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Assumptio Mosis and the Eschatology of Despair

Assumptio Mosis is an early first-millennium Jewish work framed as a farewell discourse from Moses to Joshua. The work rewrites the ending section of Deuteronomy, and includes within it a prophecy describing events in the distant future, alternative or supplementary to the predictions offered in Deuteronomy proper. This new twist on Moses's prophetic vision may derive from a certain despair faced by the community of which this author was a part, perhaps, as the article suggests, the Hadrianic persecution. According to this visionary re-interpretation of Deuteronomy, there is nothing for the Jews to do but suffer and wait for redemption until the world is undone and they leave it for a better place; an eschatology of defeat and despair, at least in this world.

ASSUMPTIO MOSIS is a Jewish rewriting of the end of Deuteronomy preserved in a large Latin fragment.¹ Although the work “rewrites” the ending section of Deuteronomy, it contains an eschatological revelation by

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¹The Latin is a translation of the Greek, but it is unknown whether the Greek was the original or whether there was a Hebrew original. Johannes Tromp makes a strong argument for a Greek original (*The Assumption of Moses: A Critical Edition with Commentary*, *Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha* 10 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 78–85).

Moses, describing both the course of Jewish history well into Second Temple times (possibly beyond) as well as the end of days.²

Assumptio Mosis appears to be a composite.³ The framing appears to be earlier than the eschatological revelation, possibly second or first century BCE. Additionally, the framing itself may be a combination of two (originally) separate sections, one section retelling Moses's farewell speech to Joshua (the testament) and another section—now lost—describing the death of Moses (the assumption). The eschatological revelation was placed by a later editor into this earlier framing. Although the dating of the eschatological revelation is controversial, my own view is that it was composed during the Hadrianic persecutions (135–138 CE).⁴ The description of the final persecution being an attempt to stop the Jews from keeping Torah (ch. 8) fits well with

² Authors from antiquity make reference to the *Testament of Moses* and the *Assumption of Moses* (sometimes called the *Ascension of Moses*); nevertheless, it remains unclear to what they refer. Many scholars believe that these were two different works of a similar type that existed in the past. If this theory is correct, the question arises whether the work under discussion is one of these two, and if so, which one. Richard Bauckham argues that the work in question is a part of the *Testament of Moses*, and that the *Assumption of Moses* was a different, and later, text (*Jude and the Relatives of Jesus in the Early Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990), 235–80). Taking a different approach, James Davila argues that the work in question is neither the *Testament* (used by Jude) nor the *Assumption*, but a third work relating the death of Moses (*The Provenance of the Pseudepigrapha: Jewish, Christian, or Other?* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 151). In a creative twist, Johannes Tromp argues that the text in question is the *Assumption of Moses* and that the title *Testament of Moses* was generally used by authors in antiquity as a reference to the *Book of Jubilees* (*Assumption*, 115–16).

³ I make this argument in more detail elsewhere (Zev I. Farber, “Images of Joshua: The Construction of Memory in Cultural Identities” (Ph.D. Diss., Emory University, 2013), 202–21), and hope to expand on the question of how the framing was constructed in a future project. Unfortunately, the manuscript of this text is cut off in the middle of chapter 12, and we do not know how the book is supposed to end. Jude 1:9 refers to the archangel Michael fighting with the devil over Moses's body. If Jude is referencing *Assumptio Mosis* and not some other work (see previous note) this would be some indication of what is missing. Even if it turns out that this book is not *Assumptio Mosis* and there is no discussion of Moses's burial or ascent into heaven, it still seems relatively certain that the eschatological vision was placed into the framing testament and that the latter predates the former.

⁴ A dating of *Assumptio Mosis* to the post-Bar Kokhba, Hadrianic-persecution era was argued by Solomon Zeitlin in an important, if rather idiosyncratic article, “The Assumption of Moses and the Revolt of Bar Kokba: Studies in the Apocalyptic Literature,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 38, no. 1 (1947): 1–45. (I am in no way endorsing any of the other conclusions in Zeitlin's article, only the dating.) This dating is also supported by Klaus Haacker, although he assumes that the work reflects the perspective and experience of the Samaritans, not the Jews (“*Assumptio Moses—eine samaritanische Schrift?*,” *Theologische Zeitschrift* 25 (1969): 385–405).

other accounts—especially Rabbinic accounts—of the Hadrianic persecution.⁵ (There are other reasons for my suggestion as well, but a full treatment of the question will have to wait for a different venue.) Nevertheless, many scholars have argued for an earlier dating for the revelation, either in the first century CE before the great rebellion and the destruction of the Temple,⁶ or even as early as the persecutions of Antiochus IV.⁷

The hero, or anti-hero, figure of this eschatological revelation is a man named Taxo, who will die together with his twelve sons in a four-day fast reminiscent of a hunger strike. The absolute passivity of this hero character is remarkable, as is the description of the end of days. According to the eschatological revelation, all the Jews will be evacuated to heaven while the earth and its Gentile inhabitants will be destroyed. This unique vision of the future models a passive resistance approach to the suffering of the Jews

⁵ One of the main critiques of the post-Bar Kokhba / Hadrianic persecution dating is the lack of a clear reference to the destruction of the Temple. First, it should be pointed out that there is a reference to a partial destruction of the Temple (6:8), and it is not impossible that this is meant to describe the reality of a Temple standing in ruins (i.e., partially destroyed). Second, the eschatological revelation seems highly critical of the Temple and the priesthood, and it may be that detailing a tragic Temple destruction would not have fit with the worldview of the author. Compare the treatment in *3 Baruch*, which downplays the need for a third Temple and a rebuilt Jerusalem; for more on this work, see Daniel C. Harlow, *The Greek Apocalypse of Baruch (3 Baruch) in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) and Alexander Kulik, *3 Baruch: Greek-Slavonic Apocalypse of Baruch* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010). I hope to explore both the dating question and the relationship between the eschatological revelation and the Temple in future articles.

⁶ This is the majority view. See, for example, John J. Collins, “The Date and Provenance of the Testament of Moses,” in *Studies on the Testament of Moses*, ed. George W. E. Nickelsburg, Septuagint and Cognate Studies 4 (Cambridge: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 15–32; also David M. Rhoads, “The Assumption of Moses and Jewish History: 4 B.C.–A.D. 48,” in Nickelsburg, *Testament of Moses*, 53–58.

⁷ This third view has been championed by George Nickelsburg and Jacob Licht. Nickelsburg argues that the work was originally composed during the persecutions of Antiochus IV, before the purification of the Temple by the Maccabees, but that it was updated with the section on Herod, throwing off the historical order original to the work and confusing later scholars as to its original date and intent (“An Antiochan Date for the Testament of Moses,” in Nickelsburg, *Testament of Moses*, 33–37). Licht comes to a similar conclusion, but with a slightly different redactional scheme (“Taxo, or the Apocalyptic Doctrine of Vengeance,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 12, nos. 3–4 (1961): 95–103). Although I also believe the work to be composite, the eschatological revelation itself seems to me to be a unit, so it is difficult to accept Nickelsburg’s argument. For a review of the literature on the dating and redaction of *Assumptio Mosis*, see Tromp, *Assumption*, 87–123. Finally, if one is open to the possibility of the text being written in the diaspora, a date during the Alexandrian Riots (38–40 CE) would work as well. I thank Malka Zeiger Simkovich for this suggestion.

similar to that of Daniel in the lion's den (Dan 6) or Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in the fiery furnace (Dan 3). It is also reminiscent of Jesus on the cross. This model of passive redeemer stands in contrast with the description of more active redeemers like Judah Maccabee, Judith, or Bar Kokhba.

