eccl. 8:1). R. Johanan said, *Where shall wisdom be found? (Job* 28:12). R. Nahman said, *And Moses died ...there (Deut.* 34:5). Semalyon said, *And Moses died ...there* the *Safra Rabbah*, the Great Scribe of Israel.
> It has been taught [in a *baraita*]: R. Eliezer, the Elder said: Over an

Moses merited this Divine privilege because of the bones of Joseph. And there is none greater in Israel than he. As it is said, *And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him* (Ex. 13:19). Who of us is greater than Moses? For only him did the Holy One, Blessed be God, busy Himself with his burial. As it is said, *God buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth Peor* (Deut. 34:6). And not only about Moses did they say this, but about all righteous ones. As it is said, *Your righteousness shall walk before you , the glory of God will be your rear guard* (Is. 58:8).

The bones of Joseph theme is absent in the early midrash, but emerges in the Talmud (BT *Sotah* 9b, 13a) and is extended in the later midrashim. This theme is connected to issues of righteousness and answers the explicit question of the midrash: Why did Moses deserve Divine intervention in his burial? An interesting dynamic of this *mishnah* is how at the opening God's unique action is stressed, however, in its conclusion, Moses' unique treatment is de-emphasized. He becomes one of many. God buries all righteous. BT *Baba Batra* 17a evidences this tradition as well: that text removes a quality of Moses' "specialness." There, several leaders of Israel are said to have been "taken up with a kiss."

> area of twelve *mils* corresponding to the camp of Israel a heavenly voice made itself heard, saying, "*And Moses died ...there,* the Great Scribe of Israel." And there are those that say: "Moses never died." It is written here: *And Moses died ...there*. And elsewhere it is written, *And he was there with the Lord* (Ex. 34:28). As in the later passage it means he was standing and ministering so also in the former passage it means he was standing and ministering.

This account combines two *baraitot* that together present -- as in the *Sifre* and MidrTann versions -- a conflicting description of Moses' death, supporting two opposite conceptions: *Genizah* and Death.[14] The first *baraita,* which contains a narrative complete with plot and characters, begins by supporting the pole of Death. R. Judah's rhetorical question -- "Were it not for a scriptural citation, would not it be impossible to say, where did Moses die?" -- and the ensuing clarification of a scriptural contradiction seemingly removes the mystical aura from the biblical death account. Although his question might suggest that R. Judah is about to deal with deeper complexities of the mystery surrounding Moses' death, his answer implies that he, R. Judah, is seeking solely to resolve two texts with seemingly different reports regarding the location of his death.

Deuteronomy 34:1 tells that Moses died on Mount Nebo. But Deuteronomy 33:20-21,part of Moses' final blessing of the people, reports:

> And of Gad he said, Blessed be He who enlarges Gad! Poised is he like a lion, to tear off arm and scalp. He chose for himself, for there is the portion of the hidden lawgiver, where the heads of the people come. He executed the Lord's judgements And His decisions for Israel.

R. Judah interprets "the hidden lawgiver" as referring to Moses, and the "portion"

[14]Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death* , p. 76.

in Gad to be the location of his grave.[15] Thus, Deut. 34:1 describes where Moses dies, and Deut. 33:21 is an account of his interment. But the resolution of this textual contradiction creates an additional dilemma: How did Moses' body move from the place of his death (Mount Nebo in the portion of Reuben) to the location of his grave (Gad which is four miles away according to the text)? In order to solve this problem, R. Judah concludes that Moses' body was carried on the wings of the *Shekhinah* from the portion of Reuben to Gad.

R. Judah's solution imbues this description with a metaphysical dimension.[16] What began as an attempt to explain textual inconsistencies, suddenly becomes something much deeper. The metaphor "on the wings of the *Shekhinah*" connotes a protective force and implies both God's love for Moses and the special treatment accorded to him at the time of his death. Notably, neither *baraita* utilizes Deut. 34:6 -- in which God buries Moses -- as a description of God's role in Moses' burial. Rather, the scriptural core of the *Sotah* account is 34:5: "Then Moses, the servant of God, died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of God." In Hebrew, "the word of God (*al pi adonai*) may be understood literally as, "by the mouth of God." Later midrashim will emphasize the *peshat* understanding of this verse, while ascribing to it a quality of love: God causes Moses to die by kissing him.[17]

[15]See Gen. R. 20:6. Also PT *Sotah* 1:10.

