INSTRUCTIONS FROM AUTHOR TO LIBRARY FOR THESES AND PRIZE ESSAYS

AUTHOR David Regenspan

TITLE A Drop of Gall: The Personification of Death in the Aggada.

TYPE OF THESIS: Ph.D. [ ] D.H.L. [ ] Rabbinic [X]

Master's [ ] Prize Essay [ ]

1. May circulate [X]) Not necessary
2. Is restricted [ ] for ___ years.) for Ph.D.) thesis

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

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

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

February 29, 1988
Date

David Regenspan
Signature of Author

Library Record

Microfilmed
Date

Signature of Library Staff Member

A DROP OF GALL: THE PERSONIFICATION OF DEATH IN THE AGGADA

David Regenspan

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for Ordination

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE-JEWISH INSTITUTE OF RELIGION
CINCINNATI, OHIO
1988

Referee: Prof. Edward Goldman

To my wife Barbara, who has lovingly guided me always
toward my angel of life,

to my son Benjamin Joshua, who makes each day a new birth

and

to the blessed memory of my beloved father Samuel Span;
his integrity in life and death
will always give me strength.

Digest

This thesis is concerned with the portrayal of death in the aggada in personified form: the Angel of Death and other figures who act as messengers of death. It attempts to find reasons why the sages chose to represent their ideas about death in such a manner. It proceeds in its inquiry by first looking into the biblical background of the aggada's use of angels in general and angels associated with death in particular. It then provides an overview of the various forms of personified death to be found in the aggada, principally the Angel of Death, Samael, and the destructive angels. The thesis goes on to examine the use of personification of death to demonstrate the confrontation between human beings and death, as well as the confrontation between death and Torah, that is to say, righteous behavior. It finally explores what personification of death seems to reveal about how the sages viewed the ultimate place death holds in God's universe.

The discussion makes use of numerous examples of personified death taken from a variety of aggadic sources. These include tales of heroes who try to defeat death, midrashic embellishments of Bible situations, descriptive comments made by the sages about death, and other types of examples. It attempts to provide an overview of the methods the aggadists used to personify death and to show how they were thus better able to express their views about death.

The discussion takes note of the major themes, ideas and attitudes concerning death expressed by the sages through personification. These include the human fear of death, the inability of humans to avoid death altogether, the relative strength or weakness of death's power over a given mortal due to that person's degree of righteousness or sin, the possibility that humanity in general and Israel in particular might once have had the chance to be immortal, and the hope of the end of death's reign in the messianic future.

The thesis comes to the overall conclusion that the rabbinic view of death as found in the aggada could not have been portrayed as forcefully as it was without the use of personification of death. It reaches several other major conclusions. First, personification of death crystallizes the rabbinic view of the complex relationship between humanity and death. Second, it serves as a device to counter human feelings of alienation from God and the world by providing a target for mortal rage and fear. Third, it clearly shows that God rules over death and can remove death when He so wills. Finally, personification of death helps to make bearable a paradox that Judaism presents to its believers: one must both love this world and at the same time be expected to yearn for the world to come. Personification creates, so to speak, a middleman between this world and the next, helping to ease the tension of feeling suspended between the two worlds.

Table of Contents

Introduction

In traditional Jewish law, the subject of death is treated in a sober and practical fashion. The details of burial and mourning customs are prescribed in detail; the focus is kept on the world of the living and how to survive grief within it. Meanwhile, traditional Jewish theology provides assurances that the end of our existence in this world is not the end of our existence as a whole. We will go on to an afterlife, receiving reward and punishment according to our just deserts. At the end of time when the Messiah comes, we will be reunited with our bodies and rise to be judged, hopefully to go on to life eternal in a faultless new world.

Such a solid and reassuring approach to death both in earthly procedure and in heavenly faith would seem to eliminate any need for outlandish vehicles of expression. Indeed, it might at first seem quite self-defeating for the sages to have expressed their ideas about death in anything but the most straightforward of terms. Yet, in that body of nonlegal literature of the talmudic era known as aggada, the sages choose a strange and confusing way to present death and their ideas about death. They personify death in the form of fear-inspiring angels. In their discussions about bodily danger in general, they even make reference to harmful

demons. Thus they add a wild and fearful element to their otherwise reassuring discussions about death. In a monotheistic scheme of the universe, they appear at first glance to provide a means of causing people to think that death is a power apart from God. In short, by adding personifications of death to the aggada, the sages seem to be adding unnecessary confusion to their discussions about death. One can only wonder: why?

The most familiar and perhaps most important personification of death in the aggada is to be found in the figure of the Angel of Death. Here we have a character who appears both in circumstances we might expect and those that might surprise us greatly. We find the Angel appearing in fearful guise to take submissive mortals to the next world--just as we might have anticipated. However, we also find the Angel playing gleeful tricks on mortals or having tricks played on him in turn by mortals. We find him cowed in the face of certain actions performed by his would be victims, or puzzled by the behavior of human beings. We find an Angel who communicates with certain sages, who reasons and argues. We thus are confronted with a character with more than one face. Again, the presentation of death seems to be given added complication and otherwise avoidable problems of interpretation.

This thesis will explore the phenomenon of personification of death in the aggada. In so doing it will attempt to discover what is not obvious on the surface: the

function of personification of death in the sages' presentation of their ideas about death. It will especially be concerned with identifying the ways in which personification of death might add elements to the presentation of death in the aggada that otherwise would not have been possible.

The first chapter will present a brief review of biblical angelology to clarify the source of aggadic personification of death. It will then summarize and describe the major forms of personification of death to be found in the aggada. The second chapter will focus on the stories that show death in confrontation with humanity, involving deception or open conflict, and revealing the depth of the human fear of death. The third chapter will involve itself with the question of death and the Torah, reviewing the tales in which personified death finds itself weakened by righteousness or strengthened by sinfulness. The fourth and final chapter will focus on the ultimate questions of death's place in Creation and in relation to God and humanity, and will make particular inquiry into the function that personification of death plays in providing answers to such questions.

The primary sources used all contain the sayings and homilies of the sages of the talmudic era, the tannaim and amoraim. They were located with the aid of indexes, concordances and references. Much of the material used, such as Exodus Rabbah or Pesikta Rabbati, was redacted at a

considerably later period than the talmudic era, but nevertheless basically follows classical outlines, clearly contains early material and quotes only from the talmudic sages. The richest sources of material represented are the collection known as Midrash Rabbah and the Babylonian Talmud itself.

The translations of biblical and aggadic material used are published translations in which on occasion minor changes had to be made for the sake of spelling consistency or clarity of meaning. Bracketed additions in these translations have been retained. Where translations were not available or clarity seemed to demand it, my own translations are used.

Chapter 1

Personified Forms of Death

In discussions and homilies concerning death, dying and bereavement found throughout midrashic literature, death is often to be encountered in the form of a person or persons. Undoubtedly the best known and most prominent personified form of death is the Angel of Death (מלאך המות), and it is to the Angel of Death that this thesis will devote the most attention. The Angel is the supernatural emissary of death who comes to end the life of mortals on their appointed day of departure to the next world. He is at once calm and violent, emotionally involved with his task yet indifferent to it. He is a creature of the sages who created the aggada, and the purest personified expression of their thoughts and feelings about death, the ultimate human challenge.

Though not as prominent, other personifications of death find their place in the aggada. While they bear close relation to the Angel of Death, they show significant differences from him that reveal other theological and emotional nuances in the thoughts of the sages concerning death. The wicked angel Samael and even Satan (the "adversary"), who often seem to be interchangeable figures, on occasion assume the role of taking the life of those

appointed to die. These figures more strongly demonstrate than does the Angel the fact that, according to the aggadists, there is a relationship between sin and death.

Death is not only a matter of an individual end to a life. It can also be a collective concern, the mass destruction of life due to pestilence, war or disaster. This collective view of death often finds expression through a class of angels known as angels of destruction (מלאכי חבלה). Though of the same species as the Angel of Death, Samael and Satan, these angels threaten to burst forth and annihilate entire groups of people. Their high-ranking members even bear proper names.

Somewhat similar to destructive angels but of more dubious status are demons. Such creatures seem to reveal an underside of aggadic personifications of death, an occasional hint that death can seem haphazard and the result of independent forces of evil rather than the will of Heaven. They do not form an important component of aggadic personifications of death, but their presence is worth noting.

There is another angelic figure associated with death who plays an ancillary role to that of the Angel of Death. This is the strange figure called Dumah, whose role is to escort souls to their proper places in the next world. Like the demons, Dumah does not serve a central role in aggadic personification of death, but his presence in aggada deserves brief mention.

These are the personifications of death in the aggada that will be explored in this thesis. In chapter one the groundwork will be laid for an understanding of the nature of such personifications. In the first part of the chapter the biblical background of angels and angelology will be briefly reviewed to uncover the foundations of the aggadic view of angels, the beings most utilized in order to personify death. Then the basic appearance and characteristics of the Angel of Death and other personifications of death in the aggada will be explored, and illustrated with excerpts from aggadic literature found in the Talmud and midrash.

BIBLICAL ORIGINS OF ANGELS

The aggadic view of and belief in angels is based upon their appearance in the Bible. The occurrence of angels is far from a uniform matter in biblical literature. It has even been asserted that certain sections of the Bible are written specifically with an anti-angelic bias and that in such portions angelic appearances have been suppressed.[1] It has also been suggested that in certain instances the word "angel" was inserted before "Lord" or "God" in passages in which a later editor tried to suppress an anthropomorphic representation of the Deity,[2] or that it is possible that angels are at least in some instances meant to be a mere symbolic representation of a manifestation of God Himself.[3]

These qualifications aside, it is clear that in at least

some places in the Bible definite beings called angels are quite real and play an active role in the stories in which they appear. The term "angel" (מַלְאָךְ) simply means "messenger".[4] Thus an angel is a messenger between heaven and earth, God and mortal (although it would seem that angels are also assigned places in heaven in order to accompany God).

The Bible gives us no statement on why angels were created. In certain ways they appear to add an unnecessary complication to the scheme of Creation. As Mark Shapiro expresses the problem of angels in relation to the literature of the rabbis:

> Setting aside the modern predisposition to dismiss as fantastic so "mythological" a concept as that of the angel, the question to be asked is how the rabbis, who generally describe the cosmic drama in terms of God and humanity alone, were able to incorporate a third player into their world. One wonders whether the angels seriously affected the relationship between God and humanity or whether the rabbis assigned the angels roles which had little effect on that relationship.. . .[5]

Though Shapiro is here referring specifically to angels in rabbinic literature, the same problem can be said to exist in biblical literature, at the very start of Jewish literary history. From a cosmological point of view, how do such beings fit into a monotheistic universe? One can speculate

that angels represent a leftover from the polytheistic past[6] or are a necessary bridge between a transcendent God and His world.[7] Nevertheless, for our present purposes the presence of angels in the Bible and subsequent literature will simply be taken as a given. This discussion will take shape around the question of the usefulness and functions of angelic personifications of death, having taken it for granted that, long before the time of the rabbis, angels had been a part of the Jewish cosmological scheme. The aggadists simply put to use what had been bequeathed to them by generations long forgotten.

In general, biblical angels are beings defined entirely according to their functions.[8] They have no individual personalities, and no proper names.[9] They make their appearances solely to perform a specific task. Some angels are assigned to be God's emissaries on earth. Others apparently are assigned to accompany God in heaven and to praise Him.[10] But, though the angels are clearly not vulnerable to the ills and the needs of mortals, they seem essentially interchangeable. No given angel seems to personify any one aspect of life or of Creation.

There are various types of tasks that the angels perform on earth. They announce future events to mortals, act as spokesmen for God, or enact God's decrees. Thus (Gen. 18) Sarah is informed by an angel that she will bear a child, as is the wife of Manoah (Jud. 13). An angel speaks on God's behalf from a flame of fire to call Moses to his great task

(Ex. 3:2); an angel speaks in God's name to tell Abraham to spare his son Isaac (Gen. 22:11-12). Angels are sent to destroy Sodom (Gen. 19).

Biblical angels serve both protecting and destroying functions. In the last-mentioned example angels both save a mortal (Abraham's nephew Lot) and destroy a city. An angel (Ex. 32:34) protects the Israelites in the wilderness. God sends a "destroyer" (מַשְׁחִית) to kill the firstborn of Egypt (Ex. 12:23). A destroying angel is sent against Israel to bring pestilence (II Sam. 15-16).

The angels of the Bible may or may not be visible to mortals. They may take human form, or appear in some other fashion (such as within the fire of the "burning bush"). They may have wings, as do the seraphim of Isaiah 6 or the cherubim that adorn the Ark of the Testimony (Ex. 25:20).

The Bible does not offer us an Angel of Death as such nor a special category of destroying angels. This destructive role seems to be a temporary assignment at the most for any given angel. However, the Angel of Death and the Angels of Destruction (מַלְאֲכֵי חַבָּלָה) are clearly anticipated in the Bible through the destructive actions of angels. It can not be too strongly emphasized that such actions are at God's bidding. No independent demonic forces representing a power separate from God's power are to be found in this scheme.

Angels in the Bible who serve threatening or destructive functions are sometimes found brandishing a sword. It will

be seen presently that this image carries over to rabbinic personifications of death and destruction. Thus, after the sin of Adam and Eve, the Garden of Eden is kept off limits to humanity by guardian angels with a "flaming sword" (Gen. 3:24). The priest Balaam is met with an angel holding a drawn sword during his passage through a vineyard because God is angry that he has gone forth to curse Israel (Nu. 22:23). The angel that God sends against Israel in David's time appears between earth and heaven holding a drawn sword (I Chron. 21:16,30). The sword is a powerful symbol of the angel's assigned task of causing or threatening to bring about death and destruction.

It is far beyond the scope of this discussion to trace the development of angelology through post-biblical literature. In any case, the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha do not serve as sources of authority for the rabbis in their midrashic commentaries and are not quoted or drawn upon by them. Suffice it to say that, after the Babylonian exile, angelology becomes a more complicated affair. The beginning of this process can clearly be discerned in the Bible itself in the Book of Daniel. Daniel, unlike any other biblical character, communicates with angels who have proper names (e.g. Michael) and their own personalities. Such angels are not interchangeable and apparently hold permanent roles, such as that of the angel Michael, who serves as the guardian of Israel. Angels in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha often have names, roles, and elaborate ranking systems. It is

possible that Persian influence was the catalyst for this expansion of the role of angelic imagery in religious literature, since the Persian cosmos was filled with immortal beings of lesser stature.[11]

In Daniel and in Zechariah, as well as Ezekiel, angelic beings can be found providing interpretations of religious visions as well as presenting the visions themselves. Thus Ezekiel is shown a detailed plan of a new Temple in Jerusalem by an angelic being (Ez. 40-48). Zechariah (Zech. 4:1-7) is given a vision of a candlestick which is then explicated by an angel. Daniel, who communicates with God solely through angels, has a vision by the river Ulay of a ram and a goat; this vision receives its interpretation from the angel Gabriel.[12] This late biblical addition of the angel who interprets visions anticipates apocryphal and pseudepigraphical literature, in which such a role for angels is common. In post-biblical literature angels also can be found to teach mortals various skills and areas of knowledge. Such roles anticipate a role that, as will be seen presently, the Angel of Death of rabbinic literature on occasion assumes: the confidant of mortals.

The protective and destructive functions of biblical angels also expand in post-biblical literature. Angels who accompany mortals to protect them in biblical literature have more elaborated counterparts in post-biblical literature: permanent guardian angels of individuals and of nations (it was mentioned that even in the Bible, in Daniel, Michael is

the guardian angel of Israel).[13] Even in the Bible there exists a class of angel known as "adversary" (שטן), notably in the first chapter of the Book of Job. But only in post-biblical literature does this type of angel become an individual angel who is evil-minded as well as adversarial known as Satan (and by other names as well).[14] Satan and Samael of rabbinic literature are thus foreshadowed.

We have thus far seen that the rabbis had firm biblical grounds for their belief in and references to angelic beings. We have seen as well that, although the rabbis did not make use of apocryphal and pseudepigraphical references, the general angelic tradition underwent some elaboration in the post-biblical period. A number of characteristics and capabilities of angels that the rabbis inherited are now worth repeating. First, angels are primarily messengers, but whether or not they possess proper names or personalities of their own, they do not act independently of God. Second, whether (as in most biblical literature) angels are interchangeable or whether they have permanent tasks to perform, they can serve protective functions or adversarial and destructive functions. Angels offer information, and even (in later literature) interpret visions and reveal secrets.

It is now time to turn from angels in general to angels and related beings who serve to personify death in rabbinic literature. We begin with the personification of death that is by far the most prominent one in the aggada: the Angel of Death.

THE ANGEL OF DEATH

The Angel of Death receives scant mention in early rabbinic (tannaitic) literature.[15] Where the Angel appears, he is not actually described. It is in the literature dating from the later talmudic (that is, amoraic) period that the Angel and his actions are described with meaningful detail. This is especially so in literature of the Babylonian amoraim, whose Eastern, Persian-influenced world is in general well populated with supernatural spirits and with advice on how to deal with them.

Thus we do well to begin with this frightening portrait found in the Babylonian Talmud (Avoda Zara 20b):

> It is said of the Angel of Death that he is all full of eyes. When a sick person is about to depart, he stands above his head-pillow with his sword drawn out in his hand and a drop of gall hanging on it. As the sick person beholds it, he trembles and opens his mouth [in fright]; he then drops it into his mouth. It is from this that he dies, from this that [the corpse] deteriorates, from this that his face becomes greenish.. . .

This description of the Angel of Death is unusually detailed and vivid. On the surface it portrays an image of horror. One could easily infer that it represents an attempt to present the Angel of Death as nothing better than a

monster, and death itself as a base and meaningless experience. Here the dying person appears to be a hapless victim, and the manner of his death (mouth agape from fear) seems bereft of all dignity.