As opposed to an eschatology of hope, where Israel is pictured as eventually standing up to its foes and taking power in the world—like the great battle in the Gog and Magog prophecy (Ezek 38–39) or the selling of the enemy into slavery by the Judeans in Joel (4)—*Assumptio Mosis* has an eschatology of despair, where any hope for redemption of the world is abandoned. In *Assumptio Mosis* the Jews wait for their father in heaven to remove them from the accursed world and bring them to live in the divine realm.

To sharpen this point, it is worth comparing the eschatology of *Assumptio Mosis* with two other eschatologically focused apocalypses which would have been roughly contemporary to *Assumptio Mosis* (at least in my dating of the work): *4 Ezra* and *2 Baruch*. Each book, like *Assumptio Mosis*, seems to believe in a heavenly realm, or heavenly Jerusalem, preserved in purity during the dark times of the sin and destruction of the earthly Jerusalem. Nevertheless, it is unclear whether the Jews in the end of days are going to live out their futures in heaven, or, as appears more likely, whether the heavenly Jerusalem will descend upon the earth (as in Rev 21:2) and take the place of the destroyed Jerusalem, following the punishment of Israel's enemies.⁸ *Assumptio Mosis* is clear that Jews will live in heaven with God.

The Ending of Deuteronomy

The book of Deuteronomy ends with a description of Moses's final hours as the leader of Israel. During this time, Moses makes a series of speeches to the Israelites about the importance of obedience to God, writes down God's law on a scroll, appoints Joshua as his successor, and sings two songs predicting the future. He then climbs Mount Nebo and dies alone.

⁸ For discussion of the heavenly Jerusalem theme in these works, see Hindy Najman, "Between Heaven and Earth: Liminal Visions in *4 Ezra*," in *Other Worlds and their Relation to this World: Early Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Tobias Niklos et al., Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 143 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 107–18 [Reprinted in Hindy Najman, in *Past Renewals: Interpretative Authority, Renewed Revelation, and the Quest for Perfection in Jewish Antiquity* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 161–74]; John F. Hobbins, "The Summing up of History in *2 Baruch*," *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 89, nos. 1–2 (1998): 45–79; and Carla Sulzbach, "The Fate of Jerusalem in *2 Baruch* and *4 Ezra*: From Earth to Heaven and Back?" (Sixth Enoch Seminar, Milan, 2011).

There are at least three discrete sets of predictive speeches or poems in the closing of Deuteronomy.⁹ In chapter 29, Moses describes the horrible destruction that will befall the Children of Israel in the future. He even foretells the reaction of the Gentile nations, when they see Israel's downfall and ask what terrible sins the Israelites did to deserve such punishment. In chapter 30, the latter half of this speech, God promises Moses that the Children of Israel will be returned to their land (v. 3) and their covenant, and that God will solidify the covenant by circumcising their hearts (v. 6) and making them sin no more.

Chapter 32 is a song that God commands Moses to sing. The song is complex and textually problematic; there are differences between the Masoretic Text (MT), Septuagint (LXX), and Samaritan Pentateuch (SP) versions. However, the overall point of the song is that Israel will sin and God will punish them for this. The song ends with God avenging the Israelites. Finally, in chapter 33, Moses blesses the tribes and predicts for them a mostly rosy future.

The overall sense one gets from reading these sources synchronically is that Israel will eventually sin and be punished, but that this will not be the end for them. God will remember them and renew the covenant with them, this time ensuring that the Israelites will never sin so grievously again.

Whatever the social milieu that serves as the background for Deuteronomy, or at least this section (it is debated), these texts appear to be aware of a great destruction (whether of the Northern Kingdom or the Southern Kingdom, or some other catastrophic event) but are hopeful that the return

⁹I am defining "close of Deuteronomy" as chapter 29 until the end. This is because chapters 27–28 seem to have been designed as a closing to the law with promises and threats designed to urge the people to keep it (or to explain why they were eventually punished)—a model that is standard fare in Ancient Near Eastern loyalty oaths to a king, whether Neo-Assyrian or Hittite. For more on loyalty oaths and their relationship to Deuteronomy, see Hans Ulrich Steytmans, *Deuteronomium 28 und die Ade zur Thronfolgeregelung Asarhaddons* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 143–94; Bernard M. Levinson, "The Neo-Assyrian Origins of the Canon Formula in Deuteronomy 13:1," in *Scriptural Exegesis: The Shapes of Culture and the Religious Imagination—Essays in Honour of Michael Fishbane*, ed. Debora A. Green and Laura S. Lieber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28–29 and bibliography cited (esp. in n. 20–22)). For more on Deuteronomy 28 as the ending of a section (or even of the whole book), see Jack R. Lundbom, "The Inclusio and Other Framing Devices in Deuteronomy I–XXVIII," *Vetus Testamentum* 46, no. 3 (1996): 314; and Norbert Lohfink, "Distribution of the Functions of Power: The Laws Concerning Public Offices in Deuteronomy 16:18–18:22," in *A Song of Power and the Power of Song: Essays on the Book of Deuteronomy*, ed. Duane L. Christensen (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1993), 336–52.

and restabilization they are beginning to see is a sign for a more secure and permanent future on the land.

The Need for Reframing

Assumptio Mosis participates in a number of genres or literary motifs.¹⁰ First, it participates in the genre of rewritten scripture/rewritten Bible, insofar as it attempts to recast a piece of Deuteronomy in a new light.¹¹ By retelling the story of Moses's death, *Assumptio Mosis* taps into the rhetorical power of this genre, as the story is a "biblical" story and the retelling, therefore, bears a direct relationship to scripture.¹² Additionally, like most examples of rewritten scripture, *Assumptio Mosis* can be seen as a commentary on Deuteronomy, since the author uses his understanding of certain biblical passages to frame the discourse. Finally, *Assumptio Mosis* includes eschatological elements, where the author attempts to predict the future, specifically the end of the known world and the formation of a new world order.¹³

¹⁰I prefer the term "participating in a genre" to the more absolute claim that a text is of a certain genre, since stark genological categories are to some extent artificial constructs. For a discussion of genology in contemporary scholarship, see Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 219–31; Carol A. Newsom, "Spying Out the Land: A Report from Genology," in *Seeking Out the Wisdom of the Ancients: Essays Offered to Honor Michael V. Fox on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Ronald L. Troxel et al. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 19–30; and Benjamin G. Wright III, "Joining the Club: A Suggestion about Genre in Early Jewish Texts," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 17 (2010): 260–85. For a sophisticated use of genre theory dealing with the mixing of genres in Ancient Near Eastern and biblical texts, see Angela R. Roskop, *The Wilderness Itineraries: Genre, Geography and the Growth of the Torah*, History, Archaeology and the Culture of the Levant 3 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011).

¹¹The idea that *Assumptio Mosis* participates in the genre of rewritten scripture goes back to George Nickelsburg; see *Resurrection, Immortality and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism*, Harvard Theological Studies 36 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 29. This point was expanded upon in a short paper by Daniel Harrington, which focuses on *Assumptio Mosis*'s use of Deuteronomy 31–34 as a template ("Interpreting Israel's History: The Testament of Moses as a Rewriting of Deut 31–34," in Nickelsburg, *Testament of Moses*, 59–70).

