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# When the Angel infuses the Soul...

## Some aspects of Jewish and Christian embryology in the cultural context of Late Antiquity

by Doru Constantin Doroftei\*

### *Abstract:*

*This article analyses the tradition of the soul-infusing angel, a recurrent motif in early Islamic embryology, in pre-Islamic biblical traditions. The analysis aims at providing a short evaluation of the relationship between early Islamic and late antique biblical (Jewish and Christian) embryology. The article argues that the motif of the soul-infusing angel represents a widespread embryological element of the late antique religious and cultural landscape, circulating beyond religious borders in a plurality of versions and variations. Being related to the apocalyptic heritage, the motif seems to have been increasingly viewed with reservations by the emerging 'orthodoxies', both Christian and Rabbinic. Finally, this article underlines the deep interlacing of early Islamic thought with the late antique religious-cultural heritage.*

The early Islamic tradition has handed down a variety of texts (in the Qur'ān, *Ḥadīth* collections) dealing with the beginning of human life from the perspective of its monotheistic worldview.<sup>1</sup> A relevant group of *Ḥadīth* texts describes the emergence of individual life as a process conducted or assisted by an angel assigned by God for this very purpose.<sup>2</sup> The angel is

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1 The texts cover both the principles of the creation of humankind (the creation of Adam and his progeny) and the creation of each individual’s life. See CORNELIA SCHÖCK, *Adam im Islam. Ein Beitrag zur Ideengeschichte der Sunna* (Islamkundliche Untersuchungen, vol. 168; Berlin, 1993).

2 In some version of the tradition, the angel bears the name “the angel of the uterus”. See THOMAS EICH, “The term *nasama* in *Ḥadīth* with a focus on material about predestination and the unborn,” (forthcoming). I thank Prof Eich for allowing me to consult his own translation of the *Ḥadīth* texts as well as his forthcoming article.



supposed to safeguard the beginning and the subsequent development of the new human being, to give it form, or to infuse it with life (*rūḥ*, *nasama*), and to write down what his or her fate is going to be. This particular tradition, which does not occur in the Qur'ān, appears in several versions in the *Ḥadīth* collections of Muslim (d. 875), al-Buḥārī (d. 870), and several other *Ḥadīth* collections. I list below a few relevant examples:<sup>3</sup>

‘Āmir b. Wāthila heard Ibn Mas‘ūd saying: ‘The wretched is the one who is wretched in the belly of his mother, and blessed is the one who has been promised otherwise’ [...]. When the semen (*nuṭfa*) has passed 42 nights, God sends an angel to it, and he forms it (*ṣawwara-hā*) and creates his ability to hear and see and his skin, flesh and bones. Then he says: ‘Oh, Lord! Male or female?’ And your Lord ordains as he likes and the angel writes. Then he says: ‘Oh, Lord! His time of death?’ So your Lord says as he likes and the angel writes. Then he says: ‘Oh, Lord! His sustenance?’ And your Lord ordains as he likes and the angel writes. Then the angel exits with the page in his hand and he does not add anything to what he was ordered and he does not take anything away. (Ḥudayfa b. Asīd, 2)<sup>4</sup>

The principal motifs of this set of texts are the gradual development of the embryo,<sup>5</sup> the angel giving the embryo its form (*ṣūra*) or infusing the soul (*rūḥ*),<sup>6</sup> and the divine decision of the embryo’s fate, which is to be understood as an act of absolute predestination.<sup>7</sup> Some of these traditions have

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3 All *Ḥadīth* quotations are taken from Thomas Eich’s translation. For an analysis of early Islamic embryological *Ḥadīth* texts, see EICH, “The term *nasama* in *Ḥadīth*” (note 2). See also THOMAS EICH, *Islam und Bioethik: Eine kritische Analyse der modernen Diskussion im islamischen Recht* (Wiesbaden, 2005), pp. 26-33.

4 Another *Ḥadīth*, attributed to Ibn Mas‘ūd, expressly mentions the ensoulment: “Each one of you, his creation is collected in the belly of his mother for 40 days, then it is in this a blood-clot likewise, then it is in this a lump of flesh likewise, then the angel is sent to him and he breathes into him the soul (*rūḥ*) and he is ordered to write down four words: his sustenance, his time of death, his deeds and whether he will be wretched or blessed.” See EICH, “The term *nasama* in *Ḥadīth*” (note 2).

5 The discussed stages vary in the text from 40 to 120 days. For a description of the development stages of the embryo, see EICH, *Islam und Bioethik* (note 3), pp. 26-33; HASAN HATHOUT, *Islamic Perspectives in Obstetrics and Gynaecology* (Kuwait, 1996), pp. 32-37.

6 The infusing of the soul does not occur in all versions of this *Ḥadīth*.

7 In a dialog with the soul-infusing angel, God even decides if the human-being-to-be will enter Paradise or Hell. For a comprehensive analysis of predestination in early Islamic *Ḥadīth* material, see JOSEF VAN ESS, *Zwischen Ḥadīth und Theologie. Studien zum Entstehen prädestinatianischer Überlieferung* (Studien zur Sprache,,

played an important role in the understanding of Islamic embryology.<sup>8</sup>

In the last few decades, it has been argued that Islam has to be perceived as a late antique religious movement whose formation and development can be properly understood only in the context of the broader Late Antique cultural and religious landscape.<sup>9</sup> In spite of being broadly accepted, many aspects of this theory remain controversial and unclear.<sup>10</sup> This paper is intended as an attempt to illustrate the deep entrenchment of the early Islamic intellectual tradition within the cultural milieu of Late Antiquity by analysing the late antique discourse on the topic of the soul-infusing angel, which frequently occurs in early Islamic *Ḥadīth* literature.<sup>11</sup>

Few systematic studies have raised the question about the background of this Islamic tradition.<sup>12</sup> While related almost exclusively to a quotation

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Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients, N.F. vol. 7; Berlin, 1975); HELMER RINGGREN, *Studies in Arabian Fatalism* (Uppsala / Wiesbaden, 1955).