[16]Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p.78.

[17]See, for example, *Avot de Rabbi Nathan*, Version A, Chapter 12: "The Holy One, Blessed be God, took up Moses' soul and hid it below God's throne of Glory. And when God took it, God took it only with a kiss, as it is said, *By*

God's love for Moses is the central theme of the *Sotah* account and is highlighted in the series of eulogies that follows:

> The ministering angels proclaim: *He executed the Lord's judgement's and His decisions for Israel* (Deut. 33:21). And the Holy One blessed be God says, *Who will rise up for Me against doers of Evil? Who will stand up for me against the workers of iniquity?* (Ps. 94:16). Samuel said, *Who is like the wise man? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?* (Eccl. 8:1). R. Johanan said, *Where shall wisdom be found?* (Job 28:12). R. Nahman said, *And Moses died ...there*(Deut. 34:5). Semalyon said,*And Moses died ...there*, the *Safra Rabbah*, the Great Scribe of Israel.

The text contains the eulogies for Moses by the angels and God, and by the individuals listed in the second half of the text, offering variations of what God said at the moment of Moses' death. Each scriptural quotation highlights Moses' unique role as mediator between God and the people, and the words that God directly speaks convey God's particular feelings of loss in the wake of Moses' death. Although the angels express their grief by empathizing with Israel, all of the statements describe the mourning in heaven. Mourners on earth are not heard from in a "strict" reading of the eulogies. However, the style in which the statements by Samuel, R. Johanan, R. Nahman, and Semalyon are rendered, creates an impression that these individuals themselves mourned for Moses along with God and the angels, despite the difference in the chronological references to the time of mourning. God and the angels mourn in the present tense, while the humans' statements are placed in the past.[18]

the mouth of Adonai(Deut. 34:5)." See also Deut. R. 11:10 and the opening of *Petirat Moshe* (Jellinek version A).

[18]Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p. 78.

The second *baraita* destabilizes the certainty regarding Moses death and burial conveyed in the first *baraita*, by presenting declarations of Moses' concealment:

> It has been taught [in a *baraita*]: R. Eliezer, the Elder, said: Over an area of twelve *mils* corresponding to the camp of Israel a heavenly voice made itself heard, saying, "*And Moses died ...there* the Great Scribe of Israel." And there are those that say: "Moses never died."

The first part of this *baraita* begins with a short narrative that describes a *bat kol* announcing Moses' death in Moab. Yet, the statement that concludes this narrative, beginning with the words, "and there are those that say," presents the opposite belief -- Moses was concealed. It is difficult to measure the valence of this statement: is it serving to contradict the earlier assertion that Moses died and was buried or can it be read as complementary?[19]

The second half of the *baraita* provokes the same question by again presenting both conceptions regarding Moses' death through the use of a hermeneutic method called *Gezarah Shavah* (lit. "equal cutting").[20] This method creates, through an inference by analogy, a connection between two different verses that share the same word or phrase, which in this case, is the word "there":

> It is written here: *And Moses died ...**there***. And elsewhere it is written, *And he was **there** with the Lord* (Ex. 34:28). As in the later passage it means he was standing and ministering, so also in the former passage it means he was standing and ministering.

In this text, the death of Moses as described in Deuteronomy is connected, through

[19]Kushelevsky, *Moses and the Angel of Death*, p. 83.

