

THE PERSONIFICATION OF DEATH IN SOME ANCIENT RELIGIONS¹

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I

MAN has been variously defined as a fire-user, a tool-maker, and a political animal. Such definitions are, of course, designed to pick out and to underline some essential human activity which is thought to mark off man as distinct from all other beings. For the same reason man could also be characterized as a "burier of his dead"—although in this remarkable practice *homo sapiens* was, perhaps significantly, anticipated by his hominid precursor, the so-called Neanderthal Man, who carefully buried his dead, probably with some funerary equipment.²

The ritual burial of the dead, which thus occurs from the Upper Palaeolithic era, may intelligibly be interpreted either as originating from some instinctive inability on the part of man to accept the ocular evidence of physical disintegration as marking the end of the individual person, or as due to an equally instinctive hope for some of *post-mortem* survival. But, whatever its origin may be thought to have been, it is obvious that even the most primitive mortuary practice must presuppose some reflection about death, which would surely in turn have involved some speculation about the cause of death. Where death was due to an act of violence, as for example when the Palaeolithic hunter was killed by the bison that he hunted, there would have been little problem about his end—the man had obviously died because

¹ Originally given as a presidential address to the Manchester University Egyptian and Oriental Society, 24 October 1960. Other aspects of the subject will be dealt with at greater length in the author's forthcoming book entitled *Man and his Destiny in the Great Religions* (Manchester University Press).

² Cf. Th. Mainage, *Les Religions de la Préhistoire : L'Age paléolithique* (Paris, 1921), pp. 165-6; G. Clark, *From Savagery to Civilisation* (London, 1946), pp. 41-3; E. O. James, *Prehistoric Religion* (London, 1957), pp. 21-3; J. Maringer, *Vorgeschichtliche Religion* (Einseideln, 1956), pp. 71-88.

his body had been torn or broken in some fatal way¹ But death by disease, which must surely have happened too in the Palaeolithic communities, would have been more difficult to explain. Why had the individual concerned suddenly drooped and then died? Here it would seem that the imagination would have been called upon to provide an answer. What kind of answer was provided by the Palaeolithic mind we have no means of knowing. We can only surmise that, from what they knew of the cause of death by violence, these Palaeolithic peoples were likely to have inferred that death by disease must be due to the attack of some agent whom they could not see, but of whose activity they had such doleful proof. It is tempting to go on to speculate what such a conclusion might have meant to the mind of Palaeolithic man: whether it would have led him to conceive of some awful mysterious being who would suddenly strike at the individual person and cause him or her to die?

From such speculation about Palaeolithic man's reactions it will be safer and more profitable to turn and interrogate the literatures of certain of the ancient peoples of the Near East in an attempt to understand how man first sought to explain the most definitive fact of his experience as he observed its event in the persons of his fellows.

We shall start with the evidence provided by ancient Egypt because, not only is ancient Egyptian culture one of the earliest of which we have information, but it is the best documented from our present point of view. Moreover, the chief reason for this rich documentation is the fact of the exceeding preoccupation of the Egyptians with the problem of death which led to their developing the most elaborate mortuary cultus known to the history of religions.

When we come to examine the immense corpus of Egyptian funerary literature, we find, however, that, despite their deep concern about death and the great efforts which they made to

¹ The famous Lascaux picture of a bison killing a bird-headed man constitutes an interesting instance of Palaeolithic preoccupation with the question of death by violence; cf. H. Breuil, *Quatre Cents Siècles d'Art pariétal* (Montignac, 1954), pp. 131, 134-5, 148, 150-1 (fig.); F. Windels, *The Lascaux Cave Paintings* (London, 1949), pp. 27, 63; A. Laming, *Lascaux* (Pelican Books, 1959), pp. 93-6.

prevent or circumvent its dread effects, the Egyptians never seem to have formulated either any clear conception of the nature of death or of its cause.¹ Generally it would appear that they refused to accept death as a natural and inevitable event that every living being must experience. In the earliest mortuary texts, namely, the *Pyramid Texts*, which date from about the second half of the third millennium B.C., the idea is expressed that there was once a time when there was no death ;² but nothing is said of how death subsequently came to enter into the world. The various terms used by the Egyptians for death also give no certain clue as to the intrinsic nature of the concept that they were designed to express. The usual word for "to die", *mwt*, had as its determinative sign the figure of a man falling on his knees, with blood streaming from his head.³ The substantive *mwt* ("death") also had this determinative. Two alternative expressions, namely, *mni* (meaning literally, and probably euphemistically, "to land") and *hpt* have as their determinative signs the figure of a recumbent mummy or embalmed body.⁴

It is possible, however, that the determinative sign of *mwt*, i.e. the figure of the falling man with blood streaming from his head, could afford some indication of the original nature of the concept, since the same sign serves as the determinative of the word for "enemy" (*hftj*).⁵ In other words, the use of this determinative may mean that to the Egyptian mind death was regarded essentially as an enemy, and the process of dying as the consequence of an hostile attack. There is indeed certain evidence that would seem to confirm this inference. Most notably there is the legend of Osiris, which formed the *rationale* of the mortuary cultus. According to this well-known legend, the divine

¹ Cf. C. E. Sander-Hansen, *Der Begriff des Todes bei den Aegyptern* (Copenhagen, 1942), pp. 8-9, 28-9.

² *Pyr.* 1466 d. (K. Sethe, *Die altaegyptischen Pyramidentexten*, ii. 303): n hprt mt (*mwt*). The verb hpr means "to become, to come into existence".