- 8 Discussions about the moment at which the embryo becomes a human being, about the ensoulment of the future human being, and questions about the legitimacy of abortion or the legal capacity of embryos to inherit frequently go back to this set of texts. EICH, *Islam und Bioethik* (note 3), pp. 26-27; MARCIA C. INHORN & SORAYA TREMAYNE (eds.), *Islam and Assisted Reproductive Technologies: Sunni and Shia Perspectives* (Fertility, Reproduction and Sexuality, vol. 23; New York, NY [etc.], 2012); HATHOUT, *Islamic Perspectives in Obstetrics and Gynaecology* (note 5), pp. 66, 71.
- 9 See PETER BROWN, *The World of Late Antiquity: from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (London, 1971); PATRICIA CRONE & MICHAEL A. COOK, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (London / New York / Melbourne, 1977), GARTH FOWDEN, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, N.J., 1994); CHASE F. ROBINSON, "Reconstructing Early Islam: Truth and Consequences," in: HERBERT BERG (ed.), *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins* (Leiden / Boston, 2003), pp. 101-134; ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH, *Der Koran und Text der Spätantike: ein europäischer Zugang* (Berlin, 2010); ANGELIKA NEUWIRTH, *Scripture, Poetry and the Making of a Community: reading the Qur'ān as a literary Text* (Oxford, 2014).
- 10 See ROBINSON, "Reconstructing Early Islam" (note 9), pp. 101-102.
- 11 See EICH, "The term *nasama* in *Ḥadīth*" (note 2).
- 12 The reason for assuming a pre-Islamic background for the tradition of the soul-infusing angel was the existence of a very similar story from the Babylonian Talmud first quoted by IGNAZ GOLDZIEHER, "Ueber muhammedanische Polemik gegen ahl al-kitāb," in: *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 32 (1878), pp. 341-387, here p. 353 n. 353, and then, by RINGGREN, *Studies in Arabian Fatalism* (note 7), pp. 117ff; VAN ESS, *Zwischen Ḥadīth und Theologie* (note 7), p. 16 n. 50, who assumed a pre-Islamic Jewish version of the tradition as well (pointing to the difference in matters of predestination), nevertheless

from the Babylonian Talmud,<sup>13</sup> the question about the possible intertextuality of this set of traditions was treated mainly from the perspective of solving the difficulty posed by the idea of predestination. Moreover, the topic is only addressed in passing, lacking a detailed analysis of the background of this tradition.

I propose in the present paper to look at similar traditions of the broader spectrum of pre-Islamic monotheistic biblical communities. Since the perception of Judaism – based on Talmudic narratives – as a more or less monolithic late antique religious community controlled by the rabbis has increasingly been challenged in the last decades,<sup>14</sup> I will broaden the area of inquiry by bringing texts into the discussion which are perceived as reflecting Jewish, but non-Rabbinic circles.<sup>15</sup> And because the idea of significant difference between Judaism and Christianity has been increasingly challenged as

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quoted only two medieval sources from a collection of Midrashim published by ADOLF JELLINEK, *Bet Ha-Midrash. Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der älteren jüdischen Literatur*, 6 pts. (Jerusalem, <sup>3</sup>1967), pt. 1, pp. 152-155 (in Hebrew) and by AUGUST WÜNSCHE, *Aus Israels Lehrhallen*, 5 vols. (Leipzig, 1910), vol. 3, pp. 213-224 (in German), a fact pointed out by MICHAEL COOK, *Early Muslim Dogma. A source-critical study* (Cambridge, 1981), p. 148 n. 37 (“There is in fact only one Talmudic passage in question, that referred to by Goldziher and Ringgren, and is not given by either Jellinek or Wünsche; the first of their texts is Midrashic, the second an extract from a work of Rashi’s”).

- 13 See COOK, *Early Muslim Dogma* (note 12), p. 216 n. 37, where the tone of the footnote seems to imply a playing-down of the Jewish parallel. Instead, Cook proposes to look for parallels in Christian thought: “This is typical rabbinic assertion of free will; and it makes it distinctly unlikely that a Jewish deterministic exegesis of Ps. 58:3 could lie behind the saying of Ibn Mas‘ūd. This leaves us with the Christians.” (COOK, *Early Muslim Dogma* [note 12], p. 148). However, a survey of the Christian sources related to this tradition has not yet been undertaken.
- 14 See among others LEE L. LEVINE, *The Rabbinic Class of Roman Palestine in Late Antiquity*, New York 1985; DANIEL BOYARIN, “Beyond Judaism: Meṭatron and the Polymorphy of Ancient Judaism,” in: *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Period* 41 (2010), pp. 323-365; PETER SCHÄFER, *Zwei Götter im Himmel. Gottesvorstellungen in der jüdischen Antike* (München, 2017).
- 15 I intend to include in my inquiry the Jewish “mystic” literature, the so-called *Hekhalot* literature, a field in which Peter Schäfer has done inestimable pioneering work in the last decades. See PETER SCHÄFER, in collaboration with MARGARETE SCHLÜTER & HANS GEORG VON MUTIUS, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, vol. 2; Tübingen, 1981); PETER SCHÄFER, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur*, 4 vols. (Texts and Studies in

well,<sup>16</sup> at least for the first four centuries of the Christian era, I will also include Christian sources.

I argue that in spite of having been reduced to a single Talmudic quotation,<sup>17</sup> the tradition of the soul-infusing angel is in fact a common, widespread tradition in Jewish and Christian embryology in Late Antiquity (connected in most cases to the belief in the pre-existence of souls).<sup>18</sup> As I will show, the tradition circulated in many Jewish and Christian milieus and was modified by authors according to the theological needs of their day. The analysis of the tradition of the soul-infusing angel can thus give us a glimpse of the way embryologic ideas circulated between different religious communities of Late Antiquity and were forged and re-forged in a continuous process of negotiating identity.<sup>19</sup> Last but not least, this paper is understood as a (pre-)history of the *Ḥadīth* motif of the soul-infusing angel, as well as an attempt to integrate the *Ḥadīth* with its motifs into the late antique religious-cultural landscape.