It is indeed true that the Angel, "all full of eyes" as he is and brandishing a weapon at his victim, inspires us with a degree of repulsion that can not and should not be explained away. Whether or not it was consciously intended by the creators of the aggada, a major psychological function of the Angel and his like is to absorb our sense of repulsion in the face of death so that our negative feelings about mortality will not be directed at a higher power. But it must be noted that no mention is made in our example of an inner malevolence on the part of the Angel.[16] To put the case in plain language, it would seem that he is only doing his job. He is truly an angel, a messenger of God whose job is to bring a life to an end. He does not make sport of the mortal with whom he deals or draw out the agony more than necessary.

We have noted that biblical angels who execute tasks associated with death or with threat of death can be found to carry swords in their hands. The Angel of Death in the aggada continues this biblical tradition, as our example shows. Another vivid image of the sword-bearing Angel of Death can be found in Berachot 51a, where the Angel reveals to one of the sages that one should act with caution when one sees a procession of professional mourning women pass by on

their way back from a place of death, because the Angel precedes them leaping with his sword in his hand.[17]

The Angel is not limited to swords. In Ketuvot 77b, in a story with amusing folktale qualities, Rabbi Joshua b. Levi attempts to end the rule of death by stealing the Angel's weapon, which in this case is a knife. In Moed Katan 28a the Angel appears to a mortal brandishing a "fiery rod".

One might well wonder about the purpose of the "drop of gall" as an agent of death for one who is so well armed. This is not so surprising an image if one leaves the world of metaphor and enters the realm of practical realities. The sages, after all, did not live in a time when causes of death were well understood, apart from death resulting from acts of violence or brutal accident. While the Angel of Death for them serves as a general image of death as a whole, it is also apparent that the Angel offers a convenient explanation for the deaths of those who did not die of causes visible to the eye.

In Avoda Zara 20b, shortly after the Angel is described with his sword and drop of gall, the description is subjected to analysis. The focus of attention is the drop of gall and why it is the Angel's instrument of death:

> The Master said: "From it he dies." Shall we say, then, that this differs from the statement of Samuel's father? For Samuel's father said: The Angel of Death told me, "Were it not for the regard I have for people's honor, I could cut the throat

> of men as widely as that of an animal [is cut]"!--Possibly, it is that very drop that cuts into the organs of the throat. [The above-mentioned statement,] "From it the corpse deteriorates" supports the view of R. Hanina b. Kahana. For R. Hanina b. Kahana stated: It had been said in the school of Rab that if one wants to keep a corpse from deteriorating, he should turn it on its face.. . .

Here the tradition of the drop of gall is contrasted with another tradition that indicates that in fact the Angel uses his sword or knife to effect death, albeit by making an imperceptibly small incision.[18] The traditions are reconciled with the speculation that the drop itself "cuts" the throat. Clearly, the problem originates from the fact that in general one can not see with one's eyes why exactly a given person has died. A poison drop comes closer, at least, to pinpointing the actual method used by the Angel. In an age that long preceded the era of microbiology, the drop of gall is as good an explanation as any for the process of bodily decay, and thus a corroborating tradition is presented for the theory that the drop of gall effects decay.

Speculation does not shy away from the gruesome. Elsewhere in the Talmud (Arakin 7a) the "drop" is proposed as the explanation for why, when a pregnant mother dies, the fetus within her dies also:

> . . .because the child's life is very frail, the

> "drop" [of poison] from the Angel of Death enters and destroys its vital organs. . .

But in other instances it is clear from context that the Angel of Death serves as the personification of death by natural causes. The Angel is mentioned, for example, in the context of discussions about disease. Thus fever is mentioned as "a forerunner of the Angel of Death",[19] as is a "berry-like excrescence".[20] We also find that improper choices in one's diet can be an invitation for a visit from the angel, so that, in one doctor's case, the sight of a pumpkin in his patient's house prompted him to say: "The Angel of Death is in that house, yet I am to cure him!"[21]

It is interesting to note that the Angel of Death is also mentioned as the agent that takes away the life of animals. Thus, in a legal discussion on responsibility for the care of an animal, the animal's possible death is expressed in terms of the Angel taking its life away.[22]

The Angel of Death is also said to wear a cloak as part of his paraphernalia.[23] This is presumably due to the fact that he is associated with darkness.[24] He is also able to assume disguises when to do so serves his purposes.[25] It is evident that he has wings, given the fact that he is reported to fly to earth.[26]

In the summary of the background of aggadic angelology given above, it was stated that angels began in some cases to take on definite personalities of their own as the angelic literary tradition unfolded. It can be said that the Angel

of Death of the aggada often appears to be little more than a biblical type of angel, with little personality of his own or individual initiative. But at the same time the Angel can be found in various passages of aggada as a being with feelings and, at the very least, traces of personality traits. These traits are by no means consistent from passage to passage.

Here we might make note of three character traits associated with the Angel of Death throughout the history of his appearance in Jewish literature and folklore identified by Dov Noy. With the first type, the Angel is a kind of buffoon, a being who can be defeated by the craftiness or righteousness of mortals. With the second, the Angel is cruel and all-powerful. He cannot be avoided or defeated by mortals. With the third and perhaps most interesting character type, the Angel is capable of showing compassion and can be willing to make concessions.[27]

Dov Noy includes in his summary medieval legends about the Angel that hold no place in the present discussion. Nevertheless, the three character traits that he mentions can be identified within the tradition of the aggada. We find an Angel that can be delayed or fooled, an Angel who is cruel and undauntable, and an Angel who shows traces of compassion and respect for mortals, especially those mortals who are learned and righteous.

The Angel reveals his character, as one would expect, in the context of interacting with others. In general, this means encounters with humans. The subject of the Angel and

his encounters with mortals will be dealt with in the next chapter. For the moment, a few examples of how the Angel reveals his personality will suffice to make our point.

The example of Joshua b. Levi stealing the knife of the Angel of Death was mentioned earlier in this chapter.[28] In this tale, the Angel is tricked by the sage into handing over to the latter his death-effecting knife. The Angel is made a fool of, and only the intervention of God Himself causes Joshua to return the weapon. As we will see presently, a number of heroes and sages manage to delay or fool the Angel in one way or another.

Certainly the example offered earlier in this chapter of the Angel who leaps with his sword before the procession of wailing women provides a portrait of a fearsome and merciless Angel of Death. When the Angel appears in this merciless guise, he is capable of gleefully malevolent trickery. Thus the story is related of how Solomon is cruelly tricked by the Angel into yielding the lives of his trusted and valued scribes while the king is engaged in the very act of trying to save them from the Angel.[30]

A number of instances can be found in the aggada in which the Angel is, if not exactly benevolent, at the very least respectful of the honor and needs of mortals. Thus when R. Sheshet sees that the Angel has come for him in the midst of the marketplace, he insists that the latter accompany him home so that he can die in an honorable place.[31] The Angel is not said to object to the sage's

wishes. R. Ashi asks the Angel for an extra thirty days in which he can improve his studies before meeting his death, and the Angel accedes to his request. When at the end of thirty days Ashi asks for yet another extension of his time on earth, the Angel refuses his request, but only by politely pointing out that a new sage is waiting to take Ashi's place on earth and therefore room must be made for him.[32]

The aggadah yields speculations about the origins of the Angel of Death and, by extension, how he fits into the general scheme of the universe. These remarks must be saved for the fourth chapter, where they can be dealt with in context of the complex subject of death and cosmology. Suffice it to say for now that the aggadists do assign a regular place in Creation to the Angel of Death, but that place is qualified in a very significant manner.

As has already been stated, the Angel of Death represents the most important and most common personification of death in the aggada. As the heir of both biblical and post-biblical angelologies, the aggadic Angel of Death in the pious hands of the sages is above all things a messenger of God's will. Nevertheless, the fearsome character of the Angel's mission from a mortal perspective is reflected in many portrayals of the Angel. The various aspects of the Angel's appearance and behavior as reflected in aggadic representations of him hint at the many possible human reactions to death and dying.

The Angel of Death does not hold a monopoly upon

rabbinic personifications of death. It is now time to review other manifestations of such personifications in the aggada.

OTHER PERSONIFICATIONS OF DEATH

As an adjunct to the preceding section of this chapter it is interesting to note that the Angel of Death is reported to have coworkers in certain passages of aggada. Thus we find in the Talmud (Hagiga 4b) an instance of the Angel sending a "messenger" to take a life, with a darkly amusing result:

> . . .Is there anyone who passes away before one's [allotted] time?--Yes, as in the story [heard] by R. Bibi b. Abaye, who was frequently visited by the Angel of Death. [Once] the latter said to his messenger: Go, bring me Miriam, the women's hairdresser! He went and brought him Miriam, the children's nurse. Said he to him: I told thee Miriam, the women's hairdresser. He answered: If so, I will take her back. Said he to him: Since thou hast brought her, let her be added.. . .[33]

One can speculate as to whether, in the opinion of certain aggadists, the Angel sent his messengers to retrieve the souls of ordinary mortals of low rank, reserving personal visits only for those of renown.

But we find as well that, once the Angel or his messenger has completed the task of bringing an earthly life

to its end, another angelic worker for death is ready to go into action. This is the Angel Dumah, whose name means "silence".[34] It is Dumah's job to take charge of the dead once they have been brought into the next world. Shortly after the exchange between the Angel and his messenger quoted above, the Angel tells his messenger that, in the case of a mortal brought to him before his or her time, he has charge over the soul until the allotted time comes, when he hands the soul over to Dumah. Elsewhere in a midrashic passage we are given a detailed description of how Dumah and the Angel of Death work together:

> And when the time comes for a man to depart from the world, and the Angel of Death enters to take up his soul, the soul has the semblance of a kind of reed. . .The Angel lays hold of the upper part of the reed and pulls it. . . Dumah takes the spirit and carries it to the courtyard of the dead, to join the other spirits. . .[35]

The Angel of Death draws out the soul from the body, and at that point Dumah takes over.

Only the wicked and the "intermediate" souls are handed over to Dumah, but not the righteous.[36] Dumah keeps charge over the spirits in a courtyard surrounded by a wall, letting them out once each day at twilight so that they can eat and drink from a brook.[37] Wicked souls are allowed to rest from their torments on the Sabbath, but at the end of the Sabbath day it is Dumah's job to take them back to their

torments.[38] The speculation is offered that Dumah also has the job of announcing each impending arrival not long before death is to take place.[39]

In the Talmud (Baba Batra 16a) can be found the following parallel drawn by Resh Lakish: "Satan, the evil inclination, and the Angel of Death are all one." While there may be a certain degree of hyperbole in this statement (which nevertheless finds support through prooftexts), the fact remains that there is a strong connection between the Angel of Death, Satan, and sinfulness (as represented by יצר הרע, the evil prompter). Satan, especially in the guise of the virtually identical figure Samael, can be found to play the role of taker of souls into death. The evil inclination is not in itself a full-fledged personification either of death or sin, but it is an image tied to the Angel of Death and his counterparts on a cosmological level (and this special relationship will be discussed in subsequent chapters).

Satan is the "adversary", the angel who accuses humanity and acts as the tempter of mortals. On the same page of the Talmud in which we find Resh Lakish's equation between death and sin we find this interesting statement: "[Satan] comes down to earth and seduces, then ascends to heaven and awakens wrath; permission is granted to him and he takes away the soul." Here it is Satan who does the work usually associated with the Angel of Death. Like Resh Lakish, the anonymous sage who made this last statement seemed to completely identify Satan with the Angel of Death.[40]

The process works the other way as well: the Angel of Death, through acting as "accuser", becomes identified with Satan. In the midrash[41] we find two parallel sets of situations in which women and men respectively are put in danger of death due to negligent behavior. Women who are not careful with their religious duties risk death during childbirth. Men who needlessly place themselves in danger also risk death. In the former case, the Angel of Death acts as woman's accuser, and in the latter case Satan acts as the accuser of men. The Angel of Death and Satan are presented in a parallel manner. Each acts as adversary to mortals, and each acts as the emissary of death.

Samael is a more ferocious version of "the adversary". His name tends to take the place of that of Satan from the amoraic period onward, though the name appears earlier in extra-biblical apocalyptic works.[42] Especially in later aggadic passages, Samael is identified as the Angel of Death.[43]

Thus Samael cruelly brings accusations against the entire nation of Israel as the Hebrews cross the Red Sea.[44] In a midrash on the story of Judah and Tamar, Samael acts with pure viciousness in stealing Tamar's "proofs" of her righteousness, the staff and seal that she took in pledge from her father-in-law Judah.[45] But in the midrash known as the "death of Moses", Samael acts as the Angel of Death and displays a level of glee far beyond what is required for him to do his job when he is given the chance to take Moses'

soul. He is eager to end the life of the greatest of prophets and to cause grief to the Angel Michael, the defender of Israel:

> There is no one among the accusing angels so wicked as Samael. . .He was like a man who has been invited to a wedding feast, and looks forward to it, saying: "When will their rejoicing come that I may share therein." So, Samael the wicked was waiting for Moses' soul saying: "When will Michael be weeping and I be filling my mouth with laughter?"[46]

Because Samael is an angel and not an independent force of evil, he must wait with complete passivity until he is assigned his task by heaven. Nevertheless, he presents a truly frightening personification of death as, wielding a sword as does the Angel of Death, he goes for the prophet's soul.[47] Here Samael and the Angel of Death are synonymous. Though death is inevitable for even the greatest of prophets, through Samael the rabbis have allowed a clear note of fear to enter their midrashic commentary on the mortality of even the most favored of human beings.

We must finally add two categories of personifiers of death to our account. These are destructive angels and demons. As a whole, such beings provide personification of death in general, especially the death of large numbers of people all at once or over time. While the evil angels and demons are all under God's ultimate command, they are

permitted certain times and places to kill whomever is unfortunate enough to stray into their path. Since an element of chance thus seems to be added to time of death, the manner of operation of these creatures seems to contradict the idea so prominent elsewhere in aggada that there is a set time for every person to die.

Demons are not consistently presented or well defined in the literature of the sages. As a whole they are very much the province of the Babylonian Talmud, a product of the demon-filled world east of the Holy Land. In this world, each person is pursued by thousands of demons. They are to be found in ordinary places and things, such as trees, or food and drink. They sometimes must be dealt with through use of amulets or incantations.[48] Claiming tannaitic authority, the amoraim discuss at great length the belief that consuming drinks in pairs or multiples of two, as well as confronting objects found in pairs or multiples of two, exposes one to danger because such activities or things are under the authority of "Ashmedai the king of the demons." Not incidentally, the information that Ashmedai is the cause of such danger is revealed to a sage by a demon, one bearing the curiously mortal name of Joseph.[49]

Destructive angels at times seem scarcely differentiated from demons. Thus we find that the queen of the demons leads thousands of destructive angels during certain nights of the week to wreak harm.[50] A certain sage designates several incorrect acts that can possibly be performed during one's

morning preparations as constituting invitations to receive harm from destructive beings. These latter are described as being demons according to some authorities, or destructive angels according to others.[51] As is the case between Satan and Samael, the distinction is not in the least clear. One might wonder whether in fact the rabbis wished to see the dark realm of demonology, with its clear dualistic overtones, become absorbed by the safer (though problematic) realm of the angels.

The destructive angels are also closely allied in their function with Satan-Samael. We are given an amusing hint of this in the fact that neither Satan nor the destructive angels have knee joints and thus are not able to sit down (a characteristic that is ultimately derived from Job 1:7 where Satan is described as going to and fro about the world).[52] Like Satan, the destructive angels are attracted to the wicked and cleave to them. They are assigned to accompany the wicked (to cause harm rather than to guard) both during the lifetime of the wicked and after death.[53]

The destructive angels play a major role in a series of midrashim in various versions surrounding Moses' ascent to receive the Torah and Israel's subsequent sin of the Golden Calf (a primal sin in the view of the rabbis). In these stories the destructive angels are often not specified as such, but rather some of the heavenly angels play a threatening role. Such angels, whether specified as destructive angels or not, play the role of threatening to

destroy Moses rather than allow him to accept the Torah (which they jealously guard), and then threaten to destroy all of Israel (thus personifying God's tremendous wrath) when the latter commits the terrible sin of idolatry with the Golden Calf. In the versions that specify destructive angels, some of these angels are given proper names (thus magnifying their importance). These interesting embellishments of the biblical story of Sinai will be examined in some detail in the following chapter.

In this chapter we have seen that the creators of the aggada often resorted to personification in order to express their ideas and their feelings related to death and the fear of death. The most important form of personification of death found in aggadic literature is represented by the Angel of Death with, on occasion, his coworkers. The tempters and accusers Satan and Samael (who are virtually the same figure) also serve as personifiers of death, as do the destructive angels and demons.

At this introductory stage of our discussion some preliminary speculations might be ventured regarding the purpose of such personifications. Do the sages seem to believe in the literal existence of such figures as the Angel of Death? Furthermore, it can not be said that the aggadists <u>always</u> chose to use personifications in the course of their discussions about death and mourning. On the contrary, they frequently did not. Why, then, did they bother to introduce

such curious and often problematic figures into their commentaries about such a sober subject?

We can never know with any certainty how literally the sages believed in the existence of such figures, or if some sages entertained such beliefs much more strongly than others. The fact remains however that, as we have seen, the Angel of Death sometimes receives mention in a matter-of-fact manner in discussions about disease and other death-related matters. Such instances give one the impression that the existence of the Angel of Death is an established fact for the aggadists. Furthermore, as we have seen and will soon see in greater detail, various personifications of death are mentioned as having encounters with the greatest heroes of biblical and rabbinic Judaism. It is a bit hard to believe that the aggadists would have associated with such venerated ancestral figures beings that were regarded as nothing but pure fancy. We have also seen that personifications of death in the aggada bear close relation to the question of evil in human behavior and are made mention of in the course of discussions about danger and how to avoid it. Such serious subjects also do not seem to permit the use of supernatural figures that are thought to be entirely creatures of the imagination.

Clearly, personifications of death have great literary value as well. They bring to life the various human reactions to the thought of death: fear, anger, hope and bittersweet humor. We find fear encapsulated in images of a

hideous, eye-covered Angel or a brandished sword. We find anger both in the rage of Samael and in mortal efforts to defeat death, and we find humor and even hope when such efforts to defeat death partially succeed, when even death seems, so to speak, to be human.