³ Cf. A. H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford, 1927), p. 436 (A14), cf. p. 521 (Z6); Erman-Grapow, *Wörterbuch der aegyptischen Sprache*, ii. 55, 166-7, see also under hprj, op. cit. iii. pp. 258-9. Cf. A. H. Gardiner in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (ed. J. Hastings), viii. 21.

⁴ Cf. Gardiner, *Grammar*, p. 440 (A.54, 55); Erman-Grapow, op. cit. ii. 73, iii. 258-9.

⁵ Cf. Gardiner, *Grammar*, p. 436 (A.14); Erman-Grapow, op. cit. iii. 276.

hero had been slain by the assault of an evil being called Set.¹ Now, since the Osirian mortuary ritual was based upon the ritual identification of the deceased person with Osiris in the belief that, by such means, that person would share in the divine hero's resurrection to a new life, Osiris became in a very real sense in Egyptian thought the prototype of "Everyman".² Accordingly, the Osirian legend provided, as it were, the pattern of every man's destiny, and that fact in turn meant that it would surely have supplied the imagery in terms of which the process of death was conceived—in other words, as Osiris died by being struck down by an evil enemy, so death came to each individual person.

Egyptian literature does indeed contain many instances of death being envisaged thus as the attack of some demonic being. But we encounter a curious problem when we naturally go on to inquire how the Egyptians conceived of such a demonic being or beings. It would be reasonable to suppose that the evil Set, the slayer of Osiris, would have become the Egyptian death-god, for he seems so obviously cast for the part. But, although he does indeed tend to assume the rôle of the Devil in Egyptian theology, Set is never actually represented as the god of death. This fact may be due to a curious reticence that manifests itself in Egyptian iconography about the depiction of the act of dying. Thus, although Osiris is frequently represented as lying dead and being mourned over by the goddesses Isis and Nephthys, he is never shown as being struck down by Set—possibly the current belief in the magical efficacy of pictures and statues prevented the actual representation of such a baleful event. In turn, such a taboo was probably responsible for the fact that in the illustrated versions of the *Book of the Dead*, although so many scenes of incidents in the *post-mortem* career of the deceased are realistically shown, the actual death of the person concerned is never depicted.³

If the Egyptians, however, were disposed to imagine death as due to the attack of some evil demon, it would surely seem

¹ For the earliest references to the legend see *Pyramid Texts*, 972, 1256, 1500. Cf. H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1952), p. 568b.

² Cf. S. G. F. Brandon, "Osiris: Royal Mortuary God of Egypt", in *History Today*, x (1960), 589-97.

³ E.g. see the vignettes in the *Papyrus of Ani* in the British Museum.

necessary that they should have had some concrete image in their mind of this awful being—in other words, that they should in some measure have personified their conception of death. That an effective measure of personification did take place the following selection of passages vividly testifies. From the *Coffin Texts* of the Middle Kingdom (c. 2160-1580 B.C.): “Save me from the claws of him who takes for himself what he sees : may the glowing breath of his mouth not take me away.”¹ Then, a New Kingdom (c. 1580-1090 B.C.) document known as the *Wisdom of Anii*: “Death cometh and leadeth away the babe that is still in the bosom of its mother, even as the man when when he hath become old.”² Lastly, a text from the Graeco-Roman period: “Death, his name is ‘Come’ ; every one to whom he calleth comes to him straightway, their hearts being affrighted through fear of him. There is none can see him, either of gods or of men ; the great and the small alike rest in him, nor can he stay his finger. He loveth all, and robbeth the son from his mother. The old man moves to meet him, and all fear and make petition before him. Yet he turns not his face towards them, he comes not to him who implores him, he hearkens not when he is worshipped ; he shows himself not, even though any manner of bribe be given to him.”³

It would seem evident, then, that the Egyptians, when they thought of death, had in their mind's eye a personified being of horrific form. But what exactly was that form we have no certain information, since, as we have seen, the actual death-event seems never to have been depicted in Egyptian art. In the funerary papyri we certainly have a great abundance of demonic figures

¹ CT VII, Spell 1106 ; BIL. 527 ; Cairo 28085, Lacau I. 215. 13 ; cf. J. Zandee, *Death as an Enemy according to Ancient Egyptian Conceptions* (Leiden, 1960), pp. 23, 185 (B. 9b).

² A. Erman, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians* (London, 1927), p. 237.

³ Translated by A. H. Gardiner in *Encycl. of Religion and Ethics*, viii, 22a. Cf. *Guide to Egyptian Collections in the British Museum* (1909), pp. 274-5 ; Bonnet, op. cit. 353b-354a ; Zandee, op. cit. p. 47. Sander-Hansen (op. cit. p. 27) has certain justification when he writes : “Weder König noch Gott können an sich als Personifikation des Todes gelten, und es dürfte wohl behaupten werden, dass sich die Aegypter den Tod überhaupt nicht in irgend einer Gestalt vorgestellt haben. Es ist jedoch so, dass man die Einzelperscheinungen des Todes personifiziert hat . . .” ; but he seems to neglect to reckon with both the need of the ordinary mind to think in terms of concrete images and the influence of the tradition of Set as the “enemy”.

represented, but these demons are denizens of the underworld and occupied in tormenting the unrighteous there. If, however, the Egyptians did tend to think of death in terms of Set, the slayer of Osiris, as we have suggested, then it is likely that the image under which they would have personified death, at least mentally, would have been that of the strange Set-animal well known in Egyptian iconography—a creature with sharp pointed ears or horns, a long muzzle or snout, and a tail splayed at its end.¹

At this point we will leave for the moment further consideration of the ancient Egyptian conception of death ; we shall have need to return to it again when we come to consider the evidence of Coptic literature in connection with the personification of death in Early Christianity.