The analysis starts by looking for similar motifs in Judaism (section I). In doing so, I will first look at a rabbinic text (TanA *peq.* 3) which is commonly dated back shortly before the emergence of *Ḥadīth* material (7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup>

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Ancient Judaism, vols. 17, 22, 29, 46; Tübingen, 1987-1995); PETER SCHÄFER, *Die Ursprünge der jüdischen Mystik* (Berlin, 2011), pp. 214-327. For an overview of the scientific discussions on this literary corpus, see DON KARR, *Notes on the Study of Merkabah Mysticism and Hekhalot Literature in English. With an appendix on Jewish Magic*, <sup>2</sup>2017, accessible at <http://www.digital-brilliance.com/contributed/Karr/Biblios/mmhie.pdf> (as on May 10, 2017).

16 See e.g. DANIEL BOYARIN, *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia, 2004); ADAM H. BECKER & ANNETTE YOSHIKO REED (eds.), *The Ways that Never Parted. Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and Early Middle Ages* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, vol. 95; Tübingen, 2003).

17 See COOK, *Early Muslim Dogma* (note 12), p. 148 n. 37.

18 The tradition of the soul-infusing angel, together with the idea of the pre-existence of souls, was to become a main feature of the embryology of “normative” Judaism during the Middle Ages. Rashi (d. 1105) compiled different embryological rabbinic texts in his book *ליקוטי הפרדס*, in which the tradition of the soul-infusing angel occupies an important place. Other versions of such a compilation circulated during the Middle Ages, all of them stressing the tradition of the soul-infusing angel. See JELLINEK, *Bet Ha-Midrash* (note 12), pp. XXVII, pp. 153-158.

19 For the role Jewish embryological discourses played in processes of identity construction, see GWYNN KESSLER, *Conceiving Israel. The Fetus in Rabbinic Narratives* (Philadelphia, 2009).

centuries). The next step is to ask about the relationship of TanA *peq. 3* with broader rabbinic and non-rabbinic Judaism.<sup>20</sup> For this purpose, I will identify six main motifs of TanA *peq. 3* whose relation to Jewish literary corpuses I will then analyse and discuss in detail. The second section (II) is dedicated to the question of the occurrences of this tradition within the early (post-biblical) apocalyptic literature.<sup>21</sup> The third section (III) deals with early Christian sources, while the fourth section (IV) will provide a number of concluding remarks.

### 1. *The tradition of the soul-infusing angel in Judaism*

As mentioned above, scholars have already noticed the occurrence of a tradition in rabbinic Judaism describing angelic involvement in the beginning of embryonic life.<sup>22</sup> The most detailed version of such a tradition appears in the Midrash *Tanḥuma* (A)<sup>23</sup> *peq. 3*.<sup>24</sup> The date of the compilation of this

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20 For the concepts of “rabbinic” and “non-rabbinic” Judaism, see BOYARIN, “Beyond Judaism” (note 14); SCHÄFER, *Ursprünge der jüdischen Mystik* (note 15); SCHÄFER, *Zwei Götter im Himmel* (note 14).

21 By early apocalyptic literature, I mean those apocalyptic works which appeared subsequent to the last books of the Hebrew Bible (1 and 2 Enoch, Apocalypse of Abraham, 3 Baruch). See MARTHA HIMMELFARB, *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Oxford, 1993); JAMES H. CHARLESWORTH, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. (New York, 1983-1985).

22 See the footnotes 12 and 13.

23 The Midrash “Tanḥuma”, also known as “Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu”, is a compilation of rabbinic commentaries on the five books of the Torah. The material has been handed down in two main versions: Tanḥuma “Printed Version” (TanA) and Tanḥuma “Buber Edition” (TanB). Both versions are supposed to be re-workings of a hypothetical earlier work, which is referred to as “Ur-Tanḥuma” (or “Ur-Yelammedenu”). This “original” Tanḥuma was supposedly composed in the last centuries of the Talmudic period in Byzantine Palestine (5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries). Tana seems to have been redacted shortly after the Islamic conquest, also in Palestine, while TanB was supposedly edited somewhere in Europe. See GÜNTER STEMBERGER, *Einleitung in Talmud und Midrasch* (München, 2011), pp. 335-339; MARC BREGMAN, ספרות תנחומא-ילמדנו: תיאור נוסחיה, *ועיונים בדרכי ההווה* (Piscataway, N.J., 2003), p. 162.

24 The text of TanA *peq. 3* has received little attention in research. MOSES MENDELSSOHN, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. II (Berlin, 1931), p. 10, and J. FREUDENTHAL, *Hellenistische Studien*, 2 vols. (Breslau, 1875), vol. II, p. 72, described the fragment as an example of Hellenistic influence on rabbinic thinking. FRANK CHAMBERLIN PORTER, “The Pre-Existence of the Soul in the Book of Wisdom and in Rabbinical Writings,” in: *The American Journal of Theology* 12 (1908),

Midrash continues to be a matter of dispute,<sup>25</sup> yet the majority regards the material as dating back to the time around the 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>26</sup>

The biblical Parasha *Pegude* comprises Ex. 38:21–40:38, and its main topic is the depiction of the desert sanctuary. The Midrash comments on the biblical passages by addressing different aspects of rabbinic Temple theology. The first paragraph of the section, *Pegude* (א/1), discusses the relation between the heavenly and the earthly Temple, between heavenly and earthly Jerusalem respectively. The second paragraph (ב/2) draws a parallel between the creation of the world and the construction of the Temple and comes to the conclusion that the temple is to be regarded as *imago mundi* (שקול כנגד בריאת העולם) *šaqul ke-neged beri'at ha-'olam*).<sup>27</sup> The third paragraph (ג/3) resumes the comparison between the temple and the world and adds a new