¹²Some examples of rewritten scripture cover a large swath of texts. Others, like *Assumptio Mosis*, focus on one small piece of the biblical narrative. The former includes examples like *Jubilees*, *Genesis Apocryphon*, and *Liber Antiquitatem Biblicarum*; the latter includes texts like *Joseph and Asenath*, *The Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, and *The Conflict of Adam and Eve*. For more on the genre of rewritten scripture see Sidnie White Crawford, *Rewriting Scripture in Second Temple Times*, Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Related Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

¹³To me it seems that the narrative framing may once have been an independent work to which the apocalyptic predictions were attached by a later editor. Nevertheless, for the

Rewritten Scripture and the Hermeneutic Hook

As Deuteronomy became part of the sacred or canonical literature of the Judeans and Samaritans during the Persian, Greek, and Roman periods, a reframing or an updating of the prophecies for the future became necessary. If Deuteronomy was to be understood as merely referring to one of the great destructions of the past, what message or information would that carry for the “current” generation of Jews?

This concern was paramount to the editor of *Assumptio Mosis* in his placing of a new eschatological revelation into a rewritten version of the ending of Deuteronomy. The narrative framing of *Assumptio Mosis* (Chapter 1) takes the appointment of Joshua by Moses in Deuteronomy as its interpretive hook or point of departure.

profetiae quae facta est a Moysen in libro Deuteronomio, qui vocavit ad se Jesum filium Nava—hominem probatum Domino, ut sit successor plebe et scene testimonii cum omnibus sanctis illius, ut et inducat plebem in terram datam patribus eorum ut detur illis per testamentum et per jusjurandum; quod locates est in scenae dare de Jesum, dicendo ad Jesum ...

The prophecy which was given by Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, who called to him, Joshua (Jesu) son of Nun (Nau)—a man approved of by the Lord, so that he might be [Moses’s] successor for the people¹⁴ and Tent of Testimony with all its holy things, and to lead the people into the land that was given to their fathers, so that it would be given to them according to the testimony and according to the oath—that which he said in the Tent to give [it] through Joshua, saying to Joshua ...¹⁵

According to this passage, the prophecy recorded in *Assumptio Mosis* was delivered to Joshua when Moses called him into the Tent of Testimony. This

purposes of this essay whether the book is a unit or a redacted hybrid is not very important, but it will be touched upon briefly in a later section.

¹⁴ The Latin here is a little awkward. One reviewer suggested that this phrase may reflect an attempted translation of the Greek διάδοχος, which is translated in Liddell and Scott as “succeeding a person in a thing.”

¹⁵ The Latin text is from Tromp’s edition. All translations from Greek, Latin, Hebrew and Aramaic are mine.

would appear to be referring to Deut 31:23. The verse, however, contains serious ambiguity.

<p>ויצו את־יהושע בן־נון ויאמר חזק ואמץ כי אתה תביא את־בני ישראל אל־הארץ אשר־נשבעתי להם ואנכי אהיה עמך</p>	<p>And he commanded Joshua son of Nun and said, “Be strong and bold, for you shall bring the Israelites into the land that I promised them and I will be with you.”</p>
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Who is talking to Joshua in verse 23? From the immediate context one would assume that it would have to have been Moses, since Moses is the subject of the previous verse (22) and the third person masculine singular verb that opens verse 23 should refer to him.

<p>ויכתב משה את־השירה הזאת ביום ההוא וילמדה את־בני ישראל</p>	<p>Moses wrote down the words of this song on that day and taught it to the Children of Israel.</p>
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However, there are two problems with this. First, the phrase “I will be with you” sounds like God speaking, not Moses; God can go with Joshua into the land but Moses will die in the Transjordan and cannot accompany his protégé. Second, verse 23 seems to be the follow-through from ch. 31 vv. 14 and 15.

<p>ויאמר יהוה אל־משה הן קרבו ימיך למות קרא את־יהושע והתיצבו באהל מועד ואצוננו וילך משה ויהושע ויתיצבו באהל מועד וירא יהוה באהל בעמוד ענן ויעמד עמוד הענן על־פתח האהל ...</p>	<p>YHWH said to Moses, “Your time to die is near; call Joshua and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, so that I may command him.” So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves in the Tent of Meeting, and YHWH appeared at the tent in a pillar of cloud; the pillar of cloud stood at the entrance to the tent ...</p>
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According to these verses, Moses is meant to bring Joshua to the Tent of Meeting for God to instruct him, and yet from the immediate context it would seem that Moses is the one instructing Joshua.

From a source-critical perspective, this problem can be solved quite simply. One should understand verses 14, 15, and 23 to have originally been one unit which was artificially separated by God's commanding of Moses to write the song and sing it to the Children of Israel in a later redaction.

There are numerous signs throughout this section in Deuteronomy that the song is a later addition into the work, and that the foregrounding of the song must have been added by whatever redactor decided to include the song in the first place in order to smooth out what would otherwise have been a very rough insertion.¹⁶ With the addition of this material artificially dividing verse 15 from verse 23, the ambiguity of the subject of the verb "and he commanded" in 23 was created inadvertently. Although this explanation, or something like it, may be sufficient for modern biblical scholars, it would certainly be unacceptable to the author of *Assumptio Mosis* and the community he represented.

However, it is very possible that the author of *Assumptio Mosis* would not have been faced with this problem. The original language of *Assumptio Mosis* is unknown; Johannes Tromp argues that the original language was Greek, not Hebrew. If this is correct, the author of *Assumptio Mosis* may have been using the LXX text, which does not have any ambiguity about the speaker.¹⁷

καὶ ἐνετείλατο Μωυσῆς Ἰησοῖ καὶ
εἶπεν αὐτῷ Ἀνδρίζου καὶ ἰσχυε· σὺ γὰρ
εἰσάξεις τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραὴλ εἰς τὴν γῆν,
ἣν ὤμοσεν κύριος αὐτοῖς, καὶ αὐτὸς
ἔσται μετὰ σοῦ

And Moses commanded Joshua and
said to him: "Play the man¹⁸ and be
strong, for you will bring the
Children of Israel into the land
which the Lord swore to them, and
he will be with you."

Following the principle of *lectio difficilior potior*, it seems best to interpret the LXX text as a gloss aimed at smoothing out the uncertainty found in the

¹⁶ This explanation follows a supplementary approach to textual incongruences. For more on the structure of Deut 31, see Stephan B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation*, Forschungen zur Alten Testament 27 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 155–58. Taking a documentary approach, Joel Baden suggests that these verses are the commissioning of Joshua according to the E text, whereas the other verses that interrupt it are part of the D text (*J, E, and the Redaction of the Pentateuch*, Forschungen zur Alten Testament 68 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009)).

¹⁷ The other important witness to the Pentateuch text, the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), reads like the MT here.

¹⁸ The Hebrew, צוֹרֵם, simply means "be strong," but the visibly gendered "play the man" better reflects the Greek idiom.

Hebrew text, by explicitly making Moses the speaker and by changing the first person “I will be with you” into the third person “he will be with you” and specifying “the Lord” as the subject of that verb. Whether the author of *Assumptio Mosis* was using this text, or whether he interpreted the Hebrew text to be referring to Moses as the speaker, would there have been any reason for him to believe there to be a missing communication to Joshua that would justify the placing of the message of *Assumptio Mosis* into the mouth of Moses? Doesn’t the biblical text already record a farewell address from Moses to Joshua, telling him to be brave and strong, that he (Joshua) would bring the Israelites into the land, and that God would be with him?