[20]*Ibid.*, p. 77.

the use of *gezarah shavah*, with Moses' ascent to Mount Sinai. According to Exodus 34:28, Moses was "there with the Lord for forty days and forty nights; he didn't eat bread nor drink water." The verse serves to highlight Moses' metaphysical aspects, portraying him as not subject to the laws of the physical world. The *gezarah shavah* places this characterization from Exodus within the context of a description of Moses' death. Such a description of Moses as metaphysical being is congruent with an interpretation of *Genizah*, which is indeed the outcome of this *gezarah shavah*. Moses did not die; just as he "stood and ministered" "from above" in the Exodus narrative,[21] in Deuteronomy, he disappears but continues to minister from heaven.

The hermeneutic method of *gezarah shavah* offers a means for presenting both orientations within the same *baraita*. As its name suggests, this technique of "equal cutting" lends credence to both readings. Within this textual unit both *Genizah* and Death are in balance. Reading the first half of the *baraita* in light of the second, the editorial statement, "And there are those that say, "Moses never died," would seem to be presenting *Genizah* as a complementary conception to Death, and indicates the continued existence of a debate as to the particulars of Moses' death.

In reading the *bariatot* of *Sotah* 13b as a single unit, the account begins by supporting the pole of Death, but concludes upholding the pole of *Genizah*. However, the next series of exegetical comments at the bottom of 13b and top of

[21]The exegete understood the Exodus verse as indicating a temporary ascent by Moses to heaven.

14a "move" the perspective of the *Sotah* material away from the orientation of *Genizah* and back towards that of Death:

> *And He buried him in the valley of the land of Moab opposite Beit Peor* (Deut. 34:6) - R. Berechiah said: This is a sign inside of a sign. For even though [it is very clear, precisely where he is buried], *no one knows his burial place to this day* (Ibid.).
> The Roman government sent to the military camp of Beit Peor. [The government's messengers said], Show us where Moses is buried.
> They stood above [on the mountain] and it appeared below them. They stood below, and it appeared above them. They split into two groups: to those standing above [the grave] it appeared below. [To those standing below] it appeared above, to establish what is said: *No one knows his burial place to this day* (Ibid.).
> Rabbi Hama, in the name of Rabbi Hanina, said: "Even Moses, our Teacher doesn't know where he is buried." It is written here, *No one knows his burial place to this day* (Ibid.), and it is written elsewhere: *This is the blessing with which Moses, a man of God, blessed* (Deut. 33:1).
> And Rabbi Hama in the name of Rabbi Hanina said: Why was Moses buried in the area of Beit Peor? In order to atone for the incident at Peor.[22]

This textual unit, comprised of two sets of Amoraic statements that envelop a narrative describing the Roman search for Moses' grave, also appears in *Midrash Tannaim*.[23] This material emphasizes the fact of burial, but ascribes a metaphysical quality to the grave. As opposed to the *baraitot*, in this short midrash the grave is concealed, underscoring the biblical description.

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[22]Here the exegete refers to the book of Numbers 25, in which the Israelites become involved with the women of Moab and worship *Ba-al peor* . Moses burial in this same location, the exegete suggests, atones for this communal sin.

[23] See *Midrash Tannaim* to Deut. 34:6 [Hoffman pp. 225]. The BT version is verbatim the same text, but without R. Berechiah's statement.

2. Towards an Ideological Reading of BT *Sotah* 13b-14a

Because of the complex relationship between the material itself and that of its redaction into the form found in *Sotah*, the BT death account presents formidable challenges in determining its underlying ideological principles. All of the *Sotah* 13b material describing the death of Moses is comprised of second and third century Palestinian sources. But the redaction of these accounts into the 13b-14a unit most likely occurred several centuries later in Babylonia. Therefore, the sources share, to some extent, geographic and socio-historical origins, while their organization represents the ideological views of a different time and place. Here I will focus on how the *redaction* of *Sotah* 13b is reflective of the 5th or 6th century Babylonian religious milieu.