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pp. 53–115, here pp. 111–112, mentions the tradition and after a short recapitulation of the main motifs of the texts concludes (p. 112): “All this is far from Hellenic; and the passage, late as it evidently is, turns out to be little more than the proof of the persistence of the distinctive Jewish conception of the relation of body and soul.” VICTOR APTOWITZER, “Observations on the Criminal Law of the Jews,” in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 15 (1924), pp. 55–118, here p. 118 n. 197, mentions the tradition only in passing and points in a footnote to several articles which underline the Hellenistic influence on it. The first one to discuss at length the text was RUDOLF MEYER in his *Hellenistisches in der rabbinischen Anthropologie* (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament, vol. 74 = Folge 4, vol. 22; Stuttgart, 1937), pp. 88–114: “Ein jüdisch-griechischer Mythos”. Being interested in the “Jewish question of Antiquity” (“Judenfrage der Antike”), Meyer aims to show that Judaism in Late Antiquity (“in der ausgehenden Antike”) did not possess a sufficient inner richness to shape its own religious worldview by renouncing Hellenistic thought (“innerlich nicht reich genug war [...] um seine religiöse Weltvorstellung unter Verzicht auf die Gedanken des herrschenden Hellenismus von sich aus zu gestalten”). MEYER, *Hellenistisches* (note 24), p. VII. EPHRAIM E. URBACH, *The Sages – Their Concepts and Beliefs*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1975), vol. I, p. 245, mentions the text while dealing with rabbinic anthropology and states that “although the text of this tractate has reached us in late sources, yet almost all of its ideas and motifs belong to the contemporaries of R. Yoḥanan and his disciples” (i.e., 4<sup>th</sup> century).

25 For a detailed overview of the discussions, see BREGMAN, ספרות תנחומא-יילמדנו (note 23).

26 BREGMAN, ספרות תנחומא-יילמדנו (note 23), p. 167.

27 The paragraph (ב) identifies stages or parts of the construction of the sanctuary that correspond to the days of creation or to its elements. Thus, the curtain of the sanctuary corresponds to the sky, the bronze basin corresponds to the seas, the lamp corresponds to the heavenly luminaries, the ornaments of the walls correspond to animals, and the high priest corresponds to Adam (TanA, *peq* 2).



element: the creation of the human being. World, man, and Temple are different stages of the creation<sup>28</sup> which reflect the same perfection of the divine creation at work.<sup>29</sup> At this point, TanA<sup>30</sup> inserts a long paragraph about the nature of the human being with precious insights into what could be labelled “rabbinic embryology”.<sup>31</sup> In the next section, I will describe and analyse the text of TanA *peq.* 3, which I have subdivided into four parts.<sup>32</sup>

## 1.1 *Midrash Tanḥuma Parasha Pequde 3* (TanA *peq.* 3)

### 1.1.1 *The introductory fragment* (TanA *peq.* 3a)

The first fragment of TanA *peq.* 3, a sort of ‘introduction’, resumes the idea expressed in the previous paragraphs (א/1-ב/2) according to which there is a parallel between the world and the temple, adding a new element, the human being:<sup>33</sup>

It is written: “By wisdom the Lord laid the earth’s foundations” (Prov. 3:19) and it is written: “I have filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom” (Ex. 31:3)<sup>34</sup> to teach you that the Temple weighs as much as (שקול כנגד) *šaqul ke-*

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28 For the connection between the temple and the creation of the world, see also BerR 1:4ff.

29 Furthermore, the text also emphasises the connection/communication between the heavenly and the created realms. World, man, and temple are the sensible (in a Platonic sense, i.e., related to perception by human senses) reproduction of a heavenly realm (in a Platonic sense, i.e., ideal).

30 TanB omits the paragraph.

31 The embedding of the embryological paragraph in a Temple-theology context is a very important aspect since the ‘theological’ preoccupation with the heavenly temple(s) is a main feature of a Jewish literary corpus that is called *Hekhalot* literature, whose relation to rabbinic “theology” is still a matter of dispute. See below.

32 I have identified the following distinct text units: 1) an introductory fragment which ties the topic into the larger context; 2) a descriptive part which deals with the beginning of life from a Jewish-rabbinic perspective; 3) a parable about human life; and 4) a return to the idea of the introductory fragment: the human being is to be regarded as an *imago mundi* or as a *microcosm*. In this article, I will deal mainly with the first two parts: the introductory fragment (TanA *peq.* 3a) and the descriptive part (TanA *peq.* 3b). The third part, the parable about the human life, seems to be a much later insertion, see WÜNSCHE, *Aus Israels Lehrballen* (note 12), vol. 3, pp. 216-217, while the fourth part is a recapitulation of the introductory fragment.

33 If not otherwise specified, translations of quoted sources are done by myself.

34 The verse refers to Bešal’el, the master artisan building the desert sanctuary. God filled him with wisdom in order to complete the erection of the sanctuary according to the divine drawing (Ex. 31:1-11).

*neged*) the whole world and the formation of the human being (יצירת האדם *yeširat ha-adam*), who is a small world (עולם קטן *'olam qatan*). In which manner [is that to be understood]? When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world, he created it as “born of woman”.

What does it mean, “Born of woman”?