Yet perhaps the most important observation that can be made is that virtually all personifications of death are drawn from the realm of angels (and, as we have seen, even demons do not appear to always be clearly differentiated from this realm). The sages relied squarely on the biblical view of angels as mere messengers of God. Though personifications of death in the aggada often do display personality traits and a certain degree of independence in action, they are in the end only the representatives of a higher will. As such, they both serve to draw attention away from God during painful discussions about mortality and, at the same time, let it be known that death is not an independent force in the universe. It is, on the contrary, an element in God's plan. From this last tremendous article of faith, the sages seem to be telling us, great comfort should be taken.

Chapter 2

Death Confronts Humanity

Personifications of death do not operate in a void. They exist in the aggada only by virtue of the fact that there exist beings in the universe that must die. Mortality means nothing without mortals. The next step, therefore, in our discussion about figures that personify death is to examine how those figures behave in their confrontation with human beings, the mortals with whom the sages were chiefly concerned.

In the first chapter we noted that death and humanity confront each other in a variety of ways. Mortals can be seen to play tricks on death, sometimes finding a measure of success in their attempts. Death in turn can play tricks on mortals. Death can appear as a fearsome and unyielding force. On the other hand, death can reveal a certain measure of deference for the people he is sent to take.

It is a curious fact that through the medium of the aggada the sages tell us quite frankly that even the most righteous of humanity fear death and do not wish to die. This psychological reality obtains even though it is the righteous more than all others who hold a strong faith in the existence of a much better world that waits for them beyond the grave and at the end of days. As we shall see presently,

even Moses protests most vigorously against his own demise, though he has been told by God Himself that the end of his days has come. Life on earth with all its pain and imperfections is thus given great value by the sages, and the fear of the strange and new felt by even the most faithful is permitted a voice.

FEAR OF DEATH

Personification of death is a most convenient tool for dramatizing the fear of death that even the greatest of mortals experience. We have already seen the Angel of Death presented as a visually fearsome figure who causes so much terror to the mortal whose time has come that the latter's mouth gapes open, allowing the fatal drop of gall to enter.[1] Clearly the aggadists did not in the least wish to whitewash the emotional meaning of death for humanity. People face death with fear and trembling. The aggada bears strong witness to this fact.

Commenting on Ecclesiastes 3:11, "also he hath set the world in their heart", R. Benjamin in R. Levi's name says that God set a love of the world in humanity's heart, and R. Nathan adds that God set the dread of the Angel of Death in humanity's heart.[2] Fear of death is the natural outcome of love of this world. Death is relentless though one might go to bizarre lengths to avoid it. "Even if a man were willing to put his tongue in the hinge of the door as the price of being saved from death, he would not be saved."[3]

In the Talmud (Moed Katan 28a) we find this poignant tale of R. Nahman's fear of the Angel of Death:

> Raba, while seated at the bedside of R. Nahman, saw him sinking into slumber [death]. Said he to Raba: "Tell him, sir, not to torment me." Said Raba: "Are you, Sir, not a man esteemed?" Said [R. Nahman] to him, "Who is esteemed, who is regarded, who is distinguished [before the Angel of Death]?" Said [Raba] to him: "Do, Sir, show yourself to me [in a dream]." He did show himself. [Raba] asked him: "Did you suffer pain, Sir?" He replied: "As [little as] the taking of a hair from the milk; and were the Holy One, blessed be He, to say to me, Go back to that world as you were, I wish it not, for the dread thereof [of death] is great."

So enormous is the fear of death, it would seem, that life is not even worth returning to if such fear must again be experienced. It is interesting to note that on the same page of the Talmud immediately preceding the story quoted above is the account of Raba's death. Raba, though he had been given the communication from the other world from R. Nahman that proved that the fear of death is far worse than death itself, now tearfully begs his brother to tell the Angel of Death not to give him torment. It would seem that such fear is beyond the control of mortal humanity. Fear of the Angel of Death can even have physical consequences for, as we are told elsewhere in the Talmud, it can cause a woman to have a menstrual discharge.[4]

A most moving expression of the desire to hang onto life at all costs can be found in the "death of Moses" midrash, an aggadic expansion of the biblical account of Moses' death to which reference will be made a number of times during the course of this thesis. The following excerpt dramatically expresses Moses' desire to keep on living as he begs God to be allowed to cross into the Land of Israel, thus putting off for the future the day of his death:

> Said Moses to God: "Master of the Universe, if Thou wilt not bring me into Eretz Israel, let me become like the beasts of the field that eat grass and drink water and live and enjoy the world; likewise let my soul be as one of them. . .if not, let me become in this world like the bird that flies about in every direction, and gathers its food daily, and returns to its nest towards evening; let my soul likewise become like one of them.". . .[5]

We thus find that the greatest prophet who ever lived is willing to become a humble animal rather than face his death!

OUTWITTING DEATH

The fear of death and the powerful impulse to remain in this world are portrayed in a lighter and more humorous fashion in a number of stories that relate attempts by mortals to outwit death. We have already mentioned Dov Noy's

thesis that the Angel of Death is variously known in Jewish legend as a buffoon who can be tricked, as a deferential being who can feel some degree of compassion, or as an unyielding and frightful master who is not to be defeated or delayed.[6] All three of these aspects of the Angel of Death can be discerned in the aggada, and other personifications of death such as Samael add weight to the side of fearfulness. In stories in which the Angel of Death is in some manner outwitted, or in turn outwits the mortal who has tried to avoid his hour of doom, it is certainly the lighter side of the Angel and of the human predicament of mortality that is being addressed.

Attempts by mortals to outwit the Angel of Death depend upon the status of the former as righteous individuals. The methods used to defeat death are simply various forms of correct Jewish practice, especially study of the Law.[7] A number of parallel stories reveal the fact that the Angel of Death can not approach a righteous scholar who is engaged in the act of study. The Talmud (Shabbat 30a-b) relates the story that God allowed King David to know that the latter's death would occur during the Sabbath. David takes advantage of the prediction revealed to him by studying throughout each and every Sabbath day:

> Now, every Sabbath he would sit and study all day. On the day that his soul was to be at rest, the Angel of Death stood before him but could not prevail against him, because learning did not cease

> from his mouth. "What shall I do to him?" said he. Now, there was a garden before his house; so the Angel of Death went, ascended and soughed in the trees. He [David] went out to see: as he was ascending the ladder, it broke under him. Thereupon he became silent [from his studies] and his soul had repose.. . .[8]

David's darkly amusing attempt to avoid death through repeating his studies was ultimately defeated by a comical ruse perpetrated in turn by the Angel. The Angel is somewhat of a buffoon as he asks himself in a human manner: "What shall I do to him?" while standing helplessly before the mortal king. Nevertheless, David is no match for him. The Angel, after all, is backed by Divine decree of death. He is merely God's emissary.

In a parallel story involving a rabbinic rather than biblical hero, R. Hisda can not be approached by the Angel (for an unspecified period of time) due to the sage's habit of constantly studying. The Angel diverts Hisda's attention by sitting on the cedar tree of the house of study so that the tree makes a cracking sound. He then is able to complete his mission.[9] Rabbah b. Nahmani can not be approached by the Angel of Death when the Heavenly Academy sends for him because he is studying without interruption (although b. Nahmani is not consciously attempting to outwit the Angel, of whom he is blissfully unaware). A chance wind blowing through the bushes diverts his attention and gives the Angel his chance.[10]

The Angel of Death truly shows himself a trickster when he uses a disguise to approach R. Hiyya, whose studies had made him inaccessible. Appearing at the sage's door in the guise of a beggar, the Angel shames Hiyya into coming forward to give alms, whereupon the Angel is able to take his soul.[11] Here it can perhaps be said that the Angel reveals a sense of humor. Outwitted by Torah study, he in turn outwits the outwitter through feigning an opportunity for the sage to fulfill another important commandment by giving charity to the poor.

In at least one instance the Angel of Death pretends to be more defeatable than he really is in order to fool a mortal. This occurs in the story of Solomon and the Angel of Death alluded to above in the first chapter.[12] The King, who is at ease with supernatural beings, observes that the Angel is "sad". The Angel explains that the decree was issued from heaven that the king's two beloved scribes were scheduled to die. Solomon attempts to defeat the decree by sending the scribes by supernatural means to Luz, a city in which the Angel of Death holds no sway.[13] But the scribes die before they can actually enter the city. The Angel, now appearing cheerful, explains to Solomon that the pair had all along been decreed to die just outside of Luz. Solomon, who never would have brought the men to that place had he not been informed by the Angel of their impending death, finds that he has been tricked into becoming death's accomplice. The Angel takes a very human delight in the manner in which he has fulfilled his charge.

Other tales told in a humorous vein reveal a respectful and deferential Angel of Death. The Angel appears to R. Eliezer while the latter, who is of priestly descent, is eating of the holy priestly offering. When Eliezer points out that he should not be interrupted while engaged in a holy act, the Angel for the time being leaves him alone.[14] R. Sheshet meets with the Angel in the marketplace and, while he does not attempt to deny the Angel his mission, insists that the Angel accompany him home so that he can die in a more dignified place.[15] R. Ashi asks the Angel for an extra thirty days in which he can improve his studies, and the Angel without argument grants his request. When at the end of that time the sage asks for yet another thirty days, the Angel respectfully points out that room must be made in the world for the sage's successor.[16]

It would be fitting to end this portion of our discussion with a comic tale of outwitting death with a spectacular twist. In the story of R. Joshua b. Levi and the Angel (also alluded to above in chapter one), the rabbi almost renders the messenger of death powerless when the latter comes for him. As we read:

> When he was about to die the Angel of Death was instructed, "Go and carry out his wish." When he came and showed himself to him the latter said, "Show me my place [in Paradise]".--"Very well," he replied. "Give me your knife," the other demanded, "[since, otherwise], you may frighten me on the

> way." He gave it to him. On arriving there he lifted him up and showed him [his place]. The latter jumped and dropped on the other side [of the wall]. He seized him by the corner of his cloak; but the other exclaimed, "I swear that I will not go back.". . .

In the end the Angel must helplessly beg for the return of his knife. Only the intervention of God Himself causes the great rabbi to return death's weapon and thus bring mortality back to the world.[17]

FIGHTING WITH DEATH

We have seen above that the aggada through personification of death boldly illustrates the human fear of death and opens the door wide for laughter at the human predicament of mortality. The aggadists might well have gone no further with their creative expressions of humankind's relationship with death, in consideration of the truth that death is ordained by God and that all human efforts to avoid death ultimately must fail miserably. Yet a beautiful aspect of this literature is that the rage and despair associated with the human awareness of mortality are allowed full expression.

Thus the aggada is also graced with tales of bold human struggles with death, of warfare with the messengers of death and destruction when the presence of the latter seems an

obscenity too great to bear. Such tales, containing as they do a certain degree of human victory, are no doubt in part a fulfillment of childish fantasies. Nevertheless, they also advocate the value of human dignity in the face of the end of life, affirming that, at the very least, one might "not go silent into that good night."

Some instances of the human battle with death as presented in personified form in the aggada do not involve overt physical struggle, but rather acts of prayer or even limitations placed by learned sages upon death and destruction in the manner of a legal ruling. The possible efficacy of prayer against death is powerfully illustrated in the account of the death of R. Judah the Prince ("Rabbi") found in the Talmud (Ketuvot 104a). Although the account contains no personification of death, its poignant portrayal of both the struggle to defy death and the effort to accept the inevitable make it worth repeating:

> On the day when Rabbi died the rabbis decreed a public fast and offered prayers for heavenly mercy. They, furthermore, announced that whoever said that Rabbi was dead would be stabbed with a sword. Rabbi's handmaid ascended the roof and prayed: "The immortals desire Rabbi [to join them] and the mortals desire Rabbi [to remain with them]; may it be the will [of God] that the mortals may overpower the immortals." When, however, she saw how often he resorted to the privy, painfully taking off his

> tefillin and putting them on again, she prayed: "May it be the will [of the Almighty] that the immortals may overpower the mortals." As the rabbis incessantly continued their prayers for [heavenly] mercy she took up a jar and threw it down from the roof to the ground. [For a moment] they ceased praying and the soul of Rabbi departed to its eternal rest.

The followers of R. Judah ferociously battle death through prayer, but do not inquire about the actual welfare of the great rabbi whom they admire. Only the truthful insight of a simple servant woman, who herself has to undergo an inward struggle, can break through to an acceptance of the inevitable.

Nevertheless, the fight against death through prayer can meet with lasting success in the appropriate situation. In the midrash two versions exist of the fascinating encounter of R. Simeon b. Halafta with the Angel of Death. The shorter version of the two stories (Deuteronomy Rabba 9:1) forms part of a commentary on Deuteronomy 31:14, "And the Lord said unto Moses: Behold, thy days approach that thou must die." God grants the righteous additional life and finds it hard to decree death upon them, and thus God informed Moses of his impending death in a circumspect way.

To help illustrate the theme of the righteous and God's decree of death, the story is told of R. Simeon b. Halafta, who attends a circumcision ceremony and witnesses the proud

father's announcement at the feast afterwards that he will store up some of the wine drunk that evening for his son's wedding day. At midnight R. Simeon undertakes his journey home and meets the Angel of Death on the way:

> On the road, the Angel of Death met him and R. Simeon noticed that he was looking strange. He asked him: "Who are you?" And the latter answered: "I am God's messenger." He asked him: "Why are you looking strange?" He replied: "On account of the talk of human beings who say: "This and that we will do," and yet not one of them knows when he will be summoned to die. The man in whose feast you have shared, and who said to you: "Of this wine I will store away a portion for my son's wedding feast," lo, his [child's] time has come, he is to be snatched away after thirty days.". . .

The subject of the child is not taken up by the sage, who instead rather selfishly inquires about the time of his own end, and is given the agreeable intelligence from the Angel that the righteous are granted increased years by God, who is reluctant to decree death upon them.

Although the ultimate homiletical aim of the tale is clear enough, it is disturbingly vague and disjointed in its details. In a sense, it is the Angel who plays the role of most sympathetic character. He looks "strange" (מזוהם) because he is apparently disturbed about the naivete of mortals who blithely predict the future, as does the father

of the circumcised babe, without taking death into account. As he himself says, he is "God's messenger", the middleman in a most unpleasant transaction for which those on the receiving end obstinately refuse to be prepared. One might well impute feelings of grief to the Angel in response to his mission to take the life of an infant. Strangely, the righteous sage does not even take up the question of the Angel's terrible upcoming mission and focuses instead upon his own concerns.

But the story returns in a longer version (Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:2,§3) told in a very different context as a commentary upon Ecclesiastes 3:2, "a time to be born, and a time to die." The question is raised: Does this verse mean that one's day of death is determined at birth and one's time can only be subtracted from (due to sin) but not added to, or are extra days beyond the allotted time rewarded to the righteous? R. Simeon's story is used to support the latter opinion.

This version of the story (told in the vernacular, Aramaic, rather than the Hebrew of the former version) also serves to fill in the gaps left by the Deuteronomy Rabbah version. Here too R. Simeon attends the circumcision, but the father's hope that he will serve some of the celebratory wine at his son's wedding is offered in the form of a sober prayer, to which Simeon and the other guests respond in formal fashion: "As you have brought him into the covenant [of Abraham], so may you bring him to Torah and the marriage-canopy."

Here too, Simeon meets the Angel on his way home at night. The latter's conversation is more expansive than the Deuteronomy Rabbah version. Rather than looking "strange", the Angel now appears "upset" (ע'ב):

> The Rabbi asked him, "Why do you look so upset?" He answered, "Because of the hard things I hear from human beings every day." "What are they?" the Rabbi inquired. He replied, "this child whom you circumcised today was fated to be taken away from here by me when he is thirty days old; but his father gave you wine and said, "Drink this good wine, for I trust in the Lord of heaven that He will grant me to offer you drink at his wedding feast." I heard this and grieved, because your prayer annuls the decree against him.". . .

Here we see a very different Angel! This Angel, far from showing compassion, is "upset" because he will not be allowed to complete his task. As in version number one, the rabbi asks to know when his own end will come, and the Angel tells him that God adds days to the life of the righteous, so that death, as it were, has no "jurisdiction" over them. Simeon and his colleagues then pray on the child's behalf, and the child lives. Though Simeon is quite literally on speaking terms with the Angel, he stands squarely in the latter's path when death appears unjust and unbearable.

Here we see that two different versions of one story in fact personify death in two separate ways. In the first

version death is sorrowful and compassionate. In the second, death is spiteful and self-seeking. And yet it is in the story in which the spiteful Angel appears that the sage is willing to fight, and the innocent babe is permitted to live. The personification of death as a personality who willingly opposes humanity does more than serve to articulate human fears. It permits a release of human anger and stimulates an assertion of human dignity.

Death and destruction can be limited simply by the declaration of the righteous scholar. Thus we find that on separate occasions the queen of demons and her tremendous band of destroying angels are met with R. Hanina and R. Abaye respectively. Each and every destructive being had already been given heavenly permission to destroy, and they had no limitations on when and where they could appear. Hanina and Abaye, due to the great influence they have with heaven, are able to order the destroyers to appear in less populated places and only on the nights of Wednesday and the Sabbath.[18]

Perhaps the most dramatic aggadic instances of a mortal's fight with death center around the midrashic expansions of the biblical accounts of two events in the life of the prophet Moses: the incident of the Golden Calf (Exodus 32) and the story of the prophet's own death (Deuteronomy from 31:14 onward). In the case of the Golden Calf, the already dramatic biblical account of Moses' ultimately successful attempt to placate the wrath of God becomes in the

midrash a battle with the most fearsome angels of destruction. The biblical account of the prophet's death, filled with pathos because Moses has been denied entry into the Land of Israel and is only allowed to view it from afar, becomes in the midrash a titanic struggle with the Angel of Death or with Samael, containing all the elements of humor, pathos, subtle trickery and violent struggle available at the aggadists' command.

The rabbis regard the sin of the Golden Calf as perhaps the most horrendous episode in the history of the people Israel, and as such they make use of personification to amplify the Divine wrath that results when the people violate the fundamental commandment against idolatry. Even on the biblical level of the account, Moses has his hands full when he must use all the eloquence at his command to plead with God not to wipe out the Israelites entirely.[19] In the midrash, Moses' struggle becomes an actual battle with the wrathful angels who are released by the sin to do their terrible work upon Israel.