In the absence of any clear Babylonian, Amoraic emendations -- save for Samuel's eulogy -- to the earlier Palestinian material, an ideological interpretation must be based on the ordering of the texts, which, because of uncertainty regarding the organizational principles, disallows any authoritative assertions. Although additional arguments in support of an ideological understanding of the text may be found in answers to questions such as why do the editors, living in Babylon, choose these descriptions and not others? Or, why were the traditions regarding the Angel of Death's search for Moses not selected? I have chosen to focus here on understanding why certain texts were *included* and how they were redacted.

At first glance, the final unit of the *Sotah* material -- the Roman search

enveloped by Rabbinic statements -- would seem to offer interpretive hints through both its content and placement in the overall collection of accounts. As examined above, when reading from the beginning of the *baraitot* and continuing through the second R. Hama statement, the account begins by supporting the exegetical orientation of Death, moves towards *Genizah*, and ultimately ends back at Death. By placing an exegesis in support of Death as the final comment in the collection, it could be assumed -- as one might in a halakhic *sugya* where the last argument is often a final judgement -- that this is the authoritative understanding of Moses death: he was not concealed, he did not ascend to heaven; Moses was buried by God. This view gains support from the identity of the tradent who quotes an earlier exegesis. Rabbi Hama was a fifth generation Babylonian Amora (d. 377), who led the academy at Pumbeditha for twenty-one years.[24] He quotes the statement of Rabbi Hanina, a first generation *Tanna* (80-100 C.E.). What does it mean for R. Hama to quote R. Hanina, a much earlier figure? Does it give the perspective of death an authoritative weight over and against the oxymoronic descriptions contained in the *baraitot*?

An affirmative answer to this question gains support from the narrative of the Romans' search for Moses grave. As seen in earlier accounts, witnesses placed within a narrative are used to substantiate the ideological views of the author. Thus, for example, the presence of the disciples at the Transfiguration serves to reinforce the contention that Jesus is the true agent of God. Here in

[24]See H. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash* , p. 97.

Sotah, the Roman army itself becomes a witness to the biblical description that one, Moses is buried and two, *no one knows his burial place to this day* (Deut. 34:6). By employing Christian or Pagan witnesses, the writer may be implying -- in contradiction to the competing belief that Moses ascended-- that even the Gentiles understand Moses' fate. In this interpretation, the Romans serve as objective witnesses for one side of an inner-communal, Jewish debate.

This theory, however, is destabilized when one examines how this final unit of the death descriptions fits into the overall structure of the *sugyot* of 13a-14b. Immediately after R. Hama's second statement, the *gemara* moves into a new *sugya* through the transitional use of a *third* statement by R. Hama. Here is the end of the Moses death material and the beginning of a new subject:

> Rabbi Hama, in the name of Rabbi Hanina, said: "Even Moses our Teacher doesn't know where he is buried." It is written here, *No one knows his burial place to this day* (Ibid.), and it is written elsewhere: *This is the blessing with which Moses, a man of God, blessed* (Deut. 33:1). And Rabbi Hama in the name of Rabbi Hanina said: Why was Moses buried in the area of Beit Peor? In order to atone for the incident at Peor. [Conclusion of Moses material]
>
> [Beginning of next *sugya*] And Rabbi Hama, in the name of Rabbi Hanina, said: Why is it written, *You shall follow Adonai, your God, and fear Him and keep His commandments* (Deut. 13:5) For how is it possible for a man to follow the *Shekhinah*?! And behold previously it was said, *For Adonai your god is a consuming fire* (Deut. 3:24). Rather to follow after God's laws [is what Deut. 13:5 actually implies].

R. Hama's third declaration supports an argument that perhaps the unit comprised of three "Rabbi Hama, in the name of Rabbi Hanina, said" statements was placed at the end of the material, not in order to provide support for a particular ideological stance, but rather to serve a redactional function as a transition point

to a new subject. Moreover, since the narrative of the Roman search and the first two of R. Hama's statements commenting on Deut. 34:6 appear in MidrTann as a complete unit, this lends support to the theory that a redactor placed the unit between the *baraitot* and the new *sugya* (which begins with the third "Rabbi Hama, in the name of Rabbi Hanina, said" statement) to serve simultaneously as a conclusion to interpretations of Moses' death and as a textual bridge to the new *sugya* that begins with R. Hama's exegesis on Deut. 13:5.