II

Turning from the Egyptian conception, it is instructive to consider briefly the idea of death which was current in the sister civilization of Mesopotamia. For here we meet with a completely different interpretation of human life and destiny, yet one which apparently induced a tendency to personify death such as we have found in Egypt.

According to what we might fairly call Mesopotamian theological thought, the gods had created mankind in order that they might have servants to build temples for them and provide them with sacrifices.² But such service was the only *raison d'être* of these human creatures whom the gods had made, so that, when these creatures ceased to be capable of performing it, there was no other purpose for their continued existence.³ This view of the

¹ Cf. Bonnet, *op. cit.* pp. 707, 711b-715; J. Vandier, *La Religion égyptienne* (Paris, 1949), pp. 199-200; S. A. B. Mercer, *The Religion of Ancient Egypt* (London, 1949), pp. 52-61. E. A. W. Budge (*From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford, 1934), pp. 86-9) would identify the Set-animal with the "Salûkî", which "literally tears his prey in pieces"—a significant description in the present context. On the association of the dog with death and the underworld in ancient mythologies see A. Hermann in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, I, sub ("Cerberus").

² Cf. S. N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Philadelphia, 1944), p. 70, *From the Tablets of Sumer* (Colorado, 1956), pp. 101-2; A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (University of Chicago Press, 1951), pp. 68-71, 46.

³ Cf. M. David, *Les Dieux et le Destin en Babylonie* (Paris, 1949), pp. 13, 26, 39-40.

human situation receives its classic expression in Mesopotamian literature in the speech of Siduri in the celebrated *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh, the hero of the *Epic*, shocked by the revelation of human mortality that comes to him through the death of his friend Enkidu, seeks to escape his fate by visiting Utanapishtim, the Babylonian Noah, in his remote abode, in order to learn the secret of his fabled deathlessness. In the course of his long and arduous journey thither, Gilgamesh is represented as meeting the mysterious Siduri, who is made the mouthpiece of the *carpe diem* philosophy of life that the traditional Mesopotamian eschatology alone sanctioned. Siduri tells Gilgamesh that his quest for immortality is hopeless, for, as she significantly explains :

The life which thou seekest thou wilt not find ;
 (for) when the gods created mankind,
 They allotted death to mankind,
 (But) life they retained in their keeping.¹

However, although death is accordingly represented as natural to man, it being an attribute of the nature with which his divine creators endowed him, we find, even in the very poem in which this belief is thus stated, that the process of dying was instinctively envisaged as the seizure of the doomed individual by a demon, a kind of death-god. Thus Enkidu, the unfortunate friend of Gilgamesh, has a presentiment of his coming death and dreams that he is seized by some awful being :

. . . he transformed me,
 That mine arms were covered with feathers like a bird.
 He looks at me (and) leads me to the house of darkness, to the dwelling
 of Irkalla ;
 To the house from which he who enters never goes forth ;
 On the road whose path does not lead back ;
 To the house whose inhabitants are bereft of light ;
 Where dust is their food and clay their sustenance ;
 (Where) they are clad like birds.²

¹ Tab. X, col. iii, 1-14 ; translated by A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago University Press, 1949), p. 70 ; cf. E. A. Speiser in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (ed. J. B. Pritchard, Princeton, 1955), p. 90a. Cf. R. C. Thompson in *Cambridge Ancient History*, iii. 230-1 ; T. Jacobson in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*, ed. H. & H. A. Frankfort, (Chicago, 1946), pp. 210-1.

² Tab. VII, col. iv, 31-41 ; translated by Heidel, op. cit. p. 36 ; cf. Speiser in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, p. 87a.

In the Babylonian Creation Epic the death-god is actually named Uggae, when the rebel Kingu is accounted to him at his execution for his association with Tiamat in her primordial struggle against the gods.¹ An Assyrian text of about the middle of the seventh century B.C. is even more explicit in the course of its account of the underworld, for it describes "Death (il mu-ú [tu?]), with a *mušhuššu*-head, his two hands (were the hands of) men, his two feet (of) serpents".²

It must, accordingly, be deemed significant that in two cultures, so very different in their eschatologies as those of Egypt and Mesopotamia, death was personified as a horrific demon that seized its victims and so brought their earthly careers to a dread end.

III

When we turn to consider Hebrew religion in this connection, we are confronted with a richness and a diversity of imagery that forbids any attempt at precise definition. The long struggle of Yahwism against ancient and deeply-rooted mortuary cults has necessarily left its mark in the extant literature in the form of conflicting views of the nature and destiny of man, which in turn involves a certain contradiction in the conception of death. The clearest and most impressive exposition of the origin of death is, of course, that contained in the well-known Yahwist story of the Temptation and Fall of Adam.³ Here, in a superb narrative, we have death presented as the penalty imposed by God on mankind in consequence of the sin of its first parents. By implication, therefore, the progenitors of the human race were created to be immortal; but it is uncertain whether we can rightly infer

¹ IV, 120. Uggae plays no important part in Mesopotamian religious literature and had no place in the main hierarchy of gods. "In einem Briefe an Assurbanipal berichtet der Schreiber, dass er 'ein Bild der Anutochter (*Labartu*), ein Bild des Namtaru, ein Bild des Latarak und ein Bild des Todes' habe anfertigen lassen." (B. Meissner, *Babylonien und Assyrien* (Heidelberg, 1925), ii. 203, see also p. 179.)