He<sup>35</sup> begins with its navel and stretches to there and to there to its four sides. Likewise began the Holy One, blessed be He, to create the world with the foundation stone (אבן שתייה *even šetiyya*) and from it he formed the world. And he built the heavenly temple, as it is written: “a place for your dwelling you, LORD, made the sanctuary” (מכון לשבתך פעלת יהוה מקדש *makhon le-šivtekha pa'alta YHWH miqdaš*).<sup>36</sup> Do not read *makhon* (מכון “dwelling, place”), but *mekhunnan* (מכון “directed [to your dwelling]”)<sup>37</sup> *le-šivtekha*, directed to the Throne of Glory.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the shaping of the foetus is according to (כ- *ke-*) the creation of the world [and the creation of the world] weighs as much as (שקול כנגד *šaqul ke-neged*) the creation of the embryo in the womb of its mother.<sup>39</sup>

The two introductory quotations, Prov. 3:19 and Ex. 31:3, emphasize the parallel through rabbinic exegetical exercise:<sup>40</sup> both the world and the sanctuary came into being through the action of the divine wisdom, which is, according to Ex. 31:3, the same as the Spirit of God.<sup>41</sup> The Temple, which weighs as much as the whole world, expresses an ancient Jewish idea<sup>42</sup> that goes back to biblical and ancient Middle East cosmologies, according to which specific sanctuaries are reflections of the whole world on a small scale, meant to guarantee the functionality of the whole universe. This

35 Probably God or an angel is meant; see below.

36 Ex. 15:17.

37 מכון can be read *makhon* “place” or *mekhunnan* “directed”. The author of the Midrash prefers the second reading of the verse (“YHWH, you made the sanctuary directed to your dwelling place.”), to underline the connection between the earthly and heavenly temple. For the author of Ex. 15:17, God’s dwelling place is in his Jerusalemite Temple, while for the rabbis, God’s “dwelling place” could not be but in heaven, on the Throne of Glory (כסא הכבוד *kisse ha-kavod*).

38 The Throne of Glory (*kisse ha-kavod*), the innermost chamber of the heavenly temple, is a central theological subject of the Jewish *merkavah* literature (*bekhalot* literature). The term *merkava* is a *terminus technicus* for God’s Throne.

39 *Tanhuma* (1960), I, 132b-133a.

40 See GÜNTER STEMBERGER, *Der Talmud. Einführung – Texte – Erläuterungen* (München, 1982), pp. 55-69; STEMBERGER, *Einleitung* (note 23), pp. 26-42.

41 See PETER SCHÄFER, *Die Vorstellung vom Heiligen Geist in der rabbinischen Literatur* (Studien zum Alten und Neuen Testament, vol. 28; München, 1972).

42 See Josephus, *Ant* III, 181-183 in: LOUIS H. FELDMAN, *Flavius Josephus, Judean Antiquities* Books 1-4 (Leiden / Boston, 2004), pp. 280-281.



sanctuary (and with it the whole seen world) is built according to, or even oriented towards, the heavenly temple/world.<sup>43</sup>

The next paragraph goes a step further and parallels the creation of the world and the erection of the sanctuary with the creation of the human being (יצירת האדם *yēširat ha-adam*), who is to be regarded as a small world or microcosm (עולם קטן *'olam qatan*).<sup>44</sup> God created/creates the world and the human being<sup>45</sup> (ילוד אשה *yalud išša*)<sup>46</sup> in a similar way.<sup>47</sup> As God began the creation of the world with its very centre, the Temple [Rock or foundation stone (אבן שתייה *even šetiyya*)], so the creation of each human being begins with its centre, the navel. This last comparison combines two ideas expressed elsewhere in

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43 Rabbinic Judaism absorbed this view as part of its Temple theology. See RAPHAEL PATAI, *Man and Temple in Ancient Jewish Myth and Ritual* (New York, N.Y., 1967), pp. 105-140; PETER SCHÄFER, "Tempel und Schöpfung. Zur Interpretation einiger Heiligtumstraditionen in der rabbinischen Literatur," in: PETER SCHÄFER, *Zur Geschichte und Theologie des rabbinischen Judentums* (Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums, vol. 15; Leiden, 1978), pp. 122-133; RACHEL ELIOR, *The Three Temples. On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford / Portland, Oregon, 2005).

44 The *theologoumenon*, according to which the human being is to be understood as a microcosm, is an ancient Greek idea that was widespread in the Hellenistic world. See RUDOLF ALLERS, "Microcosmus: from Anaximandros to Paracelsus," in: *Traditio: Studies in Ancient and Medieval History, Thought, and Religion* 2 (1944), pp. 319-497. Rabbinic Judaism is supposed to have internalized this idea only in the post-Talmudic period. See REUVEN KIPERWASSER, "הדימוי בדרכי שלום. עיונים בהגות," in: BENYAMIN ISH-SHALOM (ed.), *המיקרוקוסמי במדרשי חז"ל* (Jerusalem, 2007), pp. 205-226. Although the term *'olam qatan* as referring to human beings occurs first in post-Talmudic writings, I think the idea was already well-known among Amoraic sages (see, e.g., bSanh 37a) or maybe even among Tannaim. See URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), p. 233.

45 And also the Temple.

46 The text uses the Hebrew *yalud išša* ('born of a woman') for "human being". The term appears in biblical literature only in Job 14:1; 15:14; and 25:4. It is paralleled once by the term *adam* (Job 14:1) and two times by the term *enos*. All three contexts underline the fragility and ephemeral condition of human beings. The expression is used as well by Paul in a literal Greek translation, when he speaks about Christ, the divine Logos, having been born in a human condition: ἐξαπέστειλεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν υἱὸν αὐτοῦ, γενόμενον ἐκ γυναικός, γενόμενον ὑπὸ νόμον ("God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:4). The Talmudic occurrences of the expression *yalud išša* (bYoma 75b, bNid 13a, Sifra *be-ha'alotecha* 68) also underline the fragility of human nature.