I suggest that what may have caught the attention of the author of *Assumptio Mosis* is the repetitiveness of this “command”; Joshua had heard all this exactly in Moses’s previous speech before the people in Deut 31:7–8.¹⁹

καὶ ἐκάλεσεν Μωυσεῖς Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἶπεν
 αὐτῷ ἔναντι παντὸς Ἰσραηλ: “ἀνδρῖζου
 καὶ ἴσχυε σὺ γὰρ εἰσελεύσῃ πρὸ
 προσώπου τοῦ λαοῦ τούτου εἰς τὴν γῆν
 ἣν ὤμοσεν κύριος τοῖς πατράσιν ἡμῶν
 δοῦναι αὐτοῖς καὶ σὺ
 κατακληρονομήσεις αὐτὴν αὐτοῖς. καὶ
 κύριος ὁ συμπορευόμενος μετὰ σοῦ οὐκ
 ἀνήσει σε οὐδὲ μὴ ἐγκαταλίπη σε μὴ
 φοβοῦ μηδὲ δειλία.”

Then Moses called Joshua and said
 to him before all Israel: “Play the
 man and be strong, for you will go
 before this people into the land that
 the Lord has sworn to your fathers
 to give them; and you will put them
 in possession of it. And the Lord
 who goes with you will not let go of
 you nor will he abandon you; do not
 fear and do not dread.”

A traditional interpreter, one who assumes the perfection of the text,²⁰ would be tempted to ask why Moses would be relaying the same message to Joshua twice. Furthermore, the traditional interpreter may ask, why was the first instance in public but the second in private? One plausible explanation is that the author may have speculated that the second message was a secret

¹⁹ Since in this article I am (tentatively) operating with Tromp’s assumption that the original work was written in Greek and that, consequently, the LXX text would have been the most familiar to the author, I quote biblical passages as they appear in the Greek LXX, not in the Hebrew MT (or SP).

²⁰ The model of the “traditional interpreter” has been well analyzed and explicated by James L. Kugel. See, for instance: *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 1–49; *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999); *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007).

message, for Joshua's ears only; the message recorded in verse 23 would then only have been a place-holder or general summary, leaving out the hidden parts. Speculation of this sort may have been the opening into which the author of *Assumptio Mosis* places the revelation recorded in his work.²¹

The Eschatological Revelation: An Overview

Generally speaking, eschatological prophecies are shrouded in mystery and difficult to interpret. The authors speak in code and are often vague about what exactly they are describing or predicting. In this sense, the author of *Assumptio Mosis* is no different. During one of these difficult periods—as stated above I believe it was during the Hadrianic persecution—the author of the eschatological revelation composed his work and placed it into an earlier testament, which rewrote the ending of Deuteronomy with a focus on Moses's death and Joshua's succession. The editor then retouched the original frame, making the passing on of the eschatological revelation into the new focus of Moses's farewell address to Joshua.

Whether one accepts either the dating or the argument about redaction (each is a separate issue), what remains clear is that the author lived in a time when Jews were undergoing severe persecution, which he perceived to be the period leading up to the end of days. Not surprisingly, this period is described as the low point of history, making it the proper lead-in to the apocalypse (8:1–3).

*Et <ci>ta <ad>veniet in eos ultio et
ira quae talis non fuit in illis a saeculo
usque ad illum tempus in quo
suscitavit illis regem regum terrae et
potestatem a potentia magna qui
confitentes circumcisionem in cruce
suspendit, nam necantes torquebit, et
tradi[di]t duci victos in custodiam,*

And suddenly vengeance and wrath will come upon them—the like of which will have never been upon them since the beginning of time—until such time in which he raises above them a king of kings of the earth, and a force of great power who will hang on the cross those

²¹ Johannes Tromp makes a slightly different suggestion and argues that the hermeneutic opening for *Assumptio Mosis* may be a midrashic reading of Deut 31:14, since God states there that he will address Joshua, but the contents of that address are never given, as the actual address to Joshua in 23 is given by Moses, not God (Tromp, *Assumption*, 136). This is an attractive suggestion, although the difficulty is that *Assumptio Mosis* has Moses—not God—addressing Joshua.

*et uxores eorum di[i]sdonabuntur
gentibus. Et filii eorum pueri
secabuntur a medicis [pueri] inducer
acribis<ti>am illis.*

who confess circumcision, but will torture those who deny it, and will deliver them into captivity, led in fetters, and their wives will be divided among the Gentiles, and their sons will be operated upon by doctors [as children] to restore their foreskin.

The epoch being described here is that of the final persecution of Israel. The king of kings will rule Israel with an iron fist and will persecute the Jews in the most savage manner. Many will be taken prisoner themselves, with their wives given as booty to Gentiles and their sons surgically corrected to look like Gentiles. The chapter continues with more stereotypical physical punishments, but most importantly, spiritual punishments. The remaining Jews will be forced to worship idols, blaspheme God, and violate Torah laws. With this, Israel will have hit its lowest point. It seems more than likely that this is either the author's description of his own time period, or, at least, where he thinks the reality of his time is heading.

As with many eschatological revelations, the breaking point of history is also the lead-in to the time of deliverance. The reader awaits either the direct involvement of God, or some heroic description of an Israelite hero who will save God's people from the apparent hopelessness of the situation.²² In this regard, the author of *Assumptio Mosis* follows a unique hybrid model, with the anti-heroic savior figure Taxo.

Taxo

The Anti-Hero

There has been much speculation about Taxo. Little is known about this character; it is not even known whether he is based on a real person or is completely fictional.²³ *Assumptio Mosis* is the only extant account of Taxo's

²² The pattern of redemption after tragic loss and pain can already be found in biblical texts such as Lev 26, Deut 30, and Ezek 37. One can also see this pattern in apocalyptic texts such as *4 Esd* 13, *Rev* 13–14, and *2 Bar* 80–83.

²³ There has also been much speculation about the meaning and origin of his name. For an overview of the literature on Taxo, see Tromp, *Assumption*, 124–28.

redemptive activities. Most probably, Taxo is a construct figure, created by the author of the apocalypse. The author yearns for such a character in his troubled times and projects his redemptive act into the immediate future.

Taxo's role as savior is unconventional and rather surprising (9:1-7):

*Tunc illo die erit homo de tribu Levi
cujus nomen erit Taxo, qui habens VII
filios dicet ad eos rogans: "Videte, filii,
ecce ultio facta est in plebe altera
crudelis, immunda, et traductio sine
misericordia et eminens principatum.
Quae enim gens, aut quae regio, aut
quis populus impiorum in Dominum
qui multa scelestia fecerunt, tanta mala
passi sunt quanta nobis contegerunt?
Nunc ergo, filii, audite me! Videte
enim, et scite quia numquam
temptan<te>s Deum nec parentes nec
proavi eorum, ut praetereant mandata
illius. Scitis enim, quia haec sunt vires
nobis. Et hoc faciemus: jejunemus
triduo, et quarto die intremus in
spelunca quae in agro est, et
moriemur potius quam praetereamus
mandata Domini dominorum, Dei
parentum nostrorum. Hoc enim si
faciemus et moriemur, sanguis noster
vindican<te>ur coram Domino."*

Then, on that day, there will be a man from the tribe of Levi, whose name will be Taxo, who, having seven sons, will speak to them saying: "See, my sons, behold vengeance is taken against the people, cruel, impure, and reproof without mercy, and exceeding the original.²⁴ For what nation, or what country, or which people without reverence for the Lord, having committed numerous infamies, has suffered such enormous woes as those that have come over us? Now, therefore, my sons, hear me! See and know that neither our parents nor their forbears have tempted God by violating his commandments. For you know that in this is our strength, and thus we should do: Let us fast for three days, and on the fourth day let us enter the cave which is in the field and let us die rather than violate the commandments of the Lord of Lords, God of our fathers. For if we do this and die, our blood will be avenged before the Lord."