² Cf. E. Ebeling, *Tod und Leben nach den Vorstellungen des Babylonier* (Berlin u. Leipzig, 1931), i. 5(3). Cf. Heidel, op. cit. p. 133.

³ Gen. ii. 4—iii. 19. Cf. K. Budde, *Die biblische Paradiesesgeschichte* (Giessen, 1932), p. 11; W. O. E. Oesterley, *Immortality and the Unseen World* (London, 1930), pp. 193-9.

from this that the Yahwist writer intended to suggest that the descendants of Adam would also have been immortal but for the Fall,¹ since, according to the logic of the narrative, the procreation of offspring was one of the consequences of the Fall.² However that may be, the Yahwist story clearly represents death as originating from man's primordial disobedience to his Maker. This account of the origin of death, however, only applies to mankind; nothing is said by way of explanation of the obvious fact that animals also die. No doubt Yahwist aetiology in this passage is designed to meet a specific situation—possibly the belief in some form of *post-mortem* survival implied in the indigenous mortuary cultus.

The traditional Hebrew anthropology, which regarded the individual person as a psycho-physical organism, a compound of body and *nephesh*, necessarily envisaged death as the fatal shattering of this organism, so that what survived was in no sense the real person but some shadowy, and possibly horrific, entity that departed to a grim existence in Sheol.³ How death, being thus the fatal shattering of the psycho-physical organism that constituted the person, was achieved is not clear. Generally God is regarded as ultimately responsible for the individual's death, since Hebrew monotheism could not allow of the existence of an evil principle or a death-god that operated among men, contrary to the will of God. Consequently, although a few passages can be cited where death itself seems to be hypostatized,⁴ the dominant view is that death is due to the action of God. However, the tendency to separate Yahweh from direct contact with human affairs seems to have produced the idea of "the angel of Yahweh" as the agent of death,⁵ although the mysterious *mašhith* of Exodus xii. 13 and 23, the "destroyer" who slew the first born of Egypt, may have been originally some baleful monster of ancient Semitic

¹ The notion clearly inheres in Yahweh's warning about the consequences of eating of the forbidden tree in Gen. ii. 17, and it is re-echoed in the woman's reply to the serpent's question in Gen. iii. 4.

² Gen. iii. 14-16.

³ Cf. A. R. Johnson, *The Vitality of the Individual in the thought of Ancient Israel* (University of Wales Press, 1949), pp. 88-90.

⁴ E.g. Hos. xiii. 14; Isa. xxv. 8a.

⁵ E.g. 2 Sam. xxiv. 15-16. Cf. Oesterley, *op. cit.* pp. 54-8.

folklore.¹ In later Jewish thought the angel of death is given the name "Sammael", i.e. "the drug of God", with reference to the gall on the tip of the sword with which he is armed, and his presence in a town is betokened by the howling of dogs.²

In view of the strong monotheistic character of Hebrew religion, it is surely significant, therefore, that, despite belief that death was decreed by God, the imagination strove to see death as an event in which there was a personified agent. One can only wonder, in the absence of a Jewish religious iconography, in what form the angel of death was conceived, for the mention of the sword indicates the conception of a concrete figure.

IV

Before passing on in our survey to the evidence of ancient Greece and Early Christianity, it will be useful to glance briefly at the imagery of death in ancient Iran, for there was the classic home of religious dualism. From what can be gathered of Zarathustra's teaching, as it has been preserved in the *Gathas*, the prophet seems to have taught nothing significant about either the origin or nature of death. Death appears essentially as the inevitable prelude to the supreme test of passing over the fearsome *Cinvato paratu*, i.e. "the Bridge of the Separator", which will achieve the fateful division between the good and the bad.³ But Zarathustra was the reformer of a more ancient faith, which had its roots far back in the Aryan past of the Iranians. Professor G. Widengren of Uppsala has made out a strong case for thinking that the characteristic dualism of Iranian religion also lay back beyond Zarathustra and originates in the concept of a high-god,

¹ Cf. A. Jeremias, *Das Alte Testament in Lichte des alten Orients* (Leipzig, 1930), p. 411. If the identification of Mot as the Canaanite god of death could be definitely established, the fact would be of considerable significance in this connection: cf. C. Virolleaud, *Légendes de Babylone et de Canaan* (Paris, 1949), p. 87; G. R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 161a; R. de Langhe in *Myth, Ritual and Kingship* (ed. S. H. Hooke, Oxford, 1958); R. Dussaud, *Les Religions des Hittites, et des Hourrites, des Phéniciens et des Syriens* (Paris, 1945), p. 371.

² Cf. M. Joseph in *Encycl. of Religion and Ethics*, viii. 41b.