The personification of the forces of wrath in this episode is based upon Deuteronomy 9:19, where Moses in his summary of the events first recounted in Exodus describes his own fear: "For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure, with which the Lord was angry against you to destroy you." The "anger" (אַף) and "hot displeasure" (חֵמָה) are taken by the aggadist to be the names of principal angels of destruction, Af and Hemah. Two other names of destroying angels are derived from the verse: Kezef (from "was

angry", קצף) and Hashmed (from "to destroy", השמיד). A fifth, Hashhet (השחית , "destruction") is derived from Psalm 106:23 where the sin of the Calf and its consequences is referred to.[20]

Even in a relatively old midrashic source the fear expressed by Moses is blamed entirely on Israel: ". . . before Israel sinned, kings of heavenly kings--even Michael, even Gabriel--could not gaze upon the face of Moses. But after Israel sinned, Moses could not gaze even upon the faces of angels of lowly rank: 'For I,' said Moses, 'was in dread of [the angels of] anger and hot displeasure.. . .'"[21] Israel's sin has the power of weakening the great prophet's will to confront these supernatural beings. As it is stated in a later source, the power of sin itself causes Moses to fear those whom earlier he despised: "Come and see how great [is the harmful power of] sin. But yesterday he despised them, and now he fears them. . .".[22]

Nevertheless, Moses rises to the occasion. Various versions of the story can be found in the midrash Exodus Rabbah, introduced through a variety of scriptural pretexts. In the simplest versions it is merely reported that at the time of Israel's sin Moses actually beheld the destroying angels on their descent to earth to annihilate Israel.[23] It was that sight that caused him to immediately beseech God on their behalf, rather than follow his own impulses and descend to Israel as quickly as possible. The angelic personification of the impending doom of Israel serves to

intensify the drama of the situation and also helps to divert our attention from God Himself, who is in fact the source of the death order. While we might be aware that the sin Israel has committed is of a most grievous nature, it is hard to accept the fact that God wishes to destroy every last man, woman and innocent child of the multitude in the wilderness.

But in other versions the drama goes much further. At the time that Moses pleads on behalf of Israel, his ultimate argument that the people should be allowed to continue to exist finds support through an appeal to the covenant with the Patriarchs (Exodus 32:13): "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou didst swear by thy own self, and didst say to them, I will multiply your seed as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken of will I give to your seed, and they shall inherit it for ever." It is this argument that causes God to spare Israel. In the midrash, just as death and destruction are personified, the important principle of "merit of the fathers" (זכות אבות) is personified in the form of the Patriarchs themselves. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob join Moses and God Himself in the effort to overthrow the wrathful angels who seem to continue their fearful attack by force of inertia:

> There were five angels of destruction there: Af, Hemah, Kezef, Hashmed and Hashhet. At that moment the three Patriarchs came and opposed three of them. Af and Hemah remained. Moses said: Lord of the Universe, I request of your throne of glory

that you stand up against one while I stand against one. . ."[24]

Another version from a different midrashic source provides a new twist: the appeal to the merit of the fathers does not work. God finds scriptural pretexts for discounting the merits of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Moses can only win the argument by reminding God (Exodus 32:13) that He made His promises to the Patriarchs by swearing by His name (His "own self"). Only then does God relent, and God (not the Patriarchs) eliminates three of the destructive angels. God and Moses then, as in the version above, attack Af and Hemah respectively.[25] Thus for whatever reason the aggadist of this source discounts the power of the merit of the fathers, but the outcome is the same.

We have seen that Moses has been transformed by the midrash from a pleader to a fighter. While his methods of fighting off the destructive angel he personally battles are not described, one assumes some sort of violent confrontation to have been necessary. This in itself provides a gratifying act of vengeance against death. The fact that the Patriarchs and even God Himself join in the fray only increases the drama in which Moses plays a central role.

It is interesting that in at least one version of the tale Moses plays the role of outwitter of death. The angels of destruction approach Israel to indict them for their sin (it will be remembered that destructive angels are the close relatives of Satan, the accusing angel). Before they can do

so and then do any further harm, they find that Moses himself has already done the job of indictment for them (Exodus 32:31): "Oh, this people have sinned a great sin." Not eager to enter into a struggle with the Chosen People, the angels then depart, and Moses immediately pleads for God's mercy.[26]

Moses' confrontation with the angels of destruction represents a struggle against death on the behalf of others. But Moses fights equally hard to defeat death when death comes for him. He does so both to finish an important task he has remaining for him on earth, and purely for the selfish motive of wishing to remain alive. We have already discussed the fact that the aggada gives full voice to the fear even the righteous have of death, and have seen that Moses preferred to be turned into a beast of the field or the air rather than leave this world.

One of the last major tasks Moses has to perform is to give a final blessing to his people (Deuteronomy 33). In this episode of biblical narrative too the aggadist is not at a loss to create a personification. "And this is the blessing with which Moses the man of God blessed the children of Israel before his death" (33:1). "Before his death" (מותו לפני) is interpreted to mean that Moses is physically in the presence of the Angel of Death.

Thus an older source has it that when God mentioned to Moses that he would be going up to the mountain to die (Deut. 32:50), the Angel of Death wrongly assumes that this was the

time for him to go and fetch Moses. When the Angel arrives, Moses sternly tells him that God had already promised him that it would not be the Angel who would take his soul but rather God Himself, and proceeds to bless Israel in death's very presence.[27] Elsewhere the same source contains a version in which the Angel had for some time been preventing Moses from bestowing the blessing. Moses actually seizes the Angel, binds him and casts him down, then blesses Israel in death's supine presence.[28] A later source also reports that Moses seized and cast down the Angel before giving the blessing.[29]

It is the "death of Moses" midrash to which reference was made earlier in this chapter that contains the most striking account of Moses' battle with his own death.[30] In the "before his death" midrashim, Moses had been able to stop the Angel because the true moment ordained for the prophet's death had not yet arrived. When that moment does come, Moses is able to hold out for a time, but his mortal will can not prevail.

Moses uses every means at his command to struggle with God and Samael, God's appointed messenger of death. To shake the will of heaven Moses draws a circle around himself and offers powerful prayers of supplication while covered with dust and sackcloth. Moses' prayer storms heaven, and God has to issue special orders that it not be received. God mercifully asks the great angels Gabriel and Michael respectively to go bring Moses' soul, but the angels can not

bear the assignment and refuse. God must then resort to the evil Samael, who is only too happy to take Moses' life.

Even Samael proves no match for Moses. In the story of the confrontation between prophet and messenger of death we see many of the elements of confrontation discussed previously. Samael presents an image of cruel and unyielding death, and yet he is reduced to a buffoon. He finds Moses writing out part of the Torah, including the Ineffable Name, and, as in similar instances in the aggada, a sacred act keeps death at bay:

> [God] then said to Samael the wicked: "Go forth and bring Moses' soul." Immediately he clothed himself with anger and girded on his sword and wrapped himself with ruthlessness and went forth to meet Moses. When Samael saw Moses sitting and writing down the Ineffable Name, and how the radiance of his appearance was like unto the sun and he was like unto an angel of the Lord of hosts, he became afraid of Moses and declared: "Of a surety, angels cannot take away Moses' soul."

Moses speaks to Samael rudely and treats him to a long account of his own greatness as Israel's foremost prophet. Abashed, Samael reports back to God only to be sent back again for Moses' soul, whereupon he receives a sound beating from the prophet. Through guile, rhetoric and finally violence, Moses succeeds in defeating death's messenger, but not death itself. It is God's will that Moses must die, and

Moses is only appeased when he receives God's promise that God Himself will come to take Moses' soul.[31]

Through personification of death, the creators of the aggada were able to dramatize the relationship between mortal humanity and the death that each and every human being must one day face. The fear of death and the natural desire to avert the dread decree is so universal that it is felt as much by the great heroes of the Bible and of the world of the sages as it is felt by the ordinary person. Indeed, it is the righteous and learned hero or sage who has the means at his command to attempt at least temporarily to fight off the approach of death.

On the face of it, death is an area of darkness, a negation of everything that we know and have ever known from our own experience. Through their representation of death as a personality and through their telling of tales of human interactions with that personality, the aggadists were able to give focus to human reactions to mortality. They were able to convey the message that, despite the fact that their Judaism took it as an article of faith that for the reasonably righteous there will be a world to exist in beyond the grave, nevertheless that same Judaism allows for endless compassion for and acceptance of a natural fear of death and the fear of the unknown that death represents for each individual. Through representing the struggle with death by using stories of heroes, the aggadists make an unspoken but

ever present a fortiori argument: if the great ones of the earth, those who had themselves glimpsed elements of a world beyond this world through their spiritual powers, could be permitted their fear of death, then how much the more so should the ordinary person be permitted fear of death! Indeed, Moses himself, the one human being who had ever known God face to face, puts up the greatest fight of all against death.[32]

By turning the facing of death, in itself an abstract and inner event, into a concrete and outward confrontation of personalities, the aggadists were also able to dramatize the many nuances of feeling contained in the struggle. Humor and pathos, peace and anxiety, empathy and hostile rage all receive expression through the interactions of human personalities and the various personalities of figures of death. Death is alternately duped, battled, commanded or cajoled by humans, and death in turn displays a delight in trickery, shows some empathy and deference, or reveals nothing but hostility toward mortals. The gamut of human reactions to death, as well as the range of human expectations of how sensible or senseless a given death may or may not seem to be, are all expressed through the drama of personification. The aggadists could have expressed all of these things without personifying death, but they could not have done so nearly as well.

Perhaps there is yet another element to note in the process of personifying the confrontation of mortal with

death. As a mere negation of life, death is utterly impersonal. It is a black pit in which to be swallowed and annihilated, even if only for a moment during the transition to another reality. But if death is a person--even a frightening and hostile person--then one's death becomes personal, and one's passage to unknown territory is undertaken with a guide, however friendly or unfriendly that guide may be. Whether one accepts the guide or hates him, whether one goes with him quietly or struggles against him to the last, one still has a relationship with someone during the loneliest possible time, the moment of one's death. That someone may be the Angel of Death, but any angel is ultimately a being sent forth from the hand of God.

Chapter 3

Death and Torah

Up to this point our discussion about the various forms of personification of death and how they interact with humanity has contained strong implications about death's relationship with sin and righteousness. In the context of the preceding chapters, such implications were not analyzed in any detail. Even so, it should be clear by now that, although the aggada freely admits that all humans must die, it grants the righteous and learned individual a special relationship with death. The heroes of the biblical and rabbinic worlds are able to enter into dialogue with death, trick death, bargain with death, or even invoke divine intercession against death. Acts of righteousness and obedience to the Torah, or even the act of studying Torah, are all able at the least to slow down the otherwise inevitable arrival of the end.

We have also seen that the Angel of Death, Satan, Samael and destructive beings are related figures. Messengers of death can act as tempters or accusers and vice versa. Resh Lakish's dictum will be recalled: "Satan, the evil inclination, and the Angel of Death are all one."[1] There is a tendency of thought in the aggada that links death to sin.

In such a scheme of things, sin and righteousness are inextricably linked with obedience or disobedience to Torah. Torah in fact is more than a series of laws and precepts to be obeyed or defied. It is a force against death. Conversely, sin is a negative force able to strengthen death's dominion. As we will see, the aggada does not provide a uniform answer as to what the relationship is between Torah and death in all its ramifications. Nevertheless, through personifying death it provides vivid imagery to bring to life the titanic struggle between death and Torah.

In order to begin examining the aggada's treatment of this struggle we will first explore two midrashic stories that amplify the biblical account of the revelation at Sinai: Moses' ascent to heaven to receive the Torah, and God's removal of the power of death over Israel at the time that the latter is assembled to hear God's revelation. These stories provide a primal view of death in confrontation with the law of God. We will then reexamine the human confrontation with death in the light of the themes and ideas that the Sinai-related midrashim have revealed.

SINAI:PARADISE REGAINED, PARADISE LOST

While the very important subjects of the origins of death and the extent to which "original sin" plays a role in Judaism will have to be deferred to the next chapter, we must

now make passing reference to them. The story of the sin of Adam and Eve as told in the Bible itself makes a clear causal connection between sin and death. "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for on the day that thou eatest of it thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 1:16-17). Adam and Eve are severely punished for their sin of eating of the Tree of Knowledge, and part of that punishment is the curse of mortality.

It is not our purpose in this chapter to examine the possible implications of original sin or its role in rabbinic Judaism. What is important to note for now is that the story of the disobedience of the first parents of humanity and the connection of their sin to mortality served as a paradigm for the aggadists. The rabbis reinterpreted the "wisdom" (חכמה) celebrated in Proverbs as Torah, and the "tree of life" of Proverbs 3:18 is thus connected by rabbinic interpretation both to the Torah and to the Garden of Eden. In this vein, the story of the revelation at Sinai was expanded in the midrash so that it became nothing less than a second chance at Eden, if not for the entire world, then at the least for those who accepted the Torah, the Israelites. For a few glorious moments, says the aggada, death was held at bay from the People Israel. But just as Adam and Eve disobeyed and sinned by eating of the Tree of Knowledge, so did the Israelite multitude in the desert sin by disobeying the first

two commandments of the Decalogue, committing the fundamental sins of making and worshipping the Golden Calf. Adam and Eve brought death upon humanity. Israel through its worship of an idol brought death back upon itself.

One group of midrashim to be found in various sources concerns Moses' ascent to receive the Law. The story of Moses' ascent makes some use of personification of death and says much about the almost magical power that the rabbis attributed to the Torah. In the midrashic version of Moses' ascent, the prophet does not merely climb the physical Mount Sinai. He is brought all the way to the heavens, where he battles his way up to receive the Torah from the hands of God Himself, opposed by the angels who jealously guard the Torah from humanity.

The entire idea of an encounter with the angels may derive from Deuteronomy 33:2: "The Lord came from Sinai. . . and he came from myriads of holiness" (רִבְבֹת קֹדֶשׁ), where the Targum renders the "myriads of holiness" as angels. The tradition of involving angels at the Sinaitic revelation continues in midrashic tradition, where Psalm 68:18, a verse that mentions both thousands of "chariots" of God and Sinai, is interpreted as referring to angels at the revelation.[3] As a whole, the aggada of the <u>amoraim</u> stresses the angelic involvement more than do the (earlier) <u>tannaitic</u> sources.[4]

The angelic presence at Sinai can be found in the midrash to be a helpful and participatory presence. However, as we have already seen in the case of the sin of the Golden

Calf that occurred not long after the people first stood at Sinai, the fury of destructive angels is present in the background ready to be unleashed. In stories of Moses' ascent, such fury is unleashed at the prophet despite the fact that he is undertaking a mission at the command of God.

The Talmud relates a simple version of the story in the name of Joshua b. Levi.[5] Here the angels do not threaten Moses directly, but rather complain about his ascent before the heavenly throne:

> When Moses ascended on high, the ministering angels spake before the Holy One, blessed be He, "sovereign of the universe! What business has one born of woman amongst us?" "He has come to receive the Torah," answered He to them. Said they to Him, "That secret treasure, which has been hidden by Thee for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created, thou desirest to give to flesh and blood! "What is man, that thou art mindful of him, And the son of man, that thou visitest him?". . .

The angels can not tolerate the presence of a mortal among them and feel that the Torah, which existed before Creation (and served as the blueprint for Creation[6]) is far too precious a gift for humanity. The biblical verse the angels cite (Psalm 8:5) was also cited by the angels when they opposed the very creation of humanity.[7] This connection to the angelic opposition to man's very existence

is explicitly made in a later version of the story of Moses' ascent[8] in which God rebukes the angels:

> Ye angels--know ye?--have always been quarrelsome beings. When I wished to create man, right to My face you became a corps of prosecutors, saying: "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?", and you did not let me go ahead until I burned companies of you in the fire. Now again you rise in quarrelsomeness, and do not let me give the Torah to Israel. But if Israel do not receive the Torah, there shall be no abiding place--neither for Me nor for you.

Angelic opposition is more dramatically portrayed in this later version of the story. After Moses rides up to heaven in a cloud (derived from Exodus 24:15, "And Moses entered into the midst of the cloud"), he encounters Kemuel, an angel "that is in charge of the twelve thousand destroying angels that are seated at the gate of the firmament". Kemuel blocks the way, and Moses must fight him:

> He rebuked Moses and said to him: "What dost thou among the holy ones of the Most High? Thou comest from a place of all foulnesses: what wouldst thou in a place of purity?. . .Moses replied: "I am Amram's son--I am he who has come to receive the Torah for Israel." When Kemuel still would not let him pass, Moses struck him one blow and made him perish out of the world.

We here find that the opposition is expressed directly to the prophet, whose life is actually threatened by destroying angels. It is as if the basic situation of the story--that the Torah is a "tree of life" to which the way is being blocked-- is best dramatized by messengers of death.

We have already seen that at the time of Moses' impending death, the greatest angels and wicked Samael himself feared approaching the prophet. Ephraim Urbach considers the ascent of Moses and the account of his death to be two parts of one drama, "Moses and the Heavenly Retinue." In the ascent to heaven, Moses does not yet possess the Torah, and thus he lacks a certain power in his favor and needs God's help. By the time of his death, however, he has long possessed the Torah and has spent his life improving himself in its study. The power given to him by Torah protects him and causes even the immortals to fear him.[9] Torah is a force against death, and the fact that personifiers of death threaten the as yet Torah-less prophet serves to dramatize this point. Moses requires God's direct intervention to survive the hostile forces until the Torah is in his hands.

Significantly, in both the talmudic and later version of the ascent tale, God prompts Moses to defend his acceptance of the Torah by arguing from the Torah itself, thus in a sense allowing the prophet to internalize some of its power by having the opportunity to expound upon it (in the later version destructive angels threaten Moses yet again before

God intervenes and makes Moses proceed with his arguments). Moses argues that various commandments from the Decalogue bear no relation to or significance for heavenly existence, and therefore the angels have no need for the Torah. For example, they need no Sabbath because they do no work, and need no commandment to honor parents because angels do not have parents.