The *Sotah* material serves as the chronological terminus of the 1st-6th century accounts of Moses' death. As shown, the BT maintains, through the presentation of un-emended Tannaitic accounts, many of the contradictory descriptions common in the earlier versions. While the majority of comments emphasize death and burial, the inclusion of material that upholds *Genizah* suggests that the redactors of *Sotah* were also comfortable with descriptions of Moses and his concealment. But the question remains, why did the redactors of the BT not include the Angel of Death narrative? Was it not known in Babylonian circles? Was this narrative tradition not upheld for it supported the exegetical orientation of *Genizah?* Did it provoke controversy or discomfort through its portrayal of Moses as more powerful than the Angel of Death? The answers to these questions remain unknown and perhaps unknowable.

Conclusion

The debate revolving around Moses' reputation that began perhaps as early as the fifth century B.CE.,[1] was particularly "alive" in the first two centuries of the Common Era. The emergence of Christianity, coupled with the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and the loss of Jewish national sovereignty, created the necessity for Jewish writers to assert and burnish the reputation of their leader. As Raphael Loewe writes:

> Christological exegesis acted as a challenge to the synagogue to prove by its own that it was, in no sense spiritually poorer than the Church for its rejection of the Incarnation, its persistence in regarding the messianic era as still in the future, or its insistence that the texts upon which the Church placed a christological construction were to be understood as referring to the historical experience of the Jewish people.[2]

The Church's dissemination of its claims to spiritual authority through its biblical exegesis and exaltation of Jesus spurred Jewish interpretation and the exaltation of Jesus provoked a rabbinic reaction of exalting Moses. Moreover, as the Rabbis looked anew for equivalent spiritual wealth in the face of religious competition, while creating a religious system that served to restore the solidarity of the Jews, Moses was positioned as the patriarch for their innovations. And in understanding the representative significance of their religious leader and the manner of his death, the Rabbis created a unique passing for Moses that expressed to their followers and to the world the unparalleled quality of his life as God's true

[1]See Feldman, *Jew and Gentile*, p. 234.

[2]Raphael Loewe,"The Jewish Midrashim and Patristic and Scholastic Exegesis of the Bible," in *Studia Patristica* I (1957), p. 497.

prophet on earth.

As seen the Jewish accounts of Moses' death written in the first to sixth century, form a spectrum of descriptions ranging from definitive burial accounts to those of ascent without death. *LAB*, with its description closely aligned to Deuteronomy 34:5-6, reads, "He buried him with His own hands on a high place and in the light of all of the world," and comprise one end of this spectrum. The only other version that so unequivocally describes Moses as being buried is the latest account examined in this survey, found in the conclusion of the BT *Sotah* material. Philo's accounts in *De Virtutibus* and *De Vita Mosis* comprises the other end of the spectrum, describing a Moses who does not die, but is transformed into a metaphysical entity which returns to God.

The majority of the texts surveyed in this paper, however, occupy intermediate positions between these poles, suggesting the complexities of the contexts within which they were written and their varying ideological intents. Josephus, writing in Rome at the close of the first century, creates a Hellenistic portrayal of Moses in order to attract Gentile proselytes. Furthermore, realizing the skepticism that the biblical account engenders in Greco-Roman audiences, he utilizes literary motifs of the period -- Moses disappears in a cloud -- in order to have Moses' death conform to those of Greek heroes. But while Josephus directs his interpretive efforts towards a gentile audience, simultaneously he expresses concern for an innercommunal issue regarding the "whereabouts" of Moses. Resisting the apparent apotheosis of Moses evident in certain Jewish circles and

perhaps expressed in Philo's writing, Josephus, in the conclusion of his account, refutes the notion that Moses "went to God."[3]

The second and third century midrashists portray Moses as capable of outwitting the Angel of Death and as concealed in heaven by God. And yet, despite this description of *Genizah*, each account employs Deuteronomy 34:6 as a prooftext for the events that occurred at the end of Moses life on earth: God buried him in a valley. In contradistinction to Josephus, these midrashists directed their accounts solely towards their own communities, and the emphasis on death found within these versions is consistent with the rabbinic notion that Moses did not ascend to heaven. Yet, the utilization of the theme of *Genizah* , which in earlier writing is equated to ascension, is used here as a symbol of the eternal quality of the oral Torah.