³ Yasna xlvi. 10-11, li. 12-13. Cf. J. H. Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism* (London, 1913), pp. 374, 386; L. H. Mills, *Sacred Books of the East*, xxxi. 183. Cf. N. Söderblom, *La Vie future d'après la Mazdéisme* (Paris, 1901), p. 90.

who embodied within himself a duality of attributes—life and death, light and darkness, creativity and destruction.¹ Such a conception of deity would not be strange to the Aryan mind, since it finds expression in Hinduism and is not entirely absent from the Homeric portrait of Zeus. However that may be as to origins, it is important to notice that in later Persian religion the concept of Zurvān, which may perhaps have derived from the ancient high-god of Iran, contained some remarkably profound and realistic thinking about the nature of death.² For in Zurvān it appears that the Persians deified Time; but in so doing they recognized a twofold aspect of Time which finds expression in two forms of the god Zurvān, namely, *Zurvān akarana*, which meant “infinite Time” and *Zurvān darēgho-chvadhāta*, which was “Time of Long Dominion”, i.e. “finite Time”.³ Now, it was Time under this second aspect that was regarded as the source of decay and death in this present world. Its character and activity are vividly presented in the following passages from relevant Pahlavī texts translated by Professor R. C. Zaehner, who has concentrated upon the problem of Zurvān.⁴ First, a clear acknowledgement of the essential connection between death and the time-process: “For Zurvān there is no remedy. From death there is no escape.” Then, of the destructive nature of Time: “As to him whose eye Time has sewn up, his back is seized upon and will never rise again; pain comes upon his heart so that it beats no more; his hand is broken so that it grows no more, and his foot is broken so that it walks no more. The stars came upon him, and he goes not out another time: fate came upon him and he cannot drive it forth.” So graphic a picture of the operation of Zurvān naturally prompts the enquiry whether Time could have been so conceived without the forming of some personalized image of it. The problem involved here is too

¹ *Hochgottglaube im alten Iran* (Lund, 1938), pp. 94-145.

² Cf. R. C. Zaehner *Zurvān: a Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford, 1955), pp. 20, 88-90, 203-4, 208, 231-2, 239-242, 275, 382; Widengren, op. cit. pp. 266-310; J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ormazd et Ahriman*, (Paris, 1953), pp. 118-22.

³ Cf. Zaehner, op. cit. p. 57, in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, xvii/2 (1955), 243; H. Sasse in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, i. 193; H. Corbin, “Cyclical Time in Mazdaism and Ismailism”, in *Man and Time (Papers From the Eranos Yearbooks)* (London, 1958), pp. 117, 123-4.

⁴ *Zurvān*, pp. 240-1, see also pp. 397-9.

complicated for present discussion ; but it may be noticed that a reasonable case has been made out for thinking that the statues of a lion-headed monster adorned with various symbols of Time and usually identified with Aiōn, which have been found in many Mithraic sanctuaries, may represent *Zurvān darēgho-chvadhāta* i.e. "Time of Long Dominion", in other words, the god of death.¹

V

The rich treasury of the Greek imagination provided a variety of figures under which death was conceived. But, since their innate propensity to face facts seems to have led them to accept mortality as an essential attribute of human nature, the Greeks were never really concerned to explain the origin of death, nor did their theology find death a problem relative to man's position *vis-à-vis* the gods. Where, as in their mystery-cults, the individual was encouraged to believe that he could obtain a blessed lot after death, the very logic of the doctrine implied that such a destiny was not normal for men. The reply which Homer puts into the mouth of the dead Anticleia, when her son, Odysseus, tries vainly to embrace her insubstantial form when they meet in Hades, succinctly expresses the accepted eschatology : ". . . this is the appointed way with mortals when one dies. For the sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together, but the strong might of the blazing fire destroys these, as soon as the life (*θυμός*) leaves the white bones, and the spirit (*ψυχή*), like a dream, flits away, and hovers to and fro."²

Nurtured on such realism, it is not surprising that the Greeks developed no mythology of death. Homer may have preserved some memory of a primitive personification of death in his use of the expression *κῆρ θανάτοιο* (the *kēr* of death), and the well known figure of the winged harpy certainly indicates an early tendency to imagine death as a monster that snatches away his

¹ Cf. J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "Ahriman et le Dieu suprême dans les Mystères de Mithra", in *Numen*, ii (1955), 190-5, *Ormazd et Ahriman*, pp. 127-8 ; "Aiōn et le Léontocephale, Mithras et Ahriman", in *La Nouvelle Clio*, t.x (1958-60), no. 3 ; Zaehner, *Zurvān*, pp. viii-ix, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, xvii/2. 237-43.

² *Odyssey* XI. 204-22, trans. A. T. Murray, Loeb. edn. of *Odyssey*, i. 401-3.

victims.¹ But neither of these images succeeded in establishing itself as a traditional concept. Neither did the more sophisticated picture of Thanatos ("Death") as a winged youth, armed with a sword and of gentle mien, such as he is depicted in the illustration of the Alcestis legend that adorned one of the columns of the temple of Artemis of Ephesus.² This failure of Greek artistic genius to create an image of death that could be accepted as expressive of the general attitude to this most disturbing of human experiences is certainly remarkable, when we consider its success in providing acceptable representations of so many other conceptions that stemmed from experience and the inspirations of hope and fear. We can only hazard the suggestion that the cause of this deficiency might reside in the fact that the Greeks envisaged death essentially as a natural process or event, and such a conception precluded any convincing personalized representation of it.

It is instructive to note briefly, for the sake of comparison, the horrific Etruscan personification of death in the figure of Charun. This monster differs from both the Greek Charon and the Euripidean Thanatos in being represented with a most hideous countenance and armed with a hammer, with which he gives the

¹ Cf. J. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 174-8; see also H. J. Rose, *Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London, 1928), pp. 28, 245; E. Rohde, *Psyche* (Freiburg, 1898), i. 10, n. 1., 71-3; *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, p. 475 ("Keres"); the Etruscan Plaque de Cervetri, Musée du Louvre, ill. in *Histoire générale des Religions*, ed. M. Gorce et R. Mortier (Paris, 1948), ii, plate facing p. 296.