This argument convinces the angels, who concede and become the friends of Moses. Torah has made the prophet triumph. Then, very significantly, the Angel of Death makes his appearance to give Moses a gift of life! It is a secret of preserving life that is used later by Aaron when the latter takes incense and stays the plague that breaks out among the Israelites following Korah's rebellion (Nu. 17:12-13; it is not clear whether the Angel's secret is the incense itself or some power in addition to it). Death is again personified (in the form of death's prime messenger) to dramatize the power of Torah to extract concessions from death.

It is possible that the ascent story is a rabbinic echo of Gnostic stories about the ascent of the soul to receive the powers of light and the opposition the soul encounters on its way.[10] The Apocrypha and pagan literature also provide examples of searches for secret knowledge.[11] Even if the story of the ascent of Moses is in part a borrowed one, the masters of the aggada beautifully transformed such themes into a dramatization of the relationship between Torah, life and death.

According to the midrash, it is not only Moses who receives power against death upon receipt of the Torah. All Israel, in fact, is granted such power. A series of midrashim exist that, through personification of death, present a dramatic confrontation between death and God Himself at the time of the giving of the Torah.[12] During the encounter, God literally strips the Angel of his authority over Israel. For Israel and no other nation, an Eden-like state of existence is to be reinstated for the Torah's sake. But, like the sin of Adam and Eve, Israel's sin brings death. Upon the occurrence of the worship of the calf, the Angel's power is reinstituted, and the freedom from death Israel had almost won is a "paradise lost".

The story that Torah could have freed Israel from the power of the Angel of Death is widespread in midrashic discussions related to Sinai or to the Torah. In a tannaitic source it is actually stated that the Israelites demanded that death have no power over them before they would consent to receive the Torah:

> R. Jose says: It was upon this condition that the Israelites stood up before Mount Sinai, on condition that the Angel of Death should have no power over them. For it is said: "Ye are godlike beings," etc. But you corrupted your conduct. "Surely ye shall die like men".[13]

The prooftext used, from verses 6 and 7 of Psalm 82, nicely expresses the dichotomy between "godlike

beings"--literally, "gods"--and beings who must nonetheless die. The psalm's actual subject is the misbehavior of human rulers, but its theme of unjust behavior applies equally well to Israel's sin of the Golden Calf. Since it was Israel itself that demanded the ceasing of the Angel's rule, how much the more so should the Angel's rule resume once Israel broke a fundamental law of the Torah it had accepted.

An interesting disagreement among tannaim is recorded in a number of sources as to whether the receipt of the Torah was to free Israel from the power of the Angel of Death or, to the contrary, from the power of the hostile nations (who admittedly often bring death upon Israel). The disagreement hinges on a pun upon a word in Exodus 32:16. Concerning the writing of God "graven" upon the tablets of the Decalogue, "graven (חרות) is read as "freedom" (חירות):

> R. Judah and R. Nehemiah and the rabbis [differed on the point]. R. Judah said: Freedom from the Angel of Death; R. Nehemiah said: Freedom from [hostile] governments; the rabbis said: Freedom from sufferings.[14]

There is, then, no universal agreement that the acceptance of the Torah would free Israel from death. The freedom from hostile governments or from suffering posited by R. Nehemiah and by the rabbis respectively are equally "edenic" states that were also brought to nought by the sin of the Golden Calf.

Elsewhere in the midrash the relationship between the

sin of the Golden Calf that brought death back upon Israel, and the sin of Adam that brought death into the world, is explained in detail. Adam was permitted life eternal in return for fulfilling only one commandment--the commandment not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. How much the more so, then, should Israel be rewarded with eternal life for keeping six hundred and thirteen commandments! At the moment that Israel said (Ex. 32:4) "This is thy god, Oh Israel" of the Golden Calf, death was returned upon them.[15] A logical reason for the life-giving power of Torah is thus provided: the first man was allowed to live forever if he obeyed, and thus the receivers of the Torah should be so rewarded for obedience. Just as Adam fell for disobedience, Israel had to fall for disobedience.

At the time God decrees that death should have no power over Israel He gives the order directly to the Angel of Death. This confrontation is related without a reply given by the Angel[16], or in rather comic fashion is portrayed as a little drama in which the Angel complains that he is afraid he is now unemployed:

> What had the Holy One, blessed be He, done at the giving of the Torah? He had brought the Angel of Death and said to him: "You have jurisdiction over the whole world, except this people whom I have chosen for Myself." R. Eliezer b. R. Jose the Galilean remarked: the Angel of Death complained to the Holy One, blessed be He: "I have then been

> created in the world to no purpose!" The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: "I have created you in order that you shall destroy idol-worshippers, but not this people, for you have no jurisdiction over them."[17]

The Angel thus is still permitted to do his work among those outside of the Israelite faith community, but may not touch Israel proper. It is worth noting that we see the buffoon-like Angel in the above example, pouting impotently in his defeat and jumping to the conclusion that his dominion has been completely eradicated. Yet, as we see, even if Israel had not sinned the sin of idolatry, death never was to be removed from most of the world.

Thus, Israel missed its opportunity to defeat the rule of death. Torah was to be the force of eternal life, but sin nullified that force. Once death's power was reinstated over Israel, as we have already seen in our discussion in the previous chapter, the forces of death and destruction were unleashed against Israel. It took great effort on Moses' part to stand between Israel and the destroying angels.

As was discussed above, Torah in these stories seems to take on almost a magical power, a power that may be related to Gnostic and pagan ideas about secret knowledge. But other reasons for the relationship between Torah and life--Torah as the "tree of life"--may be given. We saw that a parallel was drawn in midrash between the eternal life Adam was to be given for his obedience and the eternal life Israel might

have merited for its obedience. Arthur Marmorstein identifies several subthemes connected to the idea that Israel might have received eternal life when it received the Torah: Israel is the "portion" of the eternal God who "chose" Israel, and therefore Israel can live eternally; Israel has the "merit of the fathers" (we saw that this last was Moses' chief defense against the angels sent to destroy Israel); Israel's acceptance of the eternal "yoke" of the law causes Israel to be eternal (similarly the parallel between Adam's and Israel's obedience mentioned above). He also identifies important related themes in midrash: that Israel, due to Torah, will not descend to Gehinom with the idolatrous nations, and Israel, due to Torah, will be created anew. Furthermore, just as Adam's sin brought mortality to the world but did not destroy humanity as a whole, so Israel's sin of idolatry brought death back to Israel, yet Israel as a group lives on in the world eternally.[18]

DEATH AND THE RIGHTEOUS

The Sinai-related midrashim we have just reviewed, containing a solicitous Angel of Death who grants Moses the secret of how to defeat death, or a crestfallen Angel of Death who sees himself stripped by God of some of his power, graphically illustrate the Torah's power over death. By extension, they indicate that the righteous, i.e. those who follow in the ways of Torah, themselves hold some sway over

death. With the sin of the Golden Calf, the Angel of Death was again permitted to take the souls of Jews, but even so, some of the power of Torah, as it were, rubs off on those who take Torah into their hearts.

We have seen that personified death is often a figure bearing a weapon. It is noteworthy, then, that the midrash describes Torah as a weapon to be borne in turn against death. Thus we find that after the sin of the calf the people are commanded to take off their "ornaments" (Ex. 33:5). "Ornaments" are interpreted in the midrash to mean "weapons":

> . . .as soon as Israel accepted the Torah God adorned them with His own glorious splendour. What was the nature of this adornment?. . .R. Simeon b. Yohai said: He gave them weapons on which was engraved the Ineffable Name, and as long as this sword was in their possession, the Angel of Death could exercise no power over them.[19]

Just as the Angel of Death bears a sword, Torah can be a "sword" against him. Though through their sin the Israelites were stripped of their special swords bearing God's name (and God's four-letter name is in itself an important element of Torah), the power of Torah remains a "weapon" for those who obey it. As it is said elsewhere in aggada: "The words of the Torah have been likened to a weapon; just as a weapon serves its owner in time of battle, so the words of Torah serve well all who labor in them with the devotion they

require."[20] At the least, this weapon can command respect from the messenger who comes to perform his sad duty of making mortals mortal.

Thus the sort of confrontations between biblical and rabbinic heroes and death discussed in detail in the preceding chapter all represent confrontations between Torah and death. All of the heroes mentioned rely on their study of and obedience to Torah to be able to defeat or delay the onslaught of the Angel of Death. Through study of Torah, King David was able to temporarily hold off the Angel[21], as was R. Hisda.[22] R. Ashi can ask for and receive extra days of life in which to improve his studies.[23] R. Joshua b. Levi nearly succeeds in stealing the weapon of the Angel of Death and rendering the latter powerless.[24] Moses, as the prophet who brought Torah down to the world, is able to fight a titanic struggle with Samael, defeating the dread angel, and is only taken to his death by God Himself.[25]

The sage of the law commands deference, even fear, from the messenger of death. Samael fears Moses, and the Angel of Death shows deference toward him at Sinai by revealing his secrets. Indeed, the theme of a deferential Angel of Death who confides his secrets to the righteous can be found elsewhere in the aggada. We have already seen in this discussion stories in which death confides in mortals. When, for example, R. Simeon b. Halafta encounters the Angel of Death after attending a circumcision ceremony, it is the latter who volunteers the information that the child is to be

taken in thirty days' time.[26] The frightening image of the Angel of Death leaping with his sword before the mourning women is part of the information revealed by the Angel to R. Joshua b. Levi in order to inform the sage how to avoid a dangerous encounter with death.[27] In the same passage, various ways of avoiding the Angel are suggested by the Angel himself, including taking another road, hiding behind a wall, or crossing a river.[28]

Even the righteous, those possessed of Torah and the ways of Torah, must in any event meet their deaths. Even at the moment of death, however, the midrash remarks that there is a difference between the death of the righteous and the death of the wicked. This is especially true if the dying person is engaged in discourse upon Torah, which as we have seen is even credited by the midrash with being able to delay death altogether. Death that comes amidst concerns about Torah must perforce be a good, peaceful death. Conversely, if one meets one's death while engaged in thoughts about ordinary business affairs, it is a sign of a less peaceful departure, and in any case a sign that one has not yet finished winding up one's affairs on earth.[29]

As if to dramatize the relative peacefulness or unpleasantness of an individual's death and the relationship of that death to Torah and righteousness, the aggadists claimed that the Angel of Death separates the soul from the body in a pleasant or unpleasant manner according to the merit of the mortal involved. It is as if the Angel were a

skilled practitioner of administering pain according to a calibrated scale of just deserts:

> And when the time comes for a man to depart from the world, and the Angel of Death enters to take up his soul, the soul has the semblance of a kind of reed filled with blood, with smaller reeds distributed through the entire body. The Angel lays hold of the upper part of the reed and pulls it, but pulls it gently out of the body of the righteous man, as though taking a hair out of milk. But out of the body of the wicked man, it is as though he were pulling tangled rope through a narrow opening. Some say it is like working a nail out of the gullet. Some say it is like pulling thorns out of fleece, or a crooked stick out of silk-floss. Some say, it is like pulling wool shearings out of thorns.[30]

It is difficult to determine from this particular personification of death whether the Angel is inherently cruel and holds back his natural inclinations on behalf of the righteous, or whether he is neutral and dispassionate in his administration of unpleasantness. However, the result is the same in either case and is according to God's will. Torah here serves as a "weapon" against an unpleasant death even when it does not shield against death itself. We have already made reference to the deaths of R. Nahman and Raba as they are reported in the Talmud.[31] Both sages greatly

feared the Angel, but after their deaths occurred they reported that dying was like "the taking of a hair from the milk" (R. Nahman) or like "the prick of a cupping instrument" (Raba). They died the deaths of those who lived lives of Torah.

A very special death is reserved for the very righteous. This is the "kiss of God", the taking of the soul by God Himself rather than by the hand of God's dark messenger. In this context the "death of Moses" midrash should be recalled. Moses in the end manages to defeat Samael so that the latter can not effect the prophet's death. Furthermore, the greatest of the angels refused to take Moses' life, so that it is God Himself who must do so. Even Moses' soul protests against its own departure, but God takes the soul with a "kiss of the mouth".[32] The sages, in fact, had in mind a precise list of those who were worthy to die by the "kiss of God":

> Our Rabbis taught: Six there were over whom the Angel of Death had no dominion, namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Aaron and Miriam. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob we know because it is written in connection with them, "in all," "of all", "all"; Moses , Aaron and Miriam because it is written in connection with them [that they died] "By the mouth of the Lord." But the words "by the mouth of the Lord" are not used in connection with [the death of] Miriam?--R. Eleazar said: Miriam

> also died by a kiss, as we learn from the use of the word "there" [in connection both with her death] and with that of Moses. And why is it not said of her that [she died] "by the mouth of the Lord"?--Because such an expression would be disrespectful.[33]

The Patriarchs, since they were blessed with "all", also were blessed with being taken by God Himself. Aaron (Nu. 33:38) goes up to Mount Hor to die "at the commandment of the Lord" (עַל-פִּי) which is taken by the midrash to mean "by the mouth of the Lord", and with these same words does the narrative describe Moses' death (Deut. 34:5). Miriam's death is connected to the idea of the "kiss" through the method of gezera shava; Moses died "there" (ibid) and Miriam died "there" (Nu. 20:1). Thus in Moses' case at least we see that his death by the "kiss" of God himself is demonstrated in two entirely separate ways: by personification of death as in the "death of Moses" story in which God finally comes for the prophet after the latter's violent conflict with Samael, and through textual analysis as above.

The same midrash of the six who were taken by God's kiss is retold in a later source[34] in context of the verse "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (Song of Songs 1:2). Here, the verse is interpreted with a view toward adding, in addition to the six, all the righteous. The idea of Torah as a weapon enters into the derivation of this

expanded application of the "kiss of God". "With the kisses" (נשיקות) is interpreted to mean "armed" (מנושקות). The words of Torah "arm" one's lips so that "in the end all will kiss thee on thy mouth."

It is an odd but true fact that the midrash mentions a place on earth in which the Angel of Death has no power whatsoever, even in the post-"edenic" world. This is the city of Luz, identified with the Luz mentioned in Genesis 28:19 and in Judges 1:26. Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar could not destroy it. More to the point, the Angel of Death holds no sway there and has no permission to enter the city. When inhabitants of Luz grow very old, they go out of the city (or are led out) to die.[35] No reason for Luz's immunity to the Angel of Death is provided as such, but the information is offered that Luz is the place where the "blue" of the ritually-commanded fringes is dyed. Since the fringes are meant to remind one who looks upon them of all the commandments of God[36], that is, the Torah in its entirety, one might assume that Luz is therefore a place "armed" with the full power of the Torah. It will be recalled that in a tale already referred to above, King Solomon attempts to protect his scribes from the Angel of Death by bringing them to Luz, but the scribes are taken before they can enter there.[37]

The admission that Torah, even in a world in which all humanity is mortal, is a force against death raises the inevitable question of whether or not the righteous are

allowed extra time on earth. The stories we have seen in which various sages temporarily avoid the Angel of Death or petition him successfully for more time clearly imply that the righteous do indeed receive more time on earth than they were initially destined to enjoy. As a whole, in fact, a long life was thought by the rabbis to be the result of righteous behavior, and various lengths of life thought to reflect various degrees of righteousness.[38]

Thus in the story we have already encountered of the servant of the Angel of Death who errs and takes the wrong soul,[39] the years wrongly taken from an ordinary person are kept in trust by the Angel to be given to a righteous scholar. In this case, it must be admitted, the Angel has transferred one person's years to another person's, but the sum total of years ordained on earth between the two people remains the same. In one of the versions of the story of R. Simeon b. Ḥalafta we saw earlier,[40] the story of the sage's nullification of the decree of death against a newborn infant through prayer is presented in the context of the ancient debate on whether or not the righteous have added years (or can cause years to be added on behalf of someone else as happened in the case of the babe) beyond the years originally ordained by God. The story of R. Simeon, of course, supports the contention (attributed to the rabbis) that years can in fact be added onto those previously ordained, for such is the power of Torah and righteousness against death. R. Akiva, on the other hand, contends that unrighteous behavior may <u>reduce</u>

one's years from the number originally ordained, while righteousness simply permits an individual to live a full lifespan.

DEATH AND SIN

If Torah is a weapon against death for those who live in its ways and are knowledgeable of its contents, then it follows that those who reject the Torah forfeit protection against death. Needless to say, none of the heroic encounters with death attributed by the midrash to various sages and Bible figures are in the least possible to a person without righteousness. Certainly death could never be the friend and confidant of such a mortal. On the contrary, the sinner walks through life barely out of the clutches of death. As we have seen, such a person is bound to live a shorter life, and to suffer unpleasant treatment at the hands of the Angel of Death.

We have seen also that sin has a weakening effect upon the sinner and even upon those in contact with him. Sin is ultimately an act of rebellion against the kingship of God, since Torah represents the laws of the kingdom. As such, sin actually causes God's power on earth to diminish.[41] Moses, who had been able to look without fear upon the most powerful of angels, could no longer face even the lower-ranking destructive angels due to his being weakened by Israel's sin of the Golden Calf.[42] Sin caused Adam, once the familiar

friend of God, to fear God's voice; sin caused Israel, that had looked upon the burning Mount Sinai without terror, to fear to look even upon the shining face of Moses their prophet.[43] Sin weakens the individual both as a receiver of grace from above and as someone fortified to repel the destructive forces below. What a weakened immune system is to disease, sin is to death.

Thus it is that the destructive forces of the world cling easily to the sinner. We have seen that figures of the aggada that personify death also can serve to act as accusers against the sinful, and accusers in turn can act the part of messengers of death. The Angel of Death becomes the accuser of the woman in childbirth who had committed one of several sins associated with womanly obligations, and Satan accuses those who take foolish chances.[44] In either case, death is the threatened result of sin. Certain proscribed acts carelessly performed during one's morning preparations can expose one to the harm of demons or destroying angels.[45] "When a man proves worthy, angels of peace are assigned to be with him; but when a man proves unworthy, angels of destruction are assigned to be with him."[46] Not only are protective angels of no avail to the sinner, but destruction actually follows him wherever he goes. Thus one should not go abroad in the company of the sinful person, because Satan accompanies that person and endangers all around him.[47]

The rabbis took the biblical drama of revelation and sin

as Israel encountered God before a flaming desert mountain and turned it into a drama of life and death on a cosmic scale. They did so by personifying the death and destruction that threatened to overwhelm the prophet and his people. The catalyst of the drama is Torah, the prize of heaven and the saving power of Israel. Had Israel not sinned, Torah, wrested as it was from the jealously guarded vaults of heaven, would have shielded her forever from the Angel of Death. For the people chosen by God, the immortality of Eden would have been restored.