The versions found in *Sifre* and MidrTann exemplify the varied nature of the majority of the Jewish accounts of Moses death and highlight the difficulty of categorizing these accounts either by narrative form or by ideological intent. There do appear to be, however, several unifying messages contained within the writings. Striving to portray their leader as God's singular agent on earth, both in the eyes of the larger population and within the Jewish community, all the writers emphasize the unique quality of Moses' death as representative of his unparalleled intimacy with God. Furthermore, the writers utilize the moment of Moses' death to present messages of comfort to their audiences. God's love for

[3]*Antiquities* 4. 8. 48.

Moses is equated with God's love for the people Israel. As seen in *Midrash Tannaim* when Moses disappears, the cloud representing the *Shekhinah*,declares, *Many waters cannot extinguish love* (Song of Songs 8:7). The rabbis used the moment of Moses death as an opportunity to reassure their communities that despite the loss of their Temple and Jerusalem, and the absence of their paramount leader, God still loves and cares for Israel.

Additionally, as J. Goldin has observed, in the midrashim on the death of Moses, a change occurs in God.[4] Almost in counterpoint to Moses, who moves from a purely terrestrial role (as seen in the Bible) to one that bridges heaven and earth (in the midrashim), God, in the course of the midrashim, moves from being a purely heavenly figure to one who is more paternal, more of this earth. This "transposition" is articulated in the scenes of mourning. In the death scene from *LAB*, composed most likely in the first century, the writer remarks on God's love for Moses, but God does not mourn his death. Yet, in the later accounts, such as *Midrash Tannaim* and the BT *Sotah* 13b material, God eulogizes Moses in the company of humans. In MidrTann God cries to Joshua, "How long will you continue to look for Moses? *Moses my servant is dead (Josh*. 1:2). Moses did not die for you, he only died for me." While in *Sotah*, God says, "[Now that Moses is dead] *who will rise up for Me against doers of Evil? Who will stand up for me against the workers of iniquity?* "(Ps. 94:16). In an important message of comfort for the

[4]See J. Goldin,"The Death of Moses: An Exercise in Midrashic Transposition," in *Studies in Midrash and Related Literature* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988), p. 183.

audiences receiving the midrashim, God mourns for the pain of the moment. These instances of Divine mourning highlight how no other biblical personality so succeeded in shortening the distance between God and humans as Moses did. Finally, the death of Moses served as a vehicle for more individualistic messages. Repeatedly, Moses is portrayed as a paragon of righteous behavior. Centuries of writers imply that for those who follow in his footsteps, they too will be rewarded with a painless death.

In contrast to the diverse Jewish interpretations, the Christian material is more monolithic. Christian descriptions of Moses' death are, by and large, limited to a discussion regarding his ascension. Christian writers attempted to destabilize Judaism's pre-eminence by undermining the popular belief that Moses had ascended and would return as Messiah. By maintaining that only the one who descended from heaven may return there at the end of his life, the Book of John polemicizes Moses' role as heavenly messenger. However, like their Jewish counterparts, Christian writers endeavored to balance competing ideological goals. As they sought to undermine Jewish claims to being the true Israel and asserted Jesus' ascendancy over Moses, the Church relied on the Bible and its Jewish origins to defend itself against Pagan polemics. Within the Christian-Pagan debate, the Church often found itself in the uncomfortable position of defending Judaism for it was key to Christianity's legacy.