² Now in the British Museum; cf. Lübke-Pernice, *Die Kunst der Griechen* (ed. B. Sarne, Wien, 1948), Abb. 330. Cf. Rohde, op. cit. ii. 249, n. 1; Rose, op. cit. p. 141; *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, pp. 29f. ("Alcestis"), 890 ("Thanatos"); Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encycl.*, 2, Reihe, ix. 1245-1257, 1267 (35). It would be interesting to know how Thanatos was actually portrayed in performances of Euripides' *Alcestis* in the Greek theatre. According to references in the play itself, Thanatos is visibly seen (ἤδη δὲ τόνδε θάνατον εἰσορῶ πέλας, | ἱερῇ θανόντων, . . . ll. 24-25), he is black-robed (843), winged (261), and armed with a sword (74). Herakles also reports how in a realistic manner he forced Thanatos to surrender Alkestis: τύμβον παρ' αὐτὸν ἐκ λόχου μάρψας χεροῖν (1142). Although thus clearly personified and depicted as a grim being, Euripides' portrait of Thanatos here differs notably from the Etruscan Charun (see below). The binding of death, which implies an effective degree of personification, also occurs in the Sisyphos legend; cf. H. J. Rose, *Handbook of Greek Mythology* (London, 1928), p. 294.

death-blow. He is often depicted accompanied by an equally repulsive monster, Tuchulcha, who may incorporate some memory of the harpy.¹

VI

Our survey now enables us to evaluate the mythology of death in Early Christianity, although constriction of space here necessitates that we notice only the more significant aspects.

Since Christianity in its primitive form derived from Judaism, it was natural that Jewish conceptions of death should find expression in the earliest Christian documents. Of these documents the writings of Paul are especially notable for the range and variety of the imagery that could be employed. The conceptions generally lack precision in formulation, and they are often used with that ambiguity of meaning that characterizes so much of Paul's seminal thinking. Thus sin is generally represented to be the cause of death, and explicit reference is made to the Fall of Adam as the occasion of the entry of death into the world ;² however, it is often uncertain whether Paul has in mind physical death or some form of spiritual death. In several places Paul appears to hypostatize death (*Thanatos*). Thus he declares that "Thanatos reigned from Adam to Moses".³ He apostrophizes death, undoubtedly with the words of Hosea in mind : "O Thanatos, where is thy sting (*κέντρον*)? O Hades, where is thy victory?"⁴ and he proclaims that "the last enemy (*ἔσχατος ἐχθρὸς*) that shall be destroyed is Thanatos".⁵ This last reference is particularly interesting, because it would seem that Paul must have been drawing here upon some idea of current Messianic eschatology.

¹ Cf. G. Dennis, *The Cities and Cemeteries of Etruria* (Everyman edn. 1907), ii, frontispiece and pp. 183-6 ; G. Bendinelli, *Compendio di Storia dell'Arte etrusca e romana* (Milano, 1931), figs. 146, 150, 151 ; A. Grenier, *Les Religions étrusque et romaine* (Paris, 1948), pp. 59-68 ; A. Hermann in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, I, sub "Charon".

² Rom. v. 12-13.

³ Rom. v. 14 : "Nirgends wird der Versuch gemacht, den Tod als Naturvorgang zu interpretieren und ihn dadurch zu neutralisieren . . .", *Theol. Wörterbuch z. N.T.*, iii. 14—this applies not only to Paul, but generally throughout the New Testament.

⁴ 1 Cor. xv. 55 ; cf. Hosea xiii. 14.

⁵ 1 Cor. xv. 26.

It presupposes the existence of an hierarchy of daemonic beings, evidently hostile to God, that the Messiah would ultimately subjugate. Of this hierarchy, and presumably its strongest member, is Thanatos, whose fate is destruction.¹ We may well ask whether Paul really did thus think of death as a personified being, apparently self-existent and opposed to God. Such a being would indeed be tantamount to the Devil, and his existence would surely imply what would virtually have been a dualistic *Weltanschauung*. Doubtlessly it would be unwise to follow out the logic of such implications; nevertheless, we should bear in mind Paul's many references to the *archontes*, the *stoicheia*, and to the *plērōma*, all of which indicate his easy familiarity with the esoteric concepts of a Gnostic hierarchy of supernatural powers.

In the *Apocalypse of John* the same idea, namely, that in the *Endzeit* death will be destroyed, finds expression. In one of the two places where the idea occurs, death is clearly hypostatized, together with Hades, and the two are described as being cast into a lake of fire.² In another passage Thanatos is personified, being depicted as riding one of the four baleful horses that John sees in his vision of the tribulation of mankind.³ We also meet in this work an interesting reminiscence of Egyptian thought, when we read that, in the extremity of their distress, men will seek Thanatos, but he will flee from them.⁴

It would appear that the essentially Jewish idea, which we meet here in Paul and the *Apocalypse*, that death, conceived as an hypostatized being, would be destroyed by divine action in the *Endzeit*, caught the imagination of Hellenistic Christians and led, curiously, to a development of Christian eschatology that actually contradicted Paul's view, as expressed in 1 Corinthians xv. 26, that the destruction of Thanatos would be the penultimate act of the *Endzeit*. Thus, by the time of the composition of 2

¹ The earliest occurrence of the idea is in Isa. xxv. 8a: בְּלֵעַ הַמָּוֹת לְגֵעַח ; there is some uncertainty about the date of this part of *Isaiah*. See the passage from *Pesikta Rabbathi*, 16 lb, cited by M. Joseph in *Encycl. of Religion and Ethics*, viii. 41b. It must be acknowledged that Jewish evidence for the currency of the idea during the period under consideration is nil; there is, of course, abundant evidence concerning the resurrection of the dead.