Although Taxo is the hero of the story, he does not cut a very heroic figure. Under Taxo there will be no armed rebellion or even political maneu-

²⁴ Ostensibly, by "original" he means the destruction of the First Temple and the exile to Babylonia.

vering. Taxo's plan is to sacrifice himself and his seven sons, all of whom are free of sin, by a pathetic act of suicidal self-starvation. He hopes, thereby, to call God's attention to the injustice perpetrated upon the people of Israel and awaken his mercy and his wrath.

Taxo as the Reverse of Certain Biblical Heroes

Taxo's speech calls to mind a number of biblical and historiographical figures. If anything, any association with these figures highlights the divide between Taxo and other Jewish or Israelite saviors with more active personae, such as Gideon or Judah Maccabee. When the reader first hears of a Levite man, the image of Moses comes to mind. Moses begins his career by killing an Egyptian task master, continues with the drowning of the Egyptian army and ends with the conquest of the Transjordan. Taxo, however, will not be attacking the persecutors, nor will he be leading any Israelites in battle against the "king of kings of the earth" and his minions.

Reading about a leader with sons, one is also led to think of Mattathias, especially his speech to his sons towards the end of 1 Maccabees 2. Mattathias's speech to his sons encourages an armed rebellion against Antiochus IV and the Syrian-Greeks. Taxo's speech to his sons, on the other hand, will only lead them to starve themselves to death in a cave, all alone.

Taxo's suggestion of a three-day fast holds a strong resonance with a similar request made by Esther in the Book of Esther. In her case, following upon the fast, Esther successfully intercedes politically on behalf of her people. Taxo plans no political maneuvering; the three-day fast is merely the beginning of a permanent fast that will end with Taxo's death and that of his seven sons. Considering the above parallels, Taxo can be understood as the anti-Moses, the anti-Mattathias, and even the anti-Esther.²⁵

²⁵ Another possible foil character for Taxo—suggested to me by my colleague Malka Zeiger Simkovich—is Simeon. His aggressive response in the Dina account (Gen 34) leads to his being cursed by Jacob and could be related to his being skipped over in the tribal blessings of Moses. His very active response to Shechem and Hamor could be seen as precedent for discontented Jews interested in active rebellion, and Taxo's approach would be the exact opposite.

Taxo and the Martyrdom of the Seven Sons

There is one resonance that appears more applicable to Taxo's strategy: the story of the woman and her seven sons.²⁶ The story is recorded in 2 Maccabees 7 and 4 Maccabees 8–17 (as well as in *Josippon*).²⁷ In this story, Antiochus IV wants to break the morale of the Jews by forcing them to abandon their religious practices. He wants them to eat swine flesh and worship idols. Assuming that he will be most successful with children, Antiochus takes a woman and her seven sons and tries to force the boys to violate the Torah. When the oldest refuses, the king tortures him, assuming the boy will give in—especially with his mother watching. Antiochus mistakenly believes she will urge her sons to give in to avoid having to watch them suffer. This does not work, and eventually all seven sons are killed. In some versions, the mother is then killed or takes her own life.

The parallels between this story and that of Taxo are notable. Both the mother and Taxo are the heads of large families that submit to death in order to avoid sinning. Both are painted as heroes in their respective narratives. Both groups of protagonists are living through a time of persecution. Both stories have an air of despair to them; the evil they are up against is too powerful and they can do nothing but submit.

Nevertheless, there are important differences. Firstly, Taxo controls his own death and the death of his sons. They die on their own and in relative

²⁶ In 2 Macc, 4 Macc, and the Babylonian Talmud (*Gittin* 57b) the woman is referred to without a name. Another rabbinic tradition, found in *Lamentations Rabba* 1, *Pesiqta Rabbati* 43, and *Eliyahu Rabba* 28 calls her Miriam bat Tanhum. *Josippon* (in the poem at the close of the book) calls her Hannah, a suggestion that was surely inspired by 1 Sam 2:5, where Hannah, mother of Samuel, sings about a barren woman having seven sons.

²⁷ The connection between the Taxo story and the story of the woman and her seven sons was noticed already by Nickelsburg (*Resurrection*, 93–111). However, since Nickelsburg believes *Assumptio Mosis* to have been composed in the period immediately prior to the Maccabean revolt (or at least during its early stages) he argues (“Antiochan Date,” 35–37) that the story of the woman and her seven sons (as well as the account of Mattathias in 1 Maccabees!) must be based upon *Assumptio Mosis*'s account of Taxo. Even if one were to accept Nickelsburg's dating, this is very hard to believe. Mattathias is such a mainstream hero, and the story of the woman and her seven sons so central and pervasive to more than one work on the Maccabees, that it would be more than a little surprising if both were dependent upon the colorless and virtually unknown character of Taxo. Whatever one thinks of this critique, if one accepts a later date for *Assumptio Mosis*, as I have argued, the literary borrowing—if there was any (it could just be a shared motif)—would have to have been in the opposite direction. Collins, who accepts a first-century dating of the work, also believes that the Taxo story must have borrowed from the others (“Date and Provenance,” 25).

“peace.” The mother and her sons must submit to Antiochus and die on his terms and under torture. More significantly, Taxo is the savior figure of *Assumptio Mosis*, but the mother is decidedly not the savior figure of 2 Maccabees. In the overall context of that work, there is no question that the real hero is Judah Maccabee, who leads the armed rebellion against the Syrian-Greeks. The mother and her sons function as an image of pure, yet helpless, piety. They are the sort of people the hero needs to protect and save.

However, the use of the mother in 4 Maccabees can be seen as parallel to that of Taxo in *Assumptio Mosis* in a number of respects. 4 Maccabees does not actually deny an armed rebellion of the Maccabees as the direct cause of the defeat of the Syrian-Greeks. Nevertheless, the Maccabees and their rebellion are decidedly ignored. The entire presentation in 4 Maccabees emphasizes the idea that the religious self-possession of the Judeans is what saved them from the Syrian-Greeks. This is why the two main narratives in the work are the story of Eliezer and the story of the seven brothers—both martyrdom stories. The conclusion of 4 Maccabees (vv. 3–5) strongly implies that it was the fortitude of the seven brothers that defeated Antiochus IV.

ἀνθ' ὧν διὰ τὴν εὐσέβειαν προέμενοι τὰ
σώματα τοῖς πόνοις ἐκείνοι οὐ μόνον
ὑπὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐθαυμάσθησαν
ἀλλὰ καὶ θείας μερίδος κατηξιώθησαν
καὶ δι' αὐτοὺς εἰρήνευσεν τὸ ἔθνος καὶ
τὴν εὐνομίαν τὴν ἐπὶ τῆς πατρίδος
ἀνανεωσάμενοι ἐκπεπόρθηκαν τοὺς
πολεμίους καὶ ὁ τύραννος Ἀντίοχος καὶ
ἐπὶ γῆς τετιμώρηται καὶ ἀποθανῶν
κολάζεται ὡς γὰρ οὐδὲν οὐδαμῶς
ἴσχυσεν ἀναγκάσαι τοὺς Ἱεροσολυμίτας
ἀλλοφυλῆσαι καὶ τῶν πατριῶν ἐθῶν
ἐκδιαιτηθῆναι τότε ἀπάρας ἀπὸ τῶν
Ἱεροσολύμων ἐστράτευσεν ἐπὶ Πέρσας.

For those who, for the sake of religion, gave over their bodies to suffering, those individuals were not only admired by people but also were deemed worthy of a divine portion and through them the nation achieved peace, and by reviving diligence in observing [divine] law in the ancestral land, they undid their enemies. The tyrant, Antiochus, was both punished upon the earth and cut off after his death. Since he was by no means capable of forcing the Jerusalemites to become pagans or to change their habits from the ways of their ancestors, he withdrew from Jerusalem and made war against the Persians.