47 Namely, oriented towards (directed to) the Throne of Glory. See below.

the Talmudic literature independently. The first one is that God created the world starting with its centre, the foundation stone (שתייה אבן *even šetiyya*):

‘And it was called foundation.’ It is taught: Because from it the world was founded. We have learned according to the one who says that the world was created from Zion. For it is taught, R. Eli‘ezer says: The world was created from its middle (yYoma 5:4/42c, l. 35-37).<sup>48</sup>

The opinion of R. Eli‘ezer was not the only rabbinic conception about the way God created the world,<sup>49</sup> yet it became the most popular one among Palestinian rabbinic sages since according to it, the Land of Israel was the first among the created lands.<sup>50</sup> God first created the rock on which the temple stood, and the Land of Israel, and from it he stretched the whole world towards its four directions. To this cosmological conception, TanA compares a Palestinian view concerning the way an embryo is formed:

It is taught:<sup>51</sup> Abba Sha‘ul says, ‘A person is formed (נוצר) from its navel, and roots are sent out here and there.’ (yNid 3:3/50d).<sup>52</sup>

The opinion of Abba Sha‘ul is similarly just one among others in rabbinic embryology,<sup>53</sup> a fact which reflects rabbinic reception of the main Hellenistic ideas of the time,<sup>54</sup> albeit one fitting the cosmological view.

### 1.1.2 The “embryological” fragment (TanA *peq.* 3b)

To the first paragraph, TanA adds a long text that gives a detailed description of the way which life emerges from its perspective. The text represents an outstanding unity, both with regard to the language<sup>55</sup> as to its inner logic, in

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48 See parallel texts: mYoma 5:1; tYoma 2:12; bSanh 26b; bYoma 54b.

49 See SCHÄFER, “Tempel und Schöpfung” (note 43), p. 127.

50 This cosmologic idea is embedded in a “theology” of the Land of Israel, which was one of the main concerns of Palestinian sages in the Amoraic period (starting with the 3<sup>rd</sup> century). See ISAIAH GAFNI, *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish constructions in Late Antiquity* (Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha – Supplement Series, vol. 21; Sheffield, 1997), pp. 58-75; SHLOMO SAND, *The Invention of the Land of Israel: from holy land to homeland* (London, 2014), pp. 102-105.

51 The formula introduces a ‘baraita’, a teaching of the Tannaim, which did not find its way into the Mishnah.

52 ySota 9:3/23c; bYoma 85a; bSota 45b.

53 SAMUEL KOTTEK, “Embryology in Talmudic and Midrashic Literature,” in: *Journal of the History of Biology* 14 (1981), pp. 299-315, here pp. 308-309.

54 MARIE-HÉLÈNE CONGOURDEAU, *L’Embryon et son âme dans les sources grecques (VI<sup>e</sup> siècle av. J.-C – V<sup>e</sup> siècle apr. J.-C.)* (Paris, 2007), pp. 232-235.

55 The text is written in a ‘pure’ *Mishnaic* Hebrew.

which haggadic elements are woven together with rabbinic medical knowledge.<sup>56</sup> The *Sitz im Leben* of this unity must have been a sermon of the Talmudic sages, like the majority of the Midrash's material.<sup>57</sup> The fragment opens with a biblical quotation: *He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted* (Job 9:10).<sup>58</sup> A short paragraph interrupts the flow of the text; because it will be repeated in a more appropriate context, it may be regarded here as a redactional note or late interpolation meant to give an explanatory principle to the whole story, the principle of the pre-existence of souls and their participation in the establishment of the covenant:

Know that all the souls which were from the first human being (אדם הראשון *adam ha-rishon*) and will be until the end of the world were created during the days of creation and all of them are in Paradise (גן עדן *Gan Eden*), and all of them were (present) at the Giving of the Torah, as it is written 'Who are standing here with us today and also with those who are not here today'<sup>59</sup> (Deut. 29:14-15).<sup>60</sup>

The pre-existence of souls is an integral part of rabbinic thought and I will come back to this topic later. Noteworthy is the participation of the pre-existing souls in the establishment of the Covenant and Giving of the Torah, which may be understood as a hint at the fact that the souls belong to the People of Israel.<sup>61</sup>

After this short insertion, the quoted verse is explained according to R. Yoḥanan as referring to God, the creator of the embryo in the womb of its mother. A very detailed explanation of the creation of the embryo follows: R. Yoḥanan said: 'What is the meaning of the verse? These are the wonders which the Holy One, blessed be He, performs at the formation of the foetus

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56 For an overview of the different rabbinic literary genres and related bibliographies, see STEMBERGER, *Einleitung* (note 23), pp. 64-70.

57 STEMBERGER, *Einleitung* (note 23), p. 336.

58 The biblical context of the verse is a description of God as the creator of the world; the Talmudic tradition connects it in many contexts with God as the creator of the embryo (see WayR 14:1-4; bNid 31a, and parallels).

59 The whole biblical text is, *I am making this covenant, with its oath, not only with you who are standing here with us today in the presence of the Lord our God but also with those who are not here today* (Deut. 29:14-15). The expression "also with those who are not here today" refers according to rabbinic interpretation to the future generations of Israel.

60 *Tanhuma* (1960), I, 133a.

61 It is not clear from the context if the pre-existing souls belong to the people of Israel or if non-Jewish souls also participated in the establishing of the covenant. For a detailed discussion of this tradition, see KESSLER, *Conceiving Israel* (note 19), pp. 29-46.