² Apoc. xx. 14, xxi. 4. Cf. R. H. Charles, *The Revelation of St. John* (Edinburgh, 1920), ii. 199-200.

³ Apoc. vi. 8. ⁴ Apoc. ix. 6. Cf. Charles, op. cit. 243-4, and above p. 321.

Timothy, it was apparently believed that Christ had already destroyed Thanatos, i.e. before his *Parousia* and the events that were to mark the *Endzeit*.¹ According to the second century *Epistle of Barnabas* and Justin Martyr,² Christ had achieved this destruction of Thanatos by his own dying and resurrection. This idea quickly becomes elaborated in the myth of Christ's triumphant descent into Hades, where he is vividly pictured as assaulting and overthrowing a thoroughly personified Thanatos.³ In this so-called *Descensuskampf*-myth another significant development may also be noted, namely, that often Thanatos becomes identified with Satan, which causes him to be invested with all those strongly personalized attributes which it had become customary to ascribe to the personification of the principle of evil.⁴ What influences or considerations induced this personification of death in Greek Christianity, seeing that in the pagan tradition the personification of Thanatos had been so singularly weak, are not apparent. Undoubtedly there was the tendency of the pious imagination thus to enhance the drama of salvation ; but there is another interesting possibility that should be noted. There exists a certain amount of evidence that the early Christian apologists felt the need of presenting Christ as one greater than Hercules, because in the early Empire there was a revival of the cult of this ancient hero in a philosophized form. Hence, to the pagans' boast that Hercules had once contended with Thanatos and compelled him to relinquish his prey, it would have been helpful to the Christian cause to claim that Christ had done far more, in that through his own death and resurrection he had actually destroyed the dread enemy of men.⁵

¹ 2 Tim. i. 10 : (Jesus) *καταργήσαντος μὲν τὸν Θάνατον . . .*

² Barn. v. 6 ; Justin, *Apol.* i. 64.

³ Cf. Eusebius, *Dem. Evang.* 4, 12, 3f, in J. Kroll, *Gott und Hölle* (Leipzig u. Berlin, 1932), p. 9. Cf. M. Werner, *Die Entstehung des christlichen Dogmas* (Bern, 1941), pp. 247-50, *The Formation of Christian Dogma* (Eng. trans., London, 1957), pp. 98-102.

⁴ *Acts of Pilate*, vii (xiii) in M. R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1926), p. 137 ; Pseudo-Melito, vii, in James, *op. cit.* pp. 212-13. Even if Charles (*op. cit.* i. 169-71) is right in concluding that Apoc. vi. 8b is an interpolation, the manuscript evidence shows it to have been an early one, and it has accordingly its significance for the association of Thanatos with Hades.

⁵ Cf. M. Simon, *Hercule et le Christianisme* (Paris, 1955), pp. 112-15.

However that may be, it is significant that it is in Egypt that we find the most thorough-going personification of death produced by Early Christianity. It occurs in a Coptic document known as the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, the extant Coptic text of which appears to be a translation of a Greek original dating from about the end of the fourth century.¹ Like many pseudepigraphical works of this kind, it takes the form of a narrative in which Jesus is the principal speaker. Thus he is represented here as telling his disciples about the death of his foster-father, Joseph; it was an early tradition that Joseph had predeceased Jesus. The part of the story that specially concerns us tells how, just before the end, Jesus sees Death (in Coptic, MOY) enter the house, together with Amente (the personification of the ancient Osirian underworld), the Devil and other demons, who are come to torment the dying Joseph.² At the rebuke of Jesus these monsters are terrified and flee, and Death in particular is actually depicted as hiding himself behind the door.³ When Joseph's last moment comes, Death fears to enter the house again to fulfil his office of separating the dying man's soul from his body, and Jesus is obliged to go out and call him to do his necessary part, though warning him to act gently.⁴

Death could scarcely be more thoroughly personified than it is here, or represented in a more humiliating position. One is naturally curious as to what influences may have operated to have produced so remarkable a portrait. Professor S. Morenz, who has edited the text, has shown convincingly that the scene draws on both Jewish and Egyptian ideas.⁵ In view of the inclusion of

¹ Cf. S. Morenz, *Die Geschichte vom Joseph dem Zimmermann* (*Texte u. Untersuchungen*, 56, Berlin, 1951), pp. 23-34, 96, 101, 112.

² ἀπαρ εἶπον, ἀφει ἐρεδμῖτε οὐνη ἡσωγ ετε παῖ πετο ἡστμθουλος (Sahidic text XIV. 1). Morenz translates στμθουλος as 'Ratgeber' (op. cit. p. 16); for his comments on the Bohairic version here see p. 64.

³ ἀφῆρ εἶτε ἡσι ἡμοσ ἀφνωτ ἀφροπῆ εἰ παροσ ἡπρο (Sahidic text, XXI, 8).