4 Maccabees and *Assumptio Mosis* share a common theme. The salvation of Israel will come due to the extreme self-sacrifice of righteous Jews. In 4 Maccabees this is expressed by the accounts of Eliezer and the woman with her seven sons. These cases of personal piety and martyrdom are offered as a type of synecdoche for the martyrdom of the righteous people of Israel as a whole. The case of Taxo in *Assumptio Mosis* appears somewhat different. Taxo is more than a synecdoche for the righteous in Israel in general; he is the savior himself.²⁸ His suffering in particular will attract the mercy of God and bring about the eschaton.²⁹ This is no accident either; Taxo states explicitly in his speech to his sons that this is his intention.

The Eschaton

Taxo's belief that God would avenge his death and the death of his sons proves prescient. With their deaths, the lowest point of Jewish history is reached, and God is ready to act (10:1–3).

Et tunc parebit regnum illius in omni creatura illius. Et tunc zabulus finem habebit, et tristitia[m] cum eo adducetur. Tunc implebuntur manus nuntii qui est in summo constitutus, qui protinus vindicavit illos ab inimicis eorum. <Exur>get enim Caelestis a sede regni sui et exiet de habitatione sancta sua cum indignationem et iram propter filios suos.

And then, his kingdom will emerge throughout all his creation. And then the devil will come to an end, and sadness will be drawn away together with him. Then, filled will be the hand of the herald, who is established in the heavens, who will immediately avenge them against their enemies. For the Heavenly One will bestir himself from the seat of his kingdom³⁰ and will leave his holy dwelling with indignation and anger on behalf of his sons.

²⁸ My analysis differs somewhat from that of Franklin Avemarie and Jan Willem van Henten, who write: "Taxo and his sons seem to represent the very few that remained of Israel after its incredibly harsh punishments at the end of time" (*Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002), 80).

²⁹ On this point, I am in agreement with Avemarie and van Henten: "The prayer of father and sons suggests that their death had crucial consequences for both Israel and its enemies . . . The coherence of 9:1–10:10 strongly suggests that Taxo and his sons' death brings about the end of time. Their faithfulness to God's commandments leads to salvation for Israel and eternal punishment for its enemies" (ibid).

³⁰ Alternatively, the phrase "a sede regni sui" could be understood as a Hebraism, rendering the term מושב מלכותו, and translated as "from his royal seat."

The death of the righteous Taxo and his sons brings about God's immediate and violent reaction. In the space of a verse the kingdom of God arrives and the devil is expelled from the world. The herald of God comes down to earth and begins to avenge the death of Taxo. In v. 3, God himself, so indignant at the death of these sinless Jews, leaves the royal seat to descend to earth.

Although Taxo is the savior figure whose accomplishments bring about the kingdom of God, he does not lead the assault on the enemies; his pathetic death draws God out of heaven and God will lead the charge. In this sense, Taxo is hardly a Judah Maccabee or a Bar Kokhba. In fact, one could make the argument that his character was designed specifically to be the exact opposite.

The vision of the punishment of the Gentiles in the eschaton is frightening. The author of *Assumptio Mosis* makes recourse to extreme miraculous involvement of the divine (10:4–7).

*Et tremebit terra usque ad fines suas
concutietur, et alti montes
humiliabuntur et concutientur et
convalles cadent. Sol non dabit lumen
et in tenebris convertent se cornua
lunae et confringentur, et tota
convertit se in sanguine; et orbis
stellarum conturvavitur. Et mare
usque ad abyssum decedit, ad³¹ fontes
aquarum deficient et flumina
expavascent. Quia exurgit summus
Deus aeternus solus, et palam veniet
ut vindicet gentes et perdet omnia
idola eorum.*

And the earth will tremble all the way until its ends shake, and the high mountains are brought low and shaken, and the valleys will sink. The sun will not give light and the horns of the moon will turn into darkness and be broken into pieces, and will be turned entirely to blood; and the orbit of the stars will be thrown into confusion. And the sea will withdraw all the way to the abyss, moreover the fountains of the waters will defect and the rivers will recoil. For the Highest God, the Only Eternal One, will bestir himself and appear publicly, in order to have vengeance on the Gentiles and destroy all of their idols.

³¹ “ad” here instead of “at,” see Tromp, *Assumption*, 37n35.

Much of the revelatory imagery used here to introduce the punishment of the Gentiles is not new or unique to *Assumptio Mosis*. In fact, this section of *Assumptio Mosis* can be seen as an embellishment of the end-of-days portrayal in Joel 2:10, and 2:30–31 [=3:3–4 in the MT]:

πρὸ προσώπου αὐτῶν συγχυθήσεται ἡ γῆ καὶ σεισθήσεται ὁ οὐρανός ὁ ἥλιος καὶ ἡ σελήνη συσκοτάσουσιν καὶ τὰ ἄστρα δύσουσιν τὸ φέγγος αὐτῶν ...

Before their faces the earth will be stirred up and the heavens will be shaken, and the sun and the moon will grow dark and the stars will reduce their brightness ...

καὶ δώσω τέρατα ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς αἷμα καὶ πῦρ καὶ ἀτμίδια καπνοῦ. ὁ ἥλιος μεταστραφήσεται εἰς σκότος καὶ ἡ σελήνη εἰς αἷμα πρὶν ἔλθειν ἡμέραν κυρίου τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἐπιφανῆ.

And I will place wonders in the heavens, and on the earth: blood and fire and vapors of smoke. The sun will turn to darkness and the moon to blood, before the great and splendid day of the Lord comes.

The end-of-days punishment of the Gentiles as described in *Assumptio Mosis* (and in the book of Joel itself) is no ordinary punishment. It is meant both to parallel the divine retribution against the Egyptians before the Exodus as well as to imply an undoing of creation. The punishment is a variation on the theme, seen in the Noah story and in some examples of apocalyptic literature, of God returning the world to the chaotic state from which it is formed in Gen 1. God is not just avenging the collective wrongs of Gentile persecution of Jews, and Taxo in particular, but is, in fact, ending the world as it was known. The sun will be darkened, the moon will be broken and the constellations of stars will lose their order. Even the water will run away from the earth, whether it be of the seas, the rivers or the various sources of ground water.

The Heavenly Abode of the Jews

The total destruction of the world raises the question of what happens to the Jews when this occurs. This question is answered in the very next verses (10:8–10).

Tunc felix eris, tu Istrahel, et ascendes supra cervices et alas aquilae, et implebuntur. Et altavit te Deus, et faciet te herere³² caelo stellarum, loco habitationis eius. Et conspiges³³ a summo, et vides inimicos tuos in terram et cognosces illos et gaudebis et agis gratias et confiteberis creatori tuo.

Then you will be happy, you Israel, and you will mount the necks and wings of eagles and they will be covered. And God will elevate you and grant you residence in the heavens among the stars, the place of his habitation. And you will look down from above and you will see your enemies on earth and you will recognize them and laugh at them and you will give thanks and praise to your Creator.

Although neither the punishment of the Gentiles nor the miraculous nature of the end-of-days is new to *Assumptio Mosis*, the fate of Israel seems to be. The surprising perception of the fate of Israel in the end of days offered here is that Israel will not, in fact, live upon the earth in the eschaton. As God destroys the world he created, Israel will be transported to heaven upon eagle's wings and will be given an apparently permanent dwelling place in heaven. From there, Israel can watch with glee as their enemies and persecutors over hundreds of years are destroyed by their God. This is apparently the endgame of creation and the final state of things, as the eschatological revelation ends with these verses, and *Assumptio Mosis* returns to the matter of Moses's death and Joshua's appointment as leader of Israel.