Yet even an Israel with sin was not an Israel deprived of the Torah. The aggadists personified death again and again to show that their heroes of righteousness, armed with the Torah, could fight back death for a time, intercede against death on behalf of others, and command respect from death until the very end, when they would be taken gently into the next world. Death has a sword, but Torah is a sword. Torah can increase length of days, and cause the forces of destruction to flee before it. It increases the force of life--indeed, the force of God--upon earth.

Thus the person with sin must be the loser in the drama of life versus death. He must live in fear, and perhaps live a life that is shorter than the one originally ordained for him by heaven. The sinner weakens his own power and that of those around him against death, causing the very power of God on earth to lessen. Indeed, the person without righteousness is almost a messenger of death himself. He corrupts living things the way death corrupts:

> Sin is thus a symptom of corruption and decay in the spiritual condition of man. He who committed a transgression is as one who was defiled by touching the corpse of a dead man. The thoroughly wicked man is therefore even in life considered as dead. Nay, the sin becomes also a part of himself and clings to him and appears with him together on the Day of Judgement. The presence of the man of sin has, so to speak, a sickening and offensive effect upon everything pure and holy, so that he has to be removed from its neighborhood.[48]

The sword of death waits for all. For some, steeped in a life of Torah, that sword represents merely a quick coda to a life of peace. For others, distant from Torah, that sword had always dangled not far from their eyes, and comes cruelly to end a life that had barely been life at all.

Chapter 4

Death's Place in the World

By now it will have been observed that the technique of personifying death in the aggada serves to create a great deal of dramatic tension in death-related midrashim. Human emotions associated with mortality become amplified. The human predicament resulting from the fact that life must end despite all wishes to the contrary is brought into bold relief with tales of trickery and battles of wills. The basic theological principles represented by Torah and its power to give life versus sin and its power to weaken life are dramatized on a cosmic stage.

Through it all, and with the aid of personification, a curious truth about death becomes evident. If the person called human being seems to occupy an unstable place in the world, prone to corruption and limited to only a brief span of life, then the "person" called death occupies an even less stable and definable place. The world, after all, was meant to be the dwelling place of humanity. After life is over, those who have at least some merit will be permitted a future life in a world to come. Death, however, is a mere messenger passing through this world, a fact that is dramatized when we see him in the person of an angel. In the "world" of departed souls, this angel seems little more than a delivery

service. In the heavenly domain, angels of death and destruction do not seem to occupy anything like an honored place among the immortal hosts. They are the "black sheep", the outcasts, despite the fact that they fulfill the will of God.

Does the presentation of death in personified form also make a positive statement about death's place in the world? This is not an idle question, because the rabbis were defenders of God in His aspect as the Creator. It would not appear to make sense for the makers of aggada to amplify the attributes and activities of a kind of creature who seems utterly out of place in Creation. The possibility must then exist that personified death has a more sensible place in the world than might at first be apparent.

In this chapter we will undertake the examination of death's place in the world by first exploring what the sages had to say about when death was created. Was the Angel of Death created along with the rest of the Creation during the first seven days? Was death brought into the world later than the time of Creation, as a result of the sin of the parents of humanity? If God created death as a part of the original plan, then death clearly was always meant to be. If, on the other hand, the sin of Adam and Eve alone brought death to the world, then perhaps God did not always intend that death be a part of His world.

The question of when death was created is closely related to the matter of the recognized partnership between

death and sin. If God created death as a matter of course, then the fact that each of us must die is not tied to our sinfulness, however much the length of our life or the pleasantness or unpleasantness of our death might be tied to our relative merits and demerits. But if humanity caused death to exist in the world through sin, then death itself (and not merely time and manner of death) came to be through God's response to human error, and not through His original plan of Creation. The possibility that the sin of disobedience committed by the parents of humanity was the sole reason that death came into the world raises an important theological question: did the sages indicate that "original sin" exists as a legitimate Jewish concept? Was the sin of Adam and Eve passed on to each and every one of their descendants, so that no one can be born sinless?

An inquiry into beginnings leads naturally to an inquiry about endings. It is a given in the rabbinic scheme of things that there will be an "end of days" when history will cease, the world will be perfected, the dead will rise and all will be judged. Will the forces of death disappear at the end of time? Will only Israel be granted immortality, while the gentile nations will not? Will the Angel of Death and angels of destruction themselves be brought to an end at that blissful time, or will they still have some sort of function to perform?

Once the origins and ends of death have been explored, we will turn to the question of death's place in the world in

relation to that of God and humanity. Judaism does not have a death god living in a separate kingdom. Therefore, whatever the place may be that death and death's messengers occupy in the world, it must stand somewhere between humanity and God. As Mark Shapiro says in relation to angels: "[T]he question to be asked is how the rabbis, who generally describe the cosmic drama in terms of God and humanity alone, were able to incorporate a third player into their world."[1] Personified death is an angelic presence and thus a "third player". How does death "act" in the drama with man and with God?

DEATH'S ORIGINS

There is disagreement in the aggada as to when the Angel of Death came into being. Two basic lines of thinking are followed that in turn have two sets of consequences. In one, the Angel of Death was created along with all other beings during the course of the days of Creation. In the other, the Angel of Death came into being after the time of the Creation, at the moment when Adam and Eve disobeyed God. In the first mentioned scheme, death always existed and was there waiting for humanity, while in the second scheme humanity originally was not faced with death at all and could have been immortal up until the moment of the first sin.[2]

We find the opinion that the Angel of Death was created during the days of Creation clearly stated as follows:

> Come and see that when the Holy One, blessed is He, created the world He created the Angel of Death on the first day. From what is this derived? R. Berekhia said: Because it is written: "And darkness was upon the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2). This is the Angel of Death, who darkens the face of humanity.[3]

The creation of the Angel of Death on the very first day of creation is here tied to the word "darkness" (חֹשֶׁךְ). Humanity, of course, is not created until the sixth day of Creation, and hence death precedes human beings in the scheme of things. Furthermore, the Angel of Death is a creature like all others, made according to God's already formulated design.

The opinion can be found elsewhere in the midrash that angels in general were created on the second day of Creation.[4] This is supported by a particular reading of the fourth verse of Psalm 104, a psalm that praises God in His aspect of Creator. Psalm 104:4 tells us that God "makes the winds His messengers." The aggadist, however, reads "winds" (רוחות) as "spirits" and "His messengers" (מלאכיו) as "His angels". The preceding verse of the psalm alludes to God's separation of the upper and lower waters during the second day of Creation in order to make the heavens: "[God] who lays the beams of His chambers in the waters. . .". The verse that tells us, according to the aggadist's reading, that God made the spirits into His angels continues the

description of what happened on the second day. On the day in which the heavens were made God also created the denizens of the heavens, the angels.

From the same midrashic source the opinion is also given that the angels were created on the fifth day of Creation. Here the reasoning is quite simple. The fifth day is the day during which winged creatures were created, and angels have wings.

Being an angel, the Angel of Death was thus possibly created on the second or fifth days of Creation. It is noteworthy that in yet another midrashic source[5] the Angel of Death is explicitly tied to the fourth verse of Psalm 104 quoted above in context of interpreting Ecclesiastes 8:8: "There is no man who has power over the wind to retain the wind." The verse is here taken to mean that no man has power to stop the Angel of Death, using the play on words from the verse in Psalms that makes "wind" into "angel".

Even if the Angel of Death was created as late as the fifth day, his creation still would have preceded that of humanity. Thus the question of whether the Angel was created on the first, second or fifth day is an academic one as far as human beings are concerned. The Angel would in any case have been an established fact of Creation before man's existence.[6]

Equally painstaking textual analysis is used to prove that the Angel of Death did not in fact exist until Adam and Eve sinned, that "when God created His world, there was no

Angel of Death in the world."[7] This is because in Genesis 2:4 (immediately after the account of the days of Creation) we find that the word "generations" of the sentence "these are the generations of the heaven and of the earth" is spelled in its "full" form-- תולדות . In almost all other places in the Bible in which the word occurs, meaning in stories that occur in the time after the fall of Adam and Eve, the word is found in its "defective" form-- תולדת . Thus, immortality was taken away from the generations spawned by Adam and Eve. Just as the word "generations" lacked a letter after sin was committed, so did people lack the quality of deathlessness.

A possible compromise between the seemingly irreconcilable positions that the Angel of Death existed before Adam and his sin, or did not yet exist until the sin, may be offered in one of the sources quoted above.[8] Here it is stated that, although the Angel of Death was created on the first day of Creation, it was the sin of Adam that actually brought the Angel into the world. Thus the Angel seemingly was kept in another realm away from the earthly realm until his services were called for. Even this explanation, however, does not completely depart from the position that God created the means to effect death before the primal sin took place, so that death was always in the scheme of things.

Through personifying death, the sages were able to offer speculations about the time death came into the world. Once

the speculations were made, they did not hesitate to follow through to the possible ramifications of their respective positions. Examples of exegesis on the words "very good" in Genesis 1:31 reflect the position that the Angel of Death came to be during the days of Creation and that death is thus an integral part of the world order.[9] The Creation is "very good" and death, as a part of Creation, must also be good:

> R. Samuel b. R. Isaac said: "Behold, it was very good" alludes to the Angel of Life; "And behold, it was very good", to the Angel of Death. Is then the Angel of Death very good? Imagine a king who made a feast, invited the guests, and set a dish filled with all good things before them: "Whoever will eat and bless the king," said he, "let him eat and enjoy it; but he who would eat and not bless the king, let him be decapitated with a sword." Similarly, for him who lays up precepts and good deeds, lo! there is the Angel of Life; while for him who does not lay up precepts and good deeds, lo! there is the Angel of Death.[10]

According to this interpretation, death provides an impetus to perform good deeds and is therefore a good thing. Good deeds mean a longer life, and the prospect of death causes an awareness of a limited amount of time in which to store up moral credit with heaven. Death is thus, paradoxically, a life-giving force. The close relationship

between death and sin is reflected in a parallel interpretation of Genesis 1:31:

> Nahman said in R. Samuel's name: "Behold, it was very good" refers to the Good Desire [inclination]; "And behold, it was very good" refers to the Evil Desire [inclination]. Can then the Evil Desire be very good? That would be extraordinary! But for the Evil Desire, however, no man would build a house, take a wife and beget children. . .[11]

Thus the evil inclination (יצר הרע), that inner force that causes people to sin and that therefore rushes along each person's death, is here seen similarly in a positive vein as a force for life. The evil inclination provides the impetus behind the acquisitive and erotic desires that cause people to build for the future and to create the next generation. It too would seem to be a fundamental part of the Creation and the way things work.

Other good consequences of death are noted in the aggada that indicate that death is a fundamental part of Creation. Death allows room for new generations to enter the world. Thus, it will be recalled, the Angel of Death himself tells R. Ashi that the latter can no longer delay the day of his death because the time has arrived for his successor to take his place.[12] We even find in certain midrashic passages that various righteous men of the Bible had completely accepted their own deaths and asked for them themselves! Though it greatly pained God to take their

lives, He did so for the sake of allowing the next generation of righteous ones to come into the world:

> And because the righteous asked with their own mouths for death, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: Let these depart to make way for the others. Had Abraham gone on living, how could Isaac have come into authority? And Jacob? And Moses? And Joshua? And Samuel? And David and Solomon? But, in truth, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: Let these depart to make way for the others.[13]

Another function of death as a positive part of Creation is its role in the process of atonement. In addition to the Day of Atonement, a person's death can serve to expiate that person's sins. Thus even though the Temple and its sacrificial means of atonement was destroyed, death remained to help make atonement possible.[14]

Other positive reasons that death is present in Creation can be found in the aggada. Death gives rest to the righteous after a lifetime spent fighting a wearisome struggle against the evil inclination.[15] Death also prevents those earthly rulers presumptuous enough to call themselves gods from becoming genuine immortals. For this reason the opinion is expressed that Adam did not deserve death at all for eating of the Tree of Knowledge, but death had to be decreed upon him to prevent the future abuse of immortality.[16] Thus Moses too had to die in order that others would know he was a mere human being, lest people

become confused and believe that it was Moses alone and unaided who performed the miracles that occurred during his long career.[17]

It has been noted that the Angel of Death can be found in the guise of an understated and almost benevolent personality. One might therefore wonder if in such instances in which a benign Angel of Death makes his appearance the aggadists had in mind such goodly functions of death as those that we have just reviewed. Although even a benign Angel comes to perform a task that any given individual mortal may find unwelcome, he nevertheless is performing good for humankind as a whole. God's Creation is good, and God's creature called the Angel of Death is part of Creation's goodness. [18]

How different, then, are the ramifications of the opinion that the sin of humanity brought the Angel of Death into existence! Death becomes, rather than a natural part of Creation, a horrible blemish gashed into the face of the world by the destructive force of sin. Adam himself could have been immortal, but removed immortality from himself by disobeying the Creator. Death is therefore a negative entity in Creation, an unfortunate intrusion. God fashioned the Angel of Death and his like as creatures of vengeance, mere afterthoughts in the general scheme of things.

Adam, who in this view manifestly deserved to die, brought death upon those of his descendants who did not deserve to die. Thus Moses had to die only due to the fact

that Adam's sin caused death to be decreed on all humanity; otherwise, Moses might well have lived forever. Thus the word adam is used for "man" in Numbers 19:14, "This is the law: when a man dies in a tent. . ." so that the phrase can be interpreted to read: "this is the law: Adam (humanity) must die". This "law" must be obeyed even by Moses because it was decreed to apply equally to all humanity.[19] The case of Moses (and by extension all the righteous) is beautifully expressed in a parable:

> R. Levi said: It is like the case of a pregnant woman who was thrown into prison and gave birth to a son there. When the child grew up the king once passed by the prison, whereupon the lad began to cry out: "My lord king, why am I kept in prison?" and the king replied: "You are kept here for the sin of your mother." So Moses pleaded: "Master of the Universe, there are thirty-six transgressions punishable by extinction enumerated in the Torah, for the commission of any one of which a man is liable to be put to death. Have I then transgressed any one of them? Why dost Thou decree death upon me? God replied: You are to die because of the sin of the first man who brought death into the world."[20]

The attitude that death is entirely a negative heritage bequeathed by the parents of humanity, a curse that took away any fair chance for the righteous to live forever and avoid

death's fearful sword, fits in well with the fearsome images of death with which the aggada abounds. Evil, vengeful Samael and the destructive angels are born of the attitude that death is a negative entity. It may well be that a touch of this attitude is found as well in the accounts of the heroes who attempt to fight off death. Perhaps they chafe under a sense of injustice, of righteous anger that they too must die along with the sinners. Perhaps it is not fear alone that motivates their rebellious actions.

The midrashim that tell the story of the immortality that was granted Israel when the Torah was given and subsequently taken away after the Israelites made and worshipped the Golden Calf fit solidly into the tradition that sin alone caused the Angel of Death to come into the world.[21] The Angel of Death is removed by God from an important part of Creation: the nation of Israel. His removal represents Israel's advance reward for obedience to the many commandments of the Torah. Clearly, the Angel is here neither a good part of Creation nor an indispensable one. Only Israel's sin causes the Angel's dominion to extend once again to all humanity. It is no wonder then that the sin of the Golden Calf is compared in the midrash to the sin of the first man. God Himself tells the Israelites that "You have followed the course of Adam".[22]

One strain of the aggada, then, blames human sin for death. Sin, in a sense, is the power that brought the Angel of Death to his position as the taker of souls. Sin

continues to operate in favor of death in the life of every person, because it is a weakening agent that exposes the sinner to the ubiquitous forces of death and destruction.

A major question remains concerning the theology of this basic attitude. Does it represent a Jewish doctrine of Original Sin? Does it reveal a scheme in which the actual sin of Adam and Eve is, as it were, genetically transmitted from generation to generation? Is each child born tainted with the first sin, and thus must live with a deficit even before righteous deeds can be performed?

Ephraim Urbach reviews the Jewish attitude toward original sin reflected in apocryphal literature and in the aggada and concludes that original sin is not to be found in mainstream Jewish tradition. The sages did not teach that the actual sin of Adam was transmitted from generation to generation. It is only the result of the sin that is transmitted, that is, death.[23] "Death is not the consequence of sin, but is linked to the doctrine of reward and punishment."[24] Thus even the aggadists who held a more angry and bitter attitude toward Adam and Eve and their disobedience did not blame them for the sinfulness of their descendants, however much they blamed them for bringing the Angel of Death into the world. Sin is still the responsibility of the individual, and while length of days is connected to one's righteous behavior, the very existence of one's death is not absolutely connected to the sins that one has committed as an individual. Immortality is not possible

to the descendants of Adam, but in theory something approaching sinlessness is possible to, at least, a handful in history.

One line of thinking in the aggada regards death as an inevitable, necessary and positive part of Creation. The Angel of Death is a creature among creatures, though at first glance he would seem to be the greatest of misfits in Creation. He was created during the seven days of Creation along with heaven and earth, sun and moon, plants and animals and, of course, humanity. Human beings need death as an impetus to live well and to make room for new generations. And yet the biblical story of Adam's sin and punishment can not be ignored. This story gives rise to the vein of thought that sees death as an afterthought in Creation fashioned by God as a punishment for sin, and the Angel of Death as an unwelcome stranger in the world. The aggada as a whole represents a mixture of these two opposing attitudes toward death. Perhaps this mixture existed as well in the mind of any given sage. Given the paradoxical nature of the human experience of death, filled as it is with both dread and hope, it is no wonder that such a mixture of opposites in one body of literature is possible and even natural.