⁴ Sahidic text XXIII, 6-8. In XXIII. 9 Death (μοσ) is named ἀθάτον cf. Apoc. ix. 11, also Morenz op. cit. p. 71. μοσ derives from the ancient Egyptian *mwt* (death); cf. W. Spiegelberg, *Koptisches Handwörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1921), p. 57.

⁵ E.g. the Jewish parallels cited by Morenz, op. cit. pp. 65-6, 71, 80, to Death's hesitation to perform his office. Cf. M. Joseph in *Encycl. of Religion and Ethics*, viii. 41b.

Amente in the company of the demons who visit the dying Joseph, it would seem reasonable to suppose that the Egyptian Christian responsible for the extant form of the work would have been more likely to have envisaged death, which he designates by the Coptic word MOY, in terms of his native tradition than in terms of Jewish thought, which in any case had no iconography. If this be a reasonable assumption, then we are faced with an interesting question. In describing death thus almost anthropomorphically, the Coptic author must have had some concrete image in his mind's eye—what form would it have taken? Two suggestions might be offered by way of an answer. It is possible that the author, familiar from childhood with the ideas and iconography of his people's ancient faith, would have conceived of Death in the form of Set, the ancient enemy beyond compare of Egyptian tradition. This possibility would, moreover, be greatly strengthened, if Morenz is right in his thesis that the purpose of the writing concerned here was to replace Osiris by Joseph as the pattern of holy dying at the time of the official suppression of paganism in Egypt; ¹ for Set was the notorious slayer of Osiris and by a natural association of ideas he could easily have become the demon who came to torment and to slay the dying Joseph. The other possibility is that the Coptic author envisaged Death in the form of the jackal-headed god Anubis. Anubis was a very ancient Egyptian mortuary-god who had been absorbed into the complex of the Osirian myth and ritual. As such he was regarded as a benevolent deity who cared for the dead, as he had originally cared for the dead Osiris. However, by the Graeco-Roman period Anubis seems to have become essentially the *psychopompos*.² He frequently appears on mummy-wrappings in a significant scene in which three figures are represented. The figure on the left is in the Osirian mummiform, and evidently represents the deceased person as identified with Osiris. The central figure shows the deceased in his ordinary attire; to his

¹ Op. cit. p. 34: "Joseph aber befindet sich in einer merkwürdigen Doppelrolle; Er ist sterbender Mensch, aber zugleich, wie Osiris, im göttlichen Schutz und damit wenn auch nicht Gott, so doch Heiliger durch besonderen Verwandtschaftsgrad." ; cf. op. cit. pp. 29-34.

² Cf. Bonnet, op. cit., sub "Anubis"; H. Herter in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, I, sub "Anubis".

left Anubis is depicted, with his arm around the shoulder of the dead man directing him towards the Osirian figure. The group has been convincingly interpreted as signifying the ritual transformation of the dead man into Osiris, with Anubis acting as the *psychopompos*.¹ Seen in such a context, Anubis seems to assume a more sinister guise than that which he had in the earlier tradition. He is now intimately associated with the event of death, and is virtually the one who leads men from life into death. His appearance in such scenes is also horrific, since he is coloured a dark blue or black, thus accentuating the fearsome aspect of his jackal's or dog's head. It is, accordingly, understandable that a Coptic Christian, familiar with such representations, might also have pictured Death in the awful shape of Anubis.

Here we may leave our enquiry. As a comparative study, it would seem to lead to one conclusion. That, whatever the nature of the eschatology concerned, among these ancient cultures a common tendency manifested itself to envisage death as the assault or the snatching away from life affected by some supernatural being. But the attempt to relate such a being to the theology of each culture concerned was never successful; in fact, with the possible exception of Iran, it was never seriously attempted and so constitutes the weakest point in the logic of each of the systems involved.²

¹ See S. Morenz, "Das Werden zu Osiris", in *Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Forschungen und Berichte*, I Band (1957), 52-70.

² Attention may also be drawn to the Coptic document entitled the "Discourse on Abbatôn by Timothy, Archbishop of Alexandria" (in *Coptic Martyrdoms*, ed. E. A. Wallis Budge, British Museum, 1914), in which the origin of the angel of death is explained in terms of the *Genesis* creation story. The angel at first has the curious name of $\mu\omicron\upsilon\rho\iota\eta\lambda$, which probably represents an attempt to present the Coptic word MOY ("death") with the customary ending of the names of angelic beings in Hebrew. On acquiring his grisly office, $\mu\omicron\upsilon\rho\iota\eta\lambda$ has his name changed by God to the Hebrew name of $\alpha\beta\delta\alpha\tau\omega\iota$: cf. op. cit. fol. 22a, p. 241. This legend appears in Muslim tradition, accounting for 'Azra'il as the Angel of Death; cf. H. Schwarzbaum, "The Overcrowded Earth", in *Numen*, iv. 64-6. It is appropriate also to recall G. E. Lessing's essay entitled "Wie die Alten den Tod gebildet" (first published in 1796), and particularly his conclusion therein concerning Greek and Roman tradition on this subject: "Weil sich die Alten an einem Gerippe des Todes erinnerten, war darum ein Gerippe das angenommene Bild des Todes? Der Spruch, den Trimalcio dabey sagte, unterscheidet vielmehr das Gerippe und den Tod ausdrücklich:

Sic erimus cuncti, postquam nos auferet Orcus.

(*Samtliche Schriften*, hrsg. K. Lachmann, Stuttgart, 1895, Band XI, S. 47).