A Rabbinic Story

It seems worth pausing the analysis of *Assumptio Mosis* to look at a story in rabbinic literature which has some resonances with the Taxo story in the eschatological revelation. Although the version of the eschaton where the Jews must hit rock bottom in order to catapult them to the top does not receive much attention in rabbinic literature, a pair of stories from *Sifrei Deuteronomy* appears to encapsulate this message.³⁴

³² From *haereo*.

³³ From *conspicio*.

³⁴ The text below is from *Sifrei Deuteronomy* ("Parshat Eiqev" 43, Finkelstein ed.) The stories also appear in slightly different form in b. *Makkot* 24a–b, and serve as the ending of the tractate.

וכבר היו רבן גמליאל ורבי יהושע ורבי אלעזר
 בן עזריה ורבי עקיבה נכנסים לרומי שמעו קול
 המיה של מדינה מפיטוליס עד מאה ועשרים
 מיל התחילו הם בוכים ורבי עקיבה מצחק.
 אמרו לו: "עקיבה מפני מה אנו בוכים ואתה
 מצחק?" אמר להם: "אתם למה בכיתם?" אמרו
 לו: "ולא נבכה? שהגוים עובדי עבודה זרה
 מזבחים לאילים ומשתחווים לעצבים יושבים
 בטח שלווה ושאנן ובית הדום רגליו של אלהינו
 היה לשריפת אש ומדור לחיות השדה!" אמר
 להם: "אף אני לכך צחקתי. אם כך נתן
 למכעיסיו קל וחומר לעושי רצונו!"

R. Gamaliel, R. Yehoshua, R. Elazar
 ben Azariah, and R. Akiva were
 entering Rome, and they heard the
 voices of the crowd in the city when
 they were in Puteoli, 120 miles
 [away]. They started to cry, but R.
 Akiva laughed. They said to him:
 "Akiva, why are you laughing while
 we are crying?" He said to them:
 "And you, why are you crying?"
 They said to him: "Should we not
 cry?! The Gentiles practice idolatry,
 offer sacrifices to false gods, and bow
 to statues—they dwell there in
 comfort, in peace, security and
 confidence. While the place for our
 God's feet is burnt in fire and is a
 home for wild animals!" He said to
 them: "This is why I am laughing,
 for if this [situation of confidence] is
 what accrues to those who anger
 him, how much more so will [good
 eventually] accrue to those who do
 his will!"

שוב פעם אחת היו עולים לירושלם. הגיעו
 לצופים קרעו בגדיהם. הגיעו להר הבית וראו
 שועל יוצא מבית קדש הקדשים. התחילו הם
 בוכים ורבי עקיבה מצחק. אמרו לו: "עקיבה
 לעולם אתה מתמיה שאנו בוכים ואתה מצחק."
 אמר להם: "ואתם למה בכיתם?" אמרו לו:
 "לא נבכה על מקום שכתוב בו 'הזור הקרב
 יומת' הרי שועל יוצא מתוכו עלינו נתקיים 'על
 זה היה דוה לבנו על הר ציון ששמש שועלים
 הלכו בו'!" אמר להם: "אף אני לכך צחקתי.
 הרי הוא אומר: 'ואעידה לי עדים נאמנים את
 אוריה הכהן ואת זכריהו בן יברכיהו'. וכי מה
 ענין אוריה אצל זכריהו? מה אמר אוריה?

Again once they were going up to
 Jerusalem. When they arrived at
 Scopus they tore their clothes. Once
 they got to the Temple Mount, they
 saw a fox running out of the Holy of
 Holies. They started crying and R.
 Akiva started laughing. They said to
 him: "Akiva, you always behave in
 such a shocking manner, for you are
 laughing while we are crying!" He
 said to them: "And you, why are you
 crying?" They replied: "Should we
 not cry? For the place referring to

'ציון שדה תחרש וירושלם עיים תהיה והר
 הבית לבמות יער'. מה אמר זכריה? 'כה אמר
 ה' צבאות עוד ישבו זקנים וזקנות וגו' ורחבות
 העיר וגו'. אמר המקום 'הרי לי שני עדים האלו
 אם קיימים דברי אוריה קיימים דברי זכריה
 ואם בטלו דברי אוריה בטלים דברי זכריה'.
 שמחתי שנתקיימו דברי אוריה לסוף שדברי
 זכריה עתידים לבוא. "בלשון הזה אמרו לו:
 "עקיבה נחמתנו."

which it says 'the stranger who approaches should be executed' (Num 1:51) has a fox running through it, should we not fulfill 'upon this our hearts grieve, upon Mount Zion which is destroyed, foxes run through it' (Lam 5:17–18)?!" He said to them: "That is why I am laughing. For it says (Isa 8:2): 'and bear witness for me reliable witnesses, Uriah the priest and Zechariah son of Yeberekiahu.' What is the connection between Uriah and Zechariah? What did Uriah say? 'Zion shall be a plowed field and Jerusalem a heap of ruins and the Temple Mount a wooded height' (Jer 26:18). What did Zechariah say? 'Thus said the Lord of Hosts: "Elderly men and women shall again sit [in the streets of Jerusalem] etc. And the streets of the city [will be filled with boys and girls] etc.'" (Zech 8:4–5). God is saying: 'I have these two testimonies. If the words of Uriah come to pass then the words of Zechariah will come to pass. If the words of Uriah are nullified then the words of Zechariah are nullified.' I am happy that the words of Uriah have come to pass, since [this means that] eventually the words of Zechariah will come as well." With the following they responded to him: "Akiva you have consoled us."

In this pair of stories one can see the same two elements that appear in the eschaton of *Assumptio Mosis*. In the first story, the great success of the Gentiles in the land that was responsible for destroying the Temple in Jerusalem brings the rabbis to tears. R. Akiva, however, sees the matter differently. In his view, it will be this very success of the offending Gentiles that will lead to their eventual ruin. In the second story, the horrific state of the Temple Mount brings the rabbis to tears. Again, R. Akiva sees it differently. In his view, the enormous fall and humiliation of the Jews will be that which guarantees their ultimate success.

It seems telling that this story is set in the period after the destruction of the Temple and the words of comfort are placed in the mouth of R. Akiva; this is the same rabbi who is described in other accounts as having backed the Bar Kokhba rebellion and being cruelly executed in the Hadrianic persecutions for teaching Torah.³⁵ It may be that the constant failure of Jewish rebellions led some, like the author of these stories, to recast the messianic vision in a form that would exclude military solutions and the painful consequences of the Bar Kokhba revolt. Although R. Akiva presents his understanding of history in an optimistic light, his position on what constitutes a sign of redemption is similar to that of the eschatological revelation in *Assumptio Mosis*—the moment when hope ends it begins.

In the rabbinic texts, R. Akiva justifies his position (at least in the second example) with quotes from the prophets. Although *Assumptio Mosis* does not quote explicitly from any biblical book, the author seems to base his vision of the eschaton on his understanding of biblical verses. If my argument that the eschatological revelation is a product of the Hadrianic persecution is correct, it may not be a coincidence that R. Akiva of all people is given this perspective in rabbinic literature. Although no organic connection between the eschatological revelation in *Assumptio Mosis* and the rabbinic stories about R. Akiva can be assumed, it is not unreasonable to imagine that both originated in a group of frightened and persecuted Jews living under the thumb of a powerful—and seemingly undefeatable—antagonistic Roman government.

Hermeneutic Hooks for the Heavenly Abode and Final Punishment

As is the case for the narrative framework, the actual description of the eschaton has a hermeneutic basis in the biblical verses. The flight of Israel to

³⁵ *Lam. Rab.* 2:4; *b. Berakhot* 61b; *b. Menahot* 29b .

heaven upon eagle's wings was certainly inspired by the description of Israel's trip to Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:4.