DEATH'S ENDING

It is a given in the rabbinic scheme of things that, at some point in the future, history will come to an end and the

arrival of the Messiah will herald an age of peace and perfection. At some point during the "end of days" the dead will be made to rise and all will come under God's final judgement. While messianic concepts are far beyond the scope of this thesis, mention must nevertheless be made of the fact that the sages operated under the assumption that at the end of time as we know it, the power currently granted to the Angel of Death will be taken away from him forever. The righteous will be granted immortal status. Immortality was taken from Adam and Eve, and was taken as well from those who sinned at the foot of Sinai with the Golden Calf. But the immortality offered in the age after the Messiah will arrive is a basic part of God's plan. It is not in question.

Had death not been personified by the aggadists, perhaps there would have been fewer questions concerning what will happen to death once the Messiah comes. As things stood, however, sooner or later any discussion about death and the end of days had to include speculation about what would happen to the Angel of Death and related figures with the arrival of the long-awaited messianic time. Angels of death and destruction are, after all, the creatures of God. Will God destroy His creatures when they are no longer needed to effect death? Can the Angel of Death and his like be given other work to do besides the taking of souls? Indeed, might not they still have their old tasks to perform even in messianic times because, in fact, death will not be lifted from all the peoples of earth, but only from Israel?

There is certainly a line of thinking in the aggada that embraces the idea that in the messianic era the Angel of Death will be completely denied his death-effecting power. Thus Genesis 3:22, "Behold, the man is become as one of us," is interpreted to refer to the fact that man will indeed one day be as deathless as the immortals of heaven. "Shall the decree which was decreed against Adam continue forever? Surely not!"[25] Yet at the same time there are those sages who do not feel that the Angel of Death will be denied power over everyone even after the Messiah comes, but only over the souls of Israel. A debate between the two schools of thought is recorded in the midrash, focusing upon the interpretation of Isaiah 25:8: "He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces. . .". R. Hanina takes the position that the verse indicates that during the messianic age, the rule of death will be removed from Israel alone. R. Joshua b. Levi argues that death's rule will end both among Israel and among the gentile nations:

> R. Hanina said: In the messianic age there will be death among none save the children of Noah. R. Joshua b. Levi said: Neither among Israel nor among the other nations, for it is written, "And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces." How does R. Hanina explain this?--From off all faces of Israel.[26]

The sages disagree as to how global is the intent of the

phrase "from all faces". Further prooftexts are offered for each position. It is clear, however, that both Hanina and Joshua have the Angel of Death in mind, not just death in the abstract, as they debate. Hanina's position automatically allows the Angel to hold onto a function in the world even in the future time. It is up to Joshua, who foresees the complete end of death, to find a job for the Angel when death comes to an end. Rather than offer the opinion that the Angel will be destroyed, Joshua does indeed find a function for him:

> Thus: whereas in this world Pharaoh [was punished] in his time and Sisera in his time; in the messianic era He will appoint the Angel of Death their [sc. Pharaoh and Sisera's] officer. . .Sheol will be destroyed, yet their bodies will not be destroyed. . .[27]

Thus in the view of R. Joshua, although the previous habitation of the wicked souls (Sheol) will no longer exist, the very wicked will not be destroyed. The Angel of Death will rule over them to punish them. Although death will end for all, for some life will not be a life worth living.

Joshua's scheme seems to extend the punishing role of destructive angels (with whom the Angel of Death is closely related) from the world of the afterlife in pre-messianic times to the world of the end of days. It will be recalled that it is the task of the Angel Dumah to take the souls of the wicked to the next world.[28] It is also said that

angels of destruction meet the wicked person and (just as such a person was accompanied by destructive angels while he was alive) the angels immediately attach themselves to the soul of the sinner, verbally tormenting him. [29] In Gehinom destructive angels beat the souls of the wicked with fiery rods[30] or sling the souls about.[31] Dumah offers temporary relief from punishment by leading the souls away from their torments on the Sabbath, after which they must return.[32] Even in the present era before the Messiah, personifications of death serve accusatory functions. Perhaps the death-effecting creatures will be allowed to remain even if death will be eliminated at the end of days, performing their accusing and punishing tasks.

Closely related as sin and death are in the rabbinic scheme of things, it should be noted that the evil inclination too is mentioned as a force that is to lose its power with the advent of the Messiah. "If the Holy one, blessed is He, will swallow up the evil inclination, all will come under His wings. And He <u>will</u> slay it!"[33] Commenting on Isaiah 61:10, "I will greatly rejoice in the Lord", the aggadist sees among the reasons for rejoicing the fact that "the angel of Death will have been destroyed out of Israel's midst" (the commentator apparently feels that death will continue among the Gentiles) and also that the evil inclination will have been removed from Israel (perhaps we are to read that it, too, will remain among the Gentiles).[34] We thus find the end of the reign of the

Angel of Death and of the evil inclination presented as parallel ideas.

DEATH, HUMANITY AND GOD

It was observed that the Angel of Death and his like seem to occupy an odd place in the world, having an unattractive status among the immortals and seeming only to pass through the earthly realms during missions of death and destruction. Upon closer examination we have found that to a greater or lesser extent, the Angel of Death is an accepted fact of Creation, a creature among creatures. He may have come into being during the days of Creation, or only after Adam and Eve disobeyed and sinned. Thus death's existence may or may not be entirely the result of human sin, depending upon one's point of view in the matter of when death was created. Nevertheless, death is not a total outsider to Creation. In messianic times at the end of history, the Angel of Death and his like may well continue to take the souls of the Gentile nations, or at the least may serve a punishing role. In some fashion, then, death will remain a creature with a place in the universe even at the end of days.

Yet one cannot but note that a certain tension remains regarding death's place in the world. Death is still a creature with which neither man nor God wishes to be closely associated. Death carries fear and havoc with him though he

performs the will of the Creator. He is a paradox, at once a servant of a higher scheme and a dark master of his own frightening realm, at once a friend and an enemy.

Some final thoughts must then be given to death's relationship with man, the highest being on earth, and God, the highest being of all. Since, as Mark Shapiro notes, the sages "generally describe the cosmic drama in terms of God and humanity",[35] how exactly does death fit between God and man? Does the personification of death make the role of death clearer in this respect? Our discussion thus far has explored the ways that the personification of death dramatizes the feelings human beings have about death, about the relationship of Torah and righteousness to death, and the relationship of sinfulness to death. We have also seen that personified death serves to make clear the fact that death is to one degree or another a part of the scheme of Creation. But how does personified death act in the great "drama" that is chiefly between humanity and God? Does death viewed as a creature, a being, affect the relationship between God and humanity?

Analyzing the deeper meanings of death and mourning customs in Jewish tradition, Emanuel Feldman observes that losing a loved one and becoming a mourner amounts to a close brush with death. The mourner feels estranged from life, community, God and even from himself. The various laws of mourning that involve restrictions of activity and changes in daily habits reflect this sense of estrangement.[36] Death's entry into the mourner's life has turned life upside down:

> How should a mourner react to the fact of death? He has now experienced the death of a close blood relative. He has felt acutely the effects of the termination of life, and has seen the incursion of the desacralizing elements of death into the realm of what was once normative living. He has witnessed at close proximity the ultimate opposite of life: He has been brushed by the powerful nonlife, nondivine force which is death and its accompanying tumah, defilement. Having known and experienced the absence of life and sanctity, he is now required by Jewish law to crystallize this cognition into concrete observances.[37]

By acting out his own sense of estrangement, of alienation from man and God, the mourner eventually returns to a sense of participation with the human community and with the divine.

By indirect means, the aggada expresses the alienating effects of death upon human beings. Certainly no more powerful image of the "nonlife, nondivine force" could be presented than the image of the sword-wielding Angel of Death, hideously covered with eyes, about to drop a poison drop of gall into the mouth of a terrified victim.[38] Such an image is one of a creature from an alien world. It is a clear projection of the feelings of utter alienation that death brings to people who have known loss or have contemplated their own end. Certainly such frightening

creatures as destructive angels and demons represent the human reaction to the precariousness of earthly existence, the suddenness of accident and disaster.

Such terror and feelings of alienation, as Feldman indicates, can interpose themselves between man and God, and even between man and himself. The mourner's "is-ness as a person has been reduced, his identity as an individual has melted away. . .".[39] So too are the feelings of "is-ness" of any individual who knowingly faces the end of his or her own life. Therefore, a serious possibility exists that the knowledge and experience of death can turn a human being away from the Creator, from concerns about the Creation, and concerns about created beings--including himself.

Such a reduction of sense of self and a consequent sense of distance from God is dramatically portrayed in the aggada. Death and sin, as we have seen, are partners, and sin itself reduces a person's strength and stature. "As long as man refrains from sin he is an object of fear and awe. The moment he sins, he is subject to fear and awe."[40] The first man had been perfectly comfortable in the presence of God, but after he sinned God's presence became fearful to him.[41] Before the time of his sin Adam was not of an ordinary human size. On the contrary, he had been created so large that he filled the world.[42] Both Moses and the Israelites were able, before the sin of idolatry was committed, to look upon the awesome sights associated with the revelation at Sinai, but afterwards they became cringing

and fearful.[43] Certainly the various biblical heroes and sages who attempt to trick the Angel of Death out of coming for them seem at the time of their fear of death to be distant from God, completely lacking in faith that God's decree of death is just and that their fate will be a good one at the end of time.

A partial answer to the dilemma of alienation from God is Torah. As we have seen, the aggadists made clear through their dramas of personified death versus the righteous that obedience to God's revealed law is a force against death. Furthermore, those who are faithful to Torah know on some level that they will enjoy eternal life at the end of days. Nevertheless, even the most righteous souls who ever lived feared death and tried to avoid it by all means at their command. The aggadists were aware enough of the power of human fear to know that dogma alone is not sufficient to overcome what the senses experience: death is an ending, a violation of comfortable normalcy. Fear of death, as well as the sense of alienation that such fear causes, can not simply be eliminated through repetition of doctrinal statements.

Fear of death can, however, be channeled. It is the aggadic technique of personifying death that provides such channeling of the human fear of death, and channeling the fear of death in turn serves to avoid a sense of alienation from God. The Angel of Death and his like stand between humanity and God's decree of death upon humanity. Personified death absorbs the negative feelings that

otherwise might be aimed toward heaven. By being permitted to run away, for a time at least, from the Angel of Death, the righteous individual is spared the indignity and potentially heretical consequences of running away from God Himself. Similarly, by being allowed to rage against an Angel of Death or a Samael, one need not rage against the Creator. The process also works vicariously: rather than look on and feel resentment on behalf of such heroes as Moses when we ponder their deaths, we can be treated in the aggada to accounts of their battles with figures of death who are alternately fearsome and foolish. The aggadists make it clear that humanity is completely allowed--perhaps even encouraged-- to feel horror and alienation in the face of personified death. Otherwise, it is hard to explain the shocking appearance the Angel of Death is capable of revealing to humanity: a body covered with eyes and a sword dripping poison brandished over the victim.[44] Such a channeling of horror and alienation toward personified death keeps such negative emotions away from God and even away from oneself.

As if to reinforce the effect of keeping human reactions to death far from God Himself, the aggadists emphasized that God distances Himself from evil and messengers of evil. "The angel that is given charge of God's anger is far off."[45] God created beings such as angels of death and destruction, but He does not keep such beings close to Him as He does the ministering angels. We are told in Genesis 1:5 that "God

called the light day, and the darkness He called night." God's name appears in association with light--"God called the light. . ."--but not with darkness--"and the darkness He called. . .". God's name is associated only with good, not evil.[46] Darkness is death;[47] God's name is not associated with death.

Thus death's role, when death is considered as a personified being, is not that of a mere go-between between man and God. Personified death plays an active role as the protector of man's relationship with God and vice versa. It was God and God alone who decreed that death must exist in the world, whether as a basic function of His Creation or as a response to sin. It is death that gives the human struggle with sin and the search for the good life their impetus. Even as a punishment for Adam's sin, death ultimately is a force for good. Yet humanity fears death and chafes under death's rule. The death of loved ones is a cause for sorrow. The rage and alienation caused by death can easily be aimed directly at the One who decreed that death should exist. Personified death is there to take the blows aimed toward heaven. It channels away the darkest and most rebellious human emotions from paths of heresy and sin. It is the means of death, the Angel of Death and his like, that make death endurable in the rabbinic scheme.

It would have been possible for the sages to discuss the Judaic view of death and dying without recourse to

personifying death. Indeed, the aggada is full of moving passages associated with death that do not contain the Angel of Death or Samael, demons or destructive angels. Furthermore, Jewish law provides sober and psychologically sound procedures for dealing with the death of a loved one and the mourning process that must follow. Rabbinic ideas about the cosmos fully embrace the concept of an afterlife and of a resurrection of the dead at the end of days. The path of the good life is mapped out: the ways of Torah, the righteous acts that assure long life, a pleasant death, a place in eternity.

Yet, as we have seen, the effectiveness of the presentation of the rabbinic attitude toward death as found in the aggada would have been blunted without recourse to the personification of death. Such personification was a natural outgrowth of the biblical and postbiblical world of angels that the rabbis adopted for their own use. As Mark Shapiro asserts, the rabbis did indeed believe in the angels, but clearly made use of them as a "literary device" with which to demonstrate their ideas about God, Israel and humanity.[48] It is evident that the sages also believed in the existence of the Angel of Death and destructive angels, and that Babylonian sages also took the existence of demons very seriously. Yet for the most part, any given story about the Angel of Death and his like is a story in which personified death serves as a device to make clear some aspect or aspects of the rabbinic attitude toward death.

Personification of death is a powerful aid in portraying the rabbinic view of death's complex relationship with humanity. The often fearful appearance of personified figures of death provides a crystallized image of the human awe of death and the unknown. The dramas of trickery and struggle between biblical and rabbinic heroes and such figures allow the aggadist to dramatize the human conflict with death, bringing to life all the complexities of mortal hopes and fears, as well as the fortunate ability of mortals to laugh at death and at themselves. The fear of death portrayed by the aggadist in even the most exalted leaders of Israel serves to excuse the fear felt by the rest of us, and could not have been so forcefully portrayed without confrontations with personified death.

Personification of death serves as a powerful means of expression of the rabbinic stance against human alienation from self, God and the world in the face of death. With death as a person, the fear, rage and alienation mortals feel about death can be focused at the personification rather than inward toward the self or upward toward God. Death as person is different from death as unknown force. It can be importuned, sneered at, yelled at--even embraced. Death as person means that someone will indeed be present when the great transition comes. God's plan will be executed by God's creature. Through representation by God's messenger, God's presence at the time of one's death is virtually a reality.

The fact that death is virtually always personified as

a species of angel, as a messenger of God's will, makes it clear as no mere exposition could that death is subject to God's will and is not an independent force in the universe. Similarly, the designation of personified death as a being created at a point in time, as well as a being to be dealt with in one manner or another at the end of days, indicates that death is merely a creature of God. The association of sin with the relative power of personified figures of death makes it clear that death is a part of God's moral scheme. Similarly, the impotence of the Angel of Death and Samael in the face of the Torah shows that the messengers of death, no matter how fearsome their guise, are totally subject to the kingship of God. One can therefore conclude that through personification of death the sages concretized and greatly strengthened their theological message that death is totally under God's dominion and that it can and will be removed from the righteous when God brings about the end of days.

Ultimately, by personifying death the aggadist deals directly with a basic paradox involved in the Jewish attitude toward death. On the one hand, the sages recognize that death must perforce be a shattering experience for those who are left behind in the land of the living, or those who look ahead to the end of their own lives. They completely sympathize with the feeling of dread that death engenders and admit that they share in feeling such fear. Moreover, they teach that Creation is good and that it is appropriate to feel reluctant to leave this beautiful world. On the other

hand, the sages teach that there is an afterlife, that there will be a resurrection, and that we should eagerly anticipate the messianic time. They tell us that we should look beyond the world of our senses to the world revealed by God to His prophets or deduced from sacred writ by His teachers. Hence the paradox: one must fear death yet eagerly look beyond it; one must love this world and yet yearn for a new world at the end of time.

Personified death does not solve this paradox, but it does deal with its emotional consequences. It acts as an intermediary between the world we know and the world we do not know. It channels our fear and yet, by its very presence, assures us that there is another place for our soul to be taken to, another world beyond this world. Its intrinsic unattractiveness lets us know that it is indeed a sad thing to have to leave this world behind, that life is truly good. On the other hand, its angelic status gives assurance that there is a world beyond this one where immortal beings dwell, and that we might hope to merit joining the ranks of the immortals at the end of time. Thus personified death makes the paradox of yearning for both life and afterlife more livable, if not more rational. This is no small comfort for the believer who would dare to take to heart the consequences of his beliefs.

No matter how much one might rage and fear, the reality of death must be accepted in the end, for to fight against that reality is both futile and an invitation to despair.

The sages used their collective imagination to turn death into a being, personalizing the one moment when we most fear annihilation of self. They created for us a dark companion, alien enough to admit the reality of the end of all that is familiar, human enough to give us an "other" with whom we can join in our plunge to a new world.

Those of us who stand outside of the orthodox world view of the sages can not literally believe in the Angel of Death and his like. We can not accept the gift the sages offer us. We can, nevertheless, appreciate the great purpose that personified death served. We can also hope for a time when the Jewish imagination will again give birth to an image to which we can join our own hopes and fears as we contemplate life's ending.

Notes to Chapter 1

1. Julian Morgenstern, "Angels," The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia (New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, Inc., 1939), vol. 1, 305-306.
Morgenstern claims that the deuteronomic and priestly writers must have consciously suppressed angelology in their writings because they retell earlier stories in which angels had appeared and eliminate angelic references. Similarly, the prophets seemed to have disliked angelology since references to angels are relatively rare in their works.

2. Morgenstern p. 305.

3. Bernard Bamberger, "Mal'ach," Encyclopedia Hebraica (Jerusalem: Encyclopedia Publishing, Ltd., 1964), vol. 23, 517.

4. The term can just as readily refer to human messengers, as in Genesis 32:4: "And Jacob sent messengers before him to Esau his brother" etc.