The material surveyed provides support for Rokeah's (and others') contention that the overt polemic between Christians and Jews had subsided by,

approximately, the end of the second century. The Christian and Jewish accounts from the first century, investigated in Chapters Two and Three, evidence the greatest level of intercommunal debate. The Book of John, in particular, portrays debates between Christians and Jews regarding both Jesus' and Moses' ascensions. The anti-Jewish polemic expressed throughout the Gospel, is considered reflective of a recent schism between a Christian circle and its former synagogue home.

In contrast, Origen's writings are perhaps indicative of the growing distance between Christians and Jews and the lessening of direct debate. His comments, written in the late second and early third centuries, although reflective of actual debates between Christians and Jews living in Caesaria, should not be understood as evidence of a "live" debate between Jews and Christians. *Contra Celsus* is an apologetic work directed towards Pagans. And although the material in which he comments on the death of Moses is part of a Jewish-Christian debate regarding the purpose of Jesus' and Moses' descriptions of their own deaths, this section of the book, like all of his comments in which Origen "corrects" Celsus' portrayal of Jews, reads as reportage or documentation. There is perceptible distance (both chronological and emotional) between the debate and its reconstruction in *Contra Celsus* .

Justin Martyr of Shechem's *Dialogue with Trypho* written shortly before Origen's work, provides a useful comparison and aides in substantiating Rokeah's hypothesis. Justin was one of the first Christian apologists to contend with the

Pagans and one of the last anti-Jewish polemicists.[5] His work, written at the end of the second century, is virulently anti-Jewish and indicative of the heated Jewish-Christian debate of the period. *Contra Celsus*, however, though written, similarly, in an area with a large Jewish population, defends, rather than attacks Judaism, and is primarily concerned with relations between Christian and Pagans.

Although the first century Palestinian, Jewish texts present less direct attacks on Christ than those against Moses in the NT, the account from *LAB* does implicitly attack Christianity and seeks to assert Moses' ascendancy in reaction to Christian claims to Christ's pre-eminence. But as seen in the Christian material, there appears to be a lessening of open polemics beginning in the Tannaitic material, and the ideological messages of these texts are directed towards Jewish audiences. And certainly, as one moves later into the period surveyed in this paper, and subsequently, farther from Palestine, the Jewish texts present few, if any, traces of the Jewish-Christian polemic.

Despite evidence of a Christian-Jewish debate as to the particulars of Moses' death and his role as God's agent, it is difficult to determine if the comments found in these texts were aimed at changing an opponent's view, or were "heard" by the opponent. For example, when the writer derides the notion of immaculate conception in *LAB*,[6] we do not know whether this comment ever reached Christians. Yet, it is possible that the author was directing his words toward Jewish-Christians

[5]See Rokeah, *Jews, Pagans, and Christians*, p. 13.

[6]*LAB* 19:9.

still present in his synagogue. From the Christian perspective, although the Book of John attacks the Moses-centered piety of a rabbinic circle, the work itself served to strengthen the faith of a particular community rather than change the opinions of its opponents. In the end, perhaps the Jewish-Christian argument regarding Moses' death should be labelled technically as "debate" and not as "polemics."

Beginning even before the redaction of the Bible, a tradition evolved regarding the details of Moses' death. What we read in Deuteronomy is perhaps only one telling. But it is these words, canonized in the Torah,

> *Then Moses, servant of YHWH, died there, in the land of Moab, by the command of YHWH. YHWH buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beith-Peor. And no one knows his burial place even until this day,*

that have inspired centuries of investigation, interpretation, and debate. Although the socio-historical contexts continuously change, the mystery of the passage remains constant. Similarly, in every generation idealogues utilize the biblical text to convey their particular agendas to their followers. And within this process of interpretive change, is the life and death of Moses; Deut. 34 is not just a textual moment, it is the end a paragon's life and the close of the Torah. This moment in particular, what is written and what is not, compels each generation to imbue this ending with its own meanings. This study is a glimpse into the first six centuries of interpretation and debate surrounding the death scene of Moses and offers the foundation for a tradition that continues to evolve to the present.

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