αὐτοὶ ἐώρακατε ὅσα πεποίηκα τοῖς
Αἰγυπτίοις καὶ ἀνέλαβον ὑμᾶς ὡσεὶ ἐπὶ
πετερυγῶν ἀετῶν καὶ προσηγαγόμεν
ὑμᾶς πρὸς ἐμαυτόν.

You yourselves have seen what I did
to the Egyptians, and that I took
you as if on eagle's wings and
brought you to me.

The biblical text is meant metaphorically and refers to God's bringing of the Israelites out of Egypt and to Mount Sinai, in order to receive the revelation of the Ten Commandments. The author of *Assumptio Mosis* makes use of this imagery when envisioning a final escape from earth—a literal flight upon the wings of eagles in order for the Jews to reach their new heavenly abode. Whereas the Israelites congregated with God at Mount Sinai for a temporary revelation, with God coming down to meet them, this trip will bring them to God's abode, where they will dwell permanently in the new order.

The punishment of the Gentiles also seems to be inspired by biblical verses, particularly the final section of Moses's song in Deut 32:42–43.³⁶

μεθύσω τὰ βέλη μου ἀφ' αἵματος καὶ ἡ
μάχαιρά μου καταφάγεται κρέα ἀφ'
αἵματος τραυματιῶν καὶ αἰχμαλωσίας
ἀπὸ κεφαλῆς ἀρχόντων ἐχθρῶν.
εὐφράνθητε οὐρανοὶ ἅμα αὐτῷ καὶ
προσκυνησάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες υἱοὶ
θεοῦ εὐφράνθητε ἔθνη μετὰ τοῦ λαοῦ
αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐνισχυσάτωσαν αὐτῷ πάντες
ἄγγελοι θεοῦ ὅτι τὸ αἶμα τῶν υἱῶν
αὐτοῦ ἐκδικᾶται καὶ ἐκδικήσει καὶ
ἀνταποδώσει δίκην τοῖς ἐχθροῖς καὶ τοῖς
μισοῦσιν ἀνταποδώσει καὶ ἐκκαθαριεῖ
κύριος τὴν γῆν τοῦ λαοῦ αὐτοῦ.

I will intoxicate my arrows with
blood and my sword shall devour
flesh—with the blood of the
wounded and captives from the
heads of their ruling enemies.
Rejoice, oh heavens, together with
him and let all the sons of God
prostrate themselves before him.
Rejoice, oh nations, with his people,
and let all the angels of God
strengthen themselves in him; for
the blood of his sons he will avenge
and he will punish and seek justice
from their enemies, and he will
repay those that hate them, and the
Lord will cleanse the land of his
people.

³⁶ The Hebrew (MT and SP) of verse 43 is rather different than the Greek; however the overall message remains the same in all versions.

Following the punishment of Israel recorded in Deut 32, the song ends on a somewhat more positive note for them. Having allowed the Gentiles to be the conduits for punishing Israel, God decides at a certain point that vengeance for the Gentiles' zealous destruction of Israel must be taken. The description in Deuteronomy, like the image in *Assumptio Mosis*, is frightening. God's arrows will be drunk with blood and sated upon flesh. The enemies of Israel stand no chance and will be slaughtered.

In addition to God's frightening vengeance, perhaps the key to *Assumptio Mosis*'s description of the eschaton lies in the final line of this poem. The poem ends with the claim that the Lord will cleanse the land of his people. The word "cleanse" (ἐκαθαρίζω) is a translation of the Hebrew "כפר." This word is usually translated as "atone," but could be understood as "cleanse" or "purify," i.e., as a poetic synonym for the word "טהר."³⁷

A reader should be puzzled by such a statement. If God is punishing the Gentiles should he not be clearing the land of them, not of Israelites? It seems reasonable to suggest that, inspired by this problem, the author of *Assumptio Mosis* suggests a creative solution. The earth will be cleansed of Israel, since the entire nation will be brought to heaven to live with God. This gives God free reign to punish the world and its inhabitants with everything imaginable in his arsenal.

In effect, the author of *Assumptio Mosis*'s eschatological revelation surmises that the end of the song is actually a description of the end of the world-order in its current form. This, he believes, was Moses's big secret and the content of the veiled message to Joshua hinted at earlier in Deuteronomy.

Conclusion

The editor of *Assumptio Mosis*, and the author of its eschatological revelation, believed that the only solution to the problem of Jewish suffering in his day was to await passively the kingdom of God. When enough horrible things happened to the Jews, God's mercy would be aroused and he would remove his now-sufficiently-punished people from the earth and wreak vengeance upon its remaining inhabitants.

The author/redactor of *Assumptio Mosis* lived during a period of intense persecution; I have argued for the Hadrianic persecutions but other scholars date it to earlier periods of Jewish persecutions. However one falls out on the

³⁷ The term is unusual in the LXX. It appears also in Isa 4:4 to translate the term for "rinse" (להדיח).

dating question, the author seems to believe that he was living in the worst period in Jewish history and was confident that the end of days must be just around the corner.

Unlike many of his coreligionists, the author of *Assumptio Mosis* did not believe that the way to bring about the eschaton was to ignite a rebellion against the Gentile enemies. Although he certainly knew of Mattathias and Judah Maccabee (unless one believes the work predates even them), he does not seem to have taken his inspiration from them.³⁸ Rather, his own messianic figure, Taxo, appears more in the image of the mother and her seven sons. Taxo's death, as well as the death of his seven innocent children, will bring about the eschaton by igniting God's wrath at the pathetic fate of such innocents.³⁹ In essence, *Assumptio Mosis* believes that the best strategy for his coreligionists is to wait out the terrible decrees since rock bottom is not far off; once rock bottom is reached, the end will come instantaneously.

In searching for inspiration and foundation for his beliefs, *Assumptio Mosis* came upon the ceremony of the transfer of authority from Moses to Joshua. Most probably, this section of Deuteronomy had already been expanded by a different author or set of authors in an earlier period. This original expansion was not interested in eschatology but rather in dealing with Moses's death and Joshua's fear of taking Moses's place. However, the author of the eschatological revelation noticed that there were some strange aspects to Moses's conferral of authority to Joshua that could be understood as hints or clues. There are references to a speech that was never made; there is the interruption of Moses's farewell with the song predicting the future. From these clues the author of the eschatological revelation was inspired to fit his own understanding of Jewish history into this narrative framework and make his text the content of Moses's undocumented speech.

Using this hermeneutic crutch, the author of the eschatological revelation utilizes Moses's voice to convey his own message to his generation: the hopelessness of the situation is the key. The terrible reality under which the Jews lived during the author's time should be understood—according

³⁸ Or from Bar Kokhba, for that matter, if one accepts the later dating of the work.

³⁹ The resonance to the New Testament stories regarding the death of Jesus and the earth-shattering consequences of his execution need hardly be mentioned. Clearly the Gospel authors and the author of *Assumptio Mosis*' apocalypse were working in a similar theological continuum when it came to eschatology, although Taxo is not a cosmic figure or the son of God. Perhaps its resonances with Christian doctrine were one reason why *Assumptio Mosis* did not become or remain popular among Jews.

to him—as the sign that suffering is almost at an end, much like R. Akiva was reported to have understood the fox in the Holy of Holies. Believing active rebellion to be wrong-headed and doomed to failure, *Assumptio Mosis* preaches an eschatology of despair; an eschatological vision which, ironically, gives the downtrodden a lifeline to the kingdom of heaven based upon the pathetic nature of their situation.