5. Mark Dov Shapiro, "The Philosophy Implicit in Rabbinic Angelology," rabbinic thesis HUC-JIR 1977, p. 2.
It is Shapiro's contention that the Rabbis believed in the existence of angels, but that they did not hold to firm beliefs about the truth of given stories about angels found in the midrash. Rather, the Rabbis used angels as literary devices to illustrate their ideas. The present thesis owes much to this idea.

6. Morgenstern, p. 304.

7. Max Wurmbrand, "Mal'ach," Encyclopedia Hebraica (Jerusalem: Encyclopedia Publishing, Ltd., 1964), vol. 23, 514.

8. For this summary of biblical angelology I rely heavily upon Shapiro pp. 4-13 and Bernard Bamberger, "Angels and Angelology," Encyclopaedia Judaica (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House Ltd., 1972), vol. 2, 956-961.

9. Note that in Genesis 32:30 Jacob asks the name of the (apparently) angelic being with whom he wrestles and receives no answer. Similarly the angel in Judges 13:17-18 who does not reveal his name.

10. Isaiah chapter 6.

11. Kaufman Kohler, "Angelology," The Jewish Encyclopedia (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901), vol. 1, 589.

12. Shapiro pp. 10-12. I have made use of his examples from the Bible.

13. Shapiro pp. 19-21.

14. Shapiro pp. 14-16.

15. In view of this point it is ironic that the figure of the Angel of Death is perhaps most widely known through his appearance in a tannaitic work--the Passover Haggadah!

16. But elsewhere, as we will see, the Angel of Death seems to take some pleasure in his work.

17. Here the Angel has been given "permission" from heaven to destroy; he thus can have some small measure of autonomy if God so wills it.

18. See The Babylonian Talmud (London: The Soncino Press, 1948, 1960) "Aboda Zarah" 20b n. 5.

19. Nedarim 41a.

20. Avodah Zarah 28a.

21. Nedarim 49a and The Babylonian Talmud (Soncino) "Nedarim" 49a n. 4. If a bad diet can cause death such a case would be related to the general idea that one can invite the Angel of Death to come by putting oneself foolishly in danger.

22. Baba Metzia 36b.

23. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 4:6, §1

24. Tanhuma Vayeshev 4.

25. Ketuvot 77b.

26. Berachot 4b.

27. Dov Noy, "Angel of Death," Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 2, 953-954.

28. See p. 12 above. Citation from Ketuvot 77b.

29. Berachot 51a.

30. Sukkah 53a.

31. Moed Katan 28a.

32. ibid.

33. The story is told in the context of a debate on the question of whether or not one may die before one's originally allotted time.

34. The Babylonian Talmud (Soncino) "Hagiga" 4b n. 6.

35. Midrash on Psalms 11:6.

36. Shabbat 152b.

37. Midrash on Psalms 11:6.

38. Pesikta Rabbati 23:8.

39. Berachot 18b.

40. Note that Satan too is subservient to God; he must ascend to get "permission" to take a soul.

41. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:2, §2.

42. Gershom Scholem, "Samael," Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 14, 719.

43. ibid. 720.

44. Exodus Rabbah 21:7.

45. Sotah 10b.

46. Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

47. However in the end it is God, not Samael, who takes Moses' soul.

48. Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, "Demons, Demonology," Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 5, 1526-1528.

49. Pesachim 110a.

50. Pesachim 112a.

51. Berachot 51a.

52. Leviticus Rabbah 6:3.

53. Shabbat 152b; Ketuvot 104a; Tanhuma Vayishlach 8; Tanhuma Pekude 3; Midrash on Psalms 104:3.

Notes to Chapter 2

1. Avodah Zarah 20b.

2. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:11, §3; compare Midrash on Psalms 9:1.

3. Midrash on Psalms 104:26.

4. Niddah 71a.

5. Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

6. Dov Noy, "Angel of Death," Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 2, 953-954.

7. The relationship between Torah and death as seen by the Aggada will be closely examined in chapter 3.

8. Compare Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:10, §2 where the spoken words of the Angel are not to be found.

9. Moed Katan 28a.

10. Baba Metzia 86a.

11. Moed Katan 28a.

12. Sukkah 53a.

13. We will again turn to the subject of the curious city of Luz in chapter 3.

14. Moed Katan 28a.

15. ibid.

16. ibid.

17. Ketuvot 77b. On this same page of the Talmud following the story of R. Joshua can be found an amusing postscript in the form of the story of the encounter of R. Hanina with the Angel of Death. At the time that the Angel comes for him Hanina also tries to steal the death-effecting knife. The Angel, however, has by this time already experienced R. Joshua's trick, and he upbraids Hanina for trying to fool him again in the same way.

18. Pesachim 112b-113a.

19. Exodus 32:11-14.

20. Exodus Rabbah 41:7 and Midrash Rabbah (London: Soncino Press, 1961), "Exodus Rabbah," p. 479, n. 2.

21. Pesikta de Rav Kahana (Mandelbaum ed.) pp. 83-84. Also Pesikta Rabbati 15:3 and Numbers Rabbah 11:3.

22. Exodus Rabbah 41:7. Another subject to be examined at length in chapter 3 will be the power of sin to cause weakness.

23. Exodus Rabbah 42:1 (angels are not specified as destroying angels); ibid 43:2.

24. Exodus Rabbah 41:7 (translation my own), compare ibid 44:8. God's stand against Af is derived from Psalm 7:7; Moses' stand against Hemah is derived from Psalm 106:23.

25. Midrash on Psalms 7:6. בְּאַפֶּךָ is read as "against your anger" rather than "in your anger".

26. Exodus Rabbah 47:9.

27. Pesikta de Rav Kahana p. 448. In chapter 3 the importance of the "kiss" of God in relation to the deaths of the righteous will be discussed.

28. ibid supplement p. 444.

29. Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:5. Here we also find attempts by Moses to drive the Angel away by force of argument and by use of God's name, until Moses finally concedes that his time has come and submits. It is a more modest struggle than the one presented in Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

30. Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

31. Pesikta de Rav Kahana p. 448 seems to be part of a tradition that assumed that Moses had always felt assured that God himself would take his soul.

32. Sol Goodman, "Selected Aggadic References to Death and Dying and their Significance for the Counseling Role of the Rabbi," rabbinic thesis HUC-JIR 1980, pp. 47-49. Goodman analyzes the "death of Moses" midrash in the light of several categories of psychological reactions to one's own impending death derived from the work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross: denial, bargaining and resignation.

Notes to Chapter 3

1. Baba Batra 16a.

2. The angels involved are not specifically called destroying angels in all versions.

3. Joseph P. Schultz, "Angelic Opposition to the Ascension of Moses and the Revelation of the Law," Jewish Quarterly Review, 61, No. 4 (1971), 282-283.

4. Ephraim E. Urbach, The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 146-148.

5. Shabbat 88b-89a.

6. Bereshit Rabbah 1:1.

7. Bereshit Rabbah 8:6; Sanhedrin 38b.

8. Pesikta Rabbati 20:4.

9. Urbach p. 177.

10. Schultz pp. 288-289.

11. ibid 292-294.

12. For a complete review of these midrashim see Arthur Marmorstein, "Ha'emunah B'netzaḥ Yisrael B'drashot Hatannaim V'ha'amoraim," in Studies in Jewish Theology (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), pp. 1-76 (Hebrew section).

13. Mekhilta de Rabbi Yishmael Baḥodesh Chapter 9.

14. Leviticus Rabbah 18:3. In other versions of the midrash the opinion that "freedom" means freedom from the Angel of Death is attributed to R. Neḥemiah rather than R. Joshua, while to the latter is attributed the opinion that "freedom" means freedom from hostile governments.

15. Exodus Rabbah 32:1.

16. For example: Exodus Rabbah 32:7 and 51:8, Song of Songs Rabbah 8:6, §1.

17. Numbers Rabbah 16:24.

18. Marmorstein p. 1 and throughout.

19. Exodus Rabbah 51:8.

20. Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2, §5.

21. Shabbat 30a-b and Ecclesiastes Rabbah 5:10, §2.
22. Moed Katan 28a.

23. ibid.

24. Ketuvot 77b.

25. Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

26. Deuteronomy Rabbah 9:1; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:2, §3.

27. Berachot 51a.

28. It is interesting to note in connection with the apparent inability of the Angel of Death to cross a body of water (in this case a river) that the Jewish mourning custom exists of pouring water around a recently deceased person before the body is removed for burial. Is this custom rooted in an attempt to contain the Angel of Death in one spot? See Maurice Lamm, The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning, (New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969), p. 4 for a summary of the custom and the author's rather unconvincing explanation of its rationale.

29. Sol Goodman, "Selected Aggadic References to Death and Dying and their Significance for the Counseling Role of the Rabbi," rabbinic thesis HUC-JIR 1980, p. 38.

30. Midrash on Psalms 11:6. It is interesting that only one description of the pleasant death of the righteous is here offered, while several alternate descriptions of the unpleasant death of the sinful are given. Perhaps the sages took some degree of relish in the thought of the punishment of the unrighteous.

31. Moed Katan 28a.

32. Deuteronomy Rabbah 11:10.

33. Baba Batra 17a; see also The Babylonian Talmud (Soncino) "Baba Batra 17a" n. 2-6.

34. Song of Songs Rabbah 1:2, §5.

35. Sotah 46b; Genesis Rabbah 69:8.

36. Numbers 15:37-40.

37. Sukkah 53a.

38. Goodman p. 35.

39. Hagiga 4b-5a.

40. Deuteronomy Rabbah 9:1; Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:2, §3.

41. Solomon Schechter, Aspects of Rabbinic Theology: Major Concepts of the Talmud (1909; rpt. New York: Schoken Books, 1961), pp. 219-239.

42. Pesikta de Rav Kahana (Mandelbaum ed.) pp. 83-84; Pesikta Rabbati 15:3; Numbers Rabbah 11:3.

43. ibid.

44. Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:1, §2.

45. Berachot 51a.

46. Midrash on Psalms 104:3.

47. Tanhuma Vayishlach 8.

48. Schechter p. 235.

Notes to Chapter 4

1. Mark Dov Shapiro, "The Philosophy Implicit in Rabbinic Angelology," rabbinic thesis HUC-JIR 1977, pp. 1-2. See quotation above in this thesis, chap. 1, p. 4.

2. Sol Goodman, "Selected Aggadic References to Death and Dying and their Significance for the Counseling Role of the Rabbi," rabbinic thesis HUC-JIR 1980, pp. 4-6.

3. Tanhuma vayeshev 4. My translation.

4. Genesis Rabbah 1:3.

5. Eccesiastes Rabbah 8:4, §1; Deuteronomy Rabbah 9:3.

6. It is interesting to note the opinion offered in Mishnah Avot 5:6 that the destructive spirits (מַזִּיקִין) were created on the eve of the Sabbath, that is, <u>after</u> the creation of humanity.

7. Exodus Rabbah 30:3, in which the following exegesis occurs.

8. Tanhuma Vayeshev 4.

9. Goodman p. 6.

10. Genesis Rabbah 9:10. The prefix "and" is interpreted to be an indication that a second meaning may be derived from the phrase under consideration, hence both Angel of Life and Angel of Death may be derived from it. A similar trick of exegesis is used in the next example, from Genesis Rabbah 9:7.

11. Genesis Rabbah 9:7. I have added the word "inclination" in brackets to provide some consistency in the translation of the term יֵצֶר הָרָע. Compare Ecclesiastes Rabbah 3:11, §3.

12. Moed Katan 28a.

13. Midrash on Psalms 116:6.

14. Ephraim E. Urbach, <u>The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs</u>, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1975), pp. 432-436.

15. Genesis Rabbah 9:5.

16. ibid.

17. Sifrei Deuteronomy 339.

18. In Deuteronomy Rabbah 9:9 we find a dramatic portrayal of

the utter firmness of death's place in the order of Creation. Here we see Moses trying to avoid death by taking advantage of the power of the Torah against death. He spends the day appointed for his death copying out scrolls of the Torah. Even God is relieved that Moses has found a way to overcome the Divine decree and signals the sun to set so that the day of death will pass with Moses left alive. But the sun itself refuses to obey God, saying: "I will not set and leave Moses alive in the world." Nature itself is thus willing to alter its own paths in order not to exclude death from its midst.

19. ibid.

20. Deuteronomy Rabbah 9:8.

21. Goodman p. 5.

22. Exodus Rabbah 32:1.

23. Urbach pp. 420-432.

24. ibid p. 430.

25. Genesis Rabbah 21:1.

26. ibid 26:2.

27. ibid.

28. Shabbat 152b.

29. Ketuvot 104a.

30. Tanhuma Pekude 3.

31. Shabbat 152b.

32. Pesikta Rabbati 23:8.

33. Exodus Rabbah 30:17. My translation.

34. Pesikta Rabbati 37:2.

35. Shapiro p. 24.

36. Emanuel Feldman, "Death as Estrangement: The Halakhah of Mourning," in Jewish Reflections on Death, ed. Jack Riemer (New York: Schocken Books, 1974), pp. 84-94.

37. ibid p. 85.

38. Avodah Zarah 20b.

39. Feldman p. 89.

40. Pesikta de Rav Kahana (Mandelbaum ed.) pp. 83-84; Numbers Rabbah 11:3; Pesikta Rabbati 15:3.

41. ibid.

42. Genesis Rabbah 8:1.

43. Pesikta de Rav Kahana (Mandelbaum ed.) pp. 83-84; Numbers Rabbah 11:3; Pesikta Rabbati 15:3.

44. Avodah Zarah 20b.

45. Midrash on Psalms 86:7.

46. Genesis Rabbah 3:6.

47. Tanhuma Vayeshev 4.

48. Shapiro p. 120 and throughout his thesis.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Finkelstein, Louis. Sifre al Sefer Devarim. New York, 1969.

Horowitz, H. S.-Rabin, I.A. Mechilta de Rabbi Ishmael. Jerusalem, 1970.

Mandelbaum, Bernard. Pesikta de Rav Kahana. New York, 1962.

Midrash Rabbah. 2 vols. Ed. Vilna, 1887 (Jerusalem offset, 1970).

Standard editions of:
The Babylonian Talmud

The Hebrew Bible

Midrash on Psalms (Midrash Tehillim)

Mishnah, Tractate Avot

Pesikta Rabbati

Tanhuma

Primary Sources-Translations

Braude, William G., trans. The Midrash on Psalms. New Haven: The Yale University Press, 1959.

_____. Pesikta de Rav Kahana. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1975.

_____. Pesikta Rabbati. New Haven: The Yale University Press, 1968.

Epstein, I., ed. The Babylonian Talmud. London: The Soncino Press, 1952.

Fisch, Harold, ed. The Holy Scriptures. Jerusalem: Koren Publishers Ltd., 1983.

Freedman, H. and Simon, Maurice, eds. Midrash Rabbah. London: The Soncino Press, 1961.

Secondary Sources--Death and Mourning

Books

Lamm, Maurice. The Jewish Way in Death and Mourning. New York: Jonathan David Publishers, 1969.

Riemer, Jack, ed. Jewish Reflections on Death. New York: Schocken Books, 1974.

Secondary Sources--Rabbinic Literature and Theology
Books
Ginzberg, Louis, ed. The Legends of the Jews. 7 vols. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1911.

Kadushin, Max. The Rabbinic Mind. New York: Bloch Publishing Co., 1972.

Kosovsky, Benjamin. Otzar L'shon Hatannaim, Mechilta de Rabbi Yishamel. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965.

_____. Otzar L'shon Hatannaim, Sifra. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1967.

_____. Otzar L'shon Hatannaim, Sifre on Numbers and Deuteronomy. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1970.

Kosovsky, Chaim Joshua. Otzar L'shon Hatalmud. New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1970.

Schechter, Solomon. Aspects of Rabbinic Theology: Major Concepts of the Talmud. New York: Schocken Books, 1961.

Urbach, Ephraim. The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs. trans. Israel Abrahams. 2 vols. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1975.

Articles
Marmorstein, Arthur. "Ha'emunah B'netzah Yisrael B'drashot Hatannaim V'ha'amoraim," in Studies in Jewish Theology. London: Oxford University Press, 1950, pp. 1-76 (Hebrew section).

Theses
Goodman, Sol. "Selected Aggadic References to Death and Dying and their Significance for the Counseling Role of the Rabbi." Rabbinic thesis HUC-JIR 1980.

Secondary Sources--Angels and Demons
Articles
Bamberger, Bernard, Joshua Gutmann, Arthur Marmorstein, Dov Shmuel Flattau, Samuel Abba Horodezky, and Alexander Altman. "Angels and Angelology." Encyclopaedia Judaica. Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd., 1972, vol. 2, 956-977.

Blau, Ludwig, and Kaufmann Kohler. "Angelology." The Jewish Encyclopedia. New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901, vol. 1, 583-597.

Cohon, Samuel S. "Angel of Death." The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia. New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, Inc. 1939, vol. 1, 302-303.

Hillers, Delbert Roy, Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, and Gershom Scholem. "Demons, Demonology." Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 5, 1521-1533.

Licht, Jacob. "Mal'ach." Encyclopedia Mikrait. Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1962, vol. 4, 975-989.

Morgenstern, Julian, Max Wiener, Isaac Husik, and Reuben Kaufman. "Angels." The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. 1, 304-314.

Noy, Dov. "Angel of Death." Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 2, 952-956.

Rabinowitz, Louis Isaac. "Satan." Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 14, 902-905.

Scholem, Gershom. "Samael." Encyclopaedia Judaica, vol. 14, 719-722.

Schultz, Joseph P. "Angelic Opposition to the Ascension of Moses and the Revelation of the Law." Jewish Quarterly Review, 61, No. 4 (1971), 282-307.

Ta-Shma, Israel. "Mal'ach Hamavet." Encyclopedia Hebraica. Jerusalem: Encyclopedia Publishing, Ltd., 1964, vol. 23, 525-526.

Wurmbrand, Max, Bernard Bamberger, Simeon Altman, and Joseph Dan. "Mal'ach." Encyclopedia Hebraica, vol 23, 513-524.

Theses

Shapiro, Mark Dov. "The Philosophy Implicit in Rabbinic Angelology." Rabbinic thesis HUC-JIR 1977.