(יצירת הולד *yeširat ha-walad*).<sup>62</sup> At the moment when the husband lies with his wife, the Holy One, blessed be He, calls the angel entrusted with the pregnancy, whose name is Layla (Night). The Holy One, blessed be He, says to him: ‘Know that tonight a human being is going to be created from the seed of NN; be aware and take care of the seed. Take it and seed it at the threshing place into 365 pieces. And he does so.’<sup>63</sup>

The paragraph begins by naming R. Yoḥanan,<sup>64</sup> from whom the tradition supposedly comes.<sup>65</sup> According to it, at the moment of intercourse, God sends an angel entrusted with the pregnancy (המלאך הממונה על ההריון *ha-mal’akh ha-memunneh ‘al ha-herayon*) to take the semen and to “seed it at the threshing place” into 365 pieces. The name of the angel is Layla (Night) – a fact which implies that the angel is in charge of all pregnancies in spite of its title (‘the angel of the *pregnancy*’). The expression “threshing-floor” (גרן *goren*) could be regarded as a euphemism for uterus, though it hints at a rabbinic polemic about seed theories.<sup>66</sup> The number of the sperm’s pieces, which coincides

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62 The expression יצירת הולד – formation of the embryo – would become the title of an independent text (סדר יצירת הולד “Order of the Formation of the Embryo”) which circulated during the Middle Ages in at least two independent versions. The basis of this medieval tractate is the text of TanA, which was extended with additional Talmudic material. The compilation is traditionally ascribed to Rashi (R. Shelomo b. Yīṣḥaq, d. 1105 in Troyes, northern France). See JELLINEK, *Bet Ha-Midrash* (note 12), pp. XXVII, 153-158; WÜNSCHE, *Aus Israels Lehrhallen* (note 12), vol. III, pp. 213-224.

63 *Tanḥuma* (1960), 133a.

64 The most important Jewish scholar of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, R. Yoḥanan, lived first in Sepphoris, then in Tiberias, and taught at his own academy. Rav Sherira Gaon (10<sup>th</sup> century), Maimonides (12<sup>th</sup> century), and others ascribed to him the compilation of the Palestinian Talmud. See STEMBERGER, *Einleitung* (note 23), pp. 101-102.

65 URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), p. 245, thinks the main ideas of the text may well go back to the school of R. Yoḥanan.

66 The expression ‘threshing-floor’ is allegedly used for the uterus by those Rabbis who according to the Babylonian Talmud think that the embryo is not formed from the whole semen, but from the best parts of it, which are selected from the whole sperm as the wheat is selected from the chaff on the threshing-floor (bNid 31a). An opposite opinion is quoted in WayR 14:6, according to which God creates the embryo from the whole semen; the sperm is selected so that the different parts of the body can be created from it: “R. Shim’on b. Laqish said: ‘He does not allow any of the drop of fluid to go to waste; rather, he selects (זורה) parts of the drop for the brains, part thereof to form the bones, part thereof to form the sinews.’” The last opinion seems to

with the number of days in the solar year,<sup>67</sup> concurs as well with the number of prohibitive commandments of the Torah<sup>68</sup> according to the Babylonian Talmud, and according to the Palestinian Targum<sup>69</sup> with the number of “nerves” or “veins” (גידין *gidin*) in the body.<sup>70</sup>

Although the angel is supposed to seed the semen at the “threshing floor”, the text reports that the semen is taken to God, where decisions are made about the life of the human-to-be. The list of destined elements includes all aspects of life (man or woman, weak or brave, poor or rich, tall or short, ugly or beautiful, fat or slim, despised or despising), save the piety or impiety of the future human being:

[...] but whether it will be a righteous person, or an evildoer he does not adjudicate, because this thing alone is committed into the hand of every human

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know the tradition of the so-called ‘three partners’ at the creation of the embryo, which lists the same parts of the body as coming from the (whole) drop of sperm. See bNid 31a; QohR 5:10. For a detailed discussion of these traditions, see KIPERWASSER, “הדימוי המיקרוקוסמי במדרשי חז"ל” (note 44). The TanA text combines, as in WayR 14:6, the two opinions: it uses the image of the threshing-floor for uterus while adopting the opinion that the whole semen is used for the formation of the child.

67 I wonder if there may be a trace of calendrical polemic. The apocalyptic literature, advocating the solar calendar, led a sharp polemic against the Jews who accepted the lunar calendar during the Hellenistic period (Enoch, the hero of this literature is said to have lived 365 years). The rabbinic calendar is a lunar calendar, although it is organized according to the solar cycle and thus a luni-solar calendar. For Jewish polemics around the calendar, see SACHA STERN, *Calendar and Community: A History of the Jewish calendar 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE to 10<sup>th</sup> Century CE* (Oxford, 2001); RACHEL ELIOR, *The Three Temples* (note 43), pp. 44-60, 81-134.

68 According to the Talmud, the positive commandments (248) coincide with the number of the members of the body, whereas the prohibitive commandments coincide with the days of the solar year (bMak 23b).

69 Or Targum Pseudo-Yonathan. The date of composition of the Targum is still a matter of dispute. Although some of its tradition may be of ancient origin (even pre-Christian), it contains traditions which cannot be dated earlier than the Islamic period (‘Ā’isha and Fāṭima are mentioned in it). Rav Hai Gaon (d. 1038) disputes its ancient origin. See ROBERT HAYWARD, “Targum,” in: Martin Goodman & Philip Alexander, *Rabbinic Texts and History of Late-Roman Palestine*, Oxford 2010, pp. 235-252, here p. 238. The tradition of the 365 nerves of the human body would later be absorbed into the anthropology of the Zohar (13<sup>th</sup> century) and in medieval Judaism.

70 *In the image of the Lord He created him, with two hundred and forty and eight Members, with three hundred and sixty and five nerves/veins* (Palestinian Targum, Gen 1:27).

being, as it is written: ‘See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction’<sup>71</sup> (Deut. 30:15).<sup>72</sup>

After the decisions are made, God calls the angel named “entrusted with the spirits” (הַמְלֵאךְ הַמְמוֹנֶה עַל הַרוּחוֹת) *ha-mal’akh ha-memunneh ‘al ha-ruhot*),<sup>73</sup> who is commanded to bring a spirit (רוּחַ *ruah*) from Paradise whose name and characteristics are then specified.<sup>74</sup> The introductory explanation that all human souls from Adam until the end of the world is repeated, although with another biblical supporting verse: “Whatever exists has already been named” (Eccl 6:10). The spirit is ordered to enter the semen (and not a formed embryo), but the spirit refuses. In a dialog with God, the spirit describes itself as divine, which contrasts with the ignobility of the created world:

The world in which I have been living since the day you created me is sufficient to me and why do you wish me to enter this malodorous drop (טִפָּה טְרוּחָה *tippa seruḥa*),<sup>75</sup> since I am holy (קְדוּשָׁה *qeduša*) and pure (טְהוּרָה *tehora*) and I was cut off from your glory (אֲנִי גְזוּרָה מִגְּזִירַת כְּבוֹדְךָ *ani gezura mi-gezerat kevodekha*)?<sup>76</sup> The Holy One, blessed be He, answers the spirit: “The world which I am going to let you enter is more beautiful than the world you have been living in, and when I created you, behold, I did not create you but for this drop alone.”<sup>77</sup>

God’s answer stresses the superiority of the created world over Paradise,<sup>78</sup>

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71 This concluding dictum appears also in other contexts of the Talmudic literature and is ascribed in all instances to R. Ḥanina bar Pappa (bBer 33b, bMeg 25a.), a scholar from Caesarea (Palestine) active at the end of the 3rd century. See STEMBERGER, *Einleitung* (note 23), pp. 106-107.

72 *Tanḥuma* (1960), 133a.

73 Here the souls are called רוּחוֹת *ruhot* (and not נִשְׁמוֹת *nešamot*). Elsewhere, the rabbinic literature also knows of an angel of the spirits, Duma, although this seems to be in charge of the souls which returned from the earthly life. See bSanh 90a.

74 The soul appears to possess some ‘physical’ characteristics.

75 The description of the semen as a “malodorous” drop is a recurrent matter in Talmudic literature (WayR 14:2; bNid 31a-b; mAvot 3:1). KOTTEK, “Embryology” (note 53), p. 303, connects this designation with Hellenistic explanations according to which the semen has to putrefy to become fertile. Even if this is right, I think the description of the semen as “malodourous” also suggests the ambivalent attitude of the Rabbis toward sex. See DANIEL BOYARIN, *Carnal Israel. Reading Sex in Talmud Culture*, Berkeley / Los Angeles / London 1993.

76 The characterization of the soul as having been created “holy”, “pure”, and even “similar to God” has Talmudic parallels; cf. bBer 10a, bNid 31a-b, WayR 4:8.

77 *Tanḥuma* (1960), I, 133a.

78 It is hard not to see in this statement an ‘answer’ to many different ‘gnostic’ positions which attacked both the majority position of Christianity and of Judaism on behalf of the creation and the created world during Late Antiquity.



and the spirit is introduced “against its will”<sup>79</sup> into the semen. Thereafter, the semen is returned into the womb of the mother and two angels are appointed for taking care of the further development of the pregnancy.<sup>80</sup> A light is put on the forehead of the child, by which “he looks and sees from one margin of the world to the other margin”.<sup>81</sup> Subsequently the angel takes the soul of the embryo on a heavenly journey, where he shows him Paradise with its righteous dwellers as well as Hell with the ones punished there:

The ones you are seeing were created at the beginning (of the world) like you and were put into the wombs of their mothers. From there they went out into the world and kept the Torah and the commandments, and because of that they deserved this beatitude you are seeing it here. Know that you will also finally get out into the world and if you will keep the Torah of the Holy One, blessed be He, you will deserve this too and also sit with the righteous.<sup>82</sup>

After the soul has seen both Paradise and Hell, a physical description of the pregnancy follows:

And the foetus is placed in the womb of his mother for nine months; the first three months the foetus stays in the womb of his mother in the lowest chamber, the next three months he stays in the middle chamber, and the last three months he stays in the highest chamber. And when the time to get into the world comes, he turns around and descends in one instant from the highest chamber to the middle one and from there to the lowest one. At the beginning (of the pregnancy), he eats and drinks from all his mother eats and drinks and produces no excrements. For that it was said: ‘He performs wonders that

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According to these currents, the created world is infinitely inferior to the spiritual world. For Christianity, see Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, who refutes the gnostic teachings by stressing the superiority and nobility of the created world. See KURT RUDOLPH, *Gnosis. The Nature & History of Gnosticism* (Edinburgh, 1987), pp. 67-87. For the relation between Gnosticism and Judaism referring to creation theories, see JAAN LAHE, *Gnosis und Judentum. Alttestamentliche und jüdische Motive in der gnostischen Literatur und das Ursprungsproblem der Gnosis* (Nag Hammadi and Manichaean Studies, vol. 75; Leiden / Boston, 2012), pp. 197-228.

79 The statement that the soul enters “against its will” (בעל כורחו *be‘al korho*) should be seen as a refutation of Hellenistic ideas according to which the soul “falls” into a body because it covets the material world. Such Hellenistic imagery had echoes in Judaism as well (WayR 4:1; DevR 5:4). See MEYER, *Hellenistisches* (note 24), pp. 64-65, 96-97.

80 Lit. “lest it gets out (prematurely) and falls down” (שלא יצא משם ושלא יפול).

81 MEYER, *Hellenistisches* (note 24), pp. 108-109, stresses the fact that this detail has parallels in the Talmudic literature (bNid 31a-b; WayR 14) and sees in it a Greek or Egyptian influence.

82 *Tanhuma* (1960), I, 133a.

cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted.’ At the end (of the pregnancy), the time to get into the world comes... And he does not want to get out from there, until the angel strikes him and blows out the candle which burns on his head and brings him against his will into the world. Immediately the child forgets everything he saw on his journey and everything he knows. And why does a child cry when he comes to the world? Because he lost his resting place and because of the world he got out of it.<sup>83</sup>

The preceding analysis has shown the close similarities between Jewish (pre-Islamic) and early Islamic traditions of the soul-infusing angel. In the following section, I will look at the relation of the TanA peq.3 fragment with the broader rabbinic and non-rabbinic literature. I identify in the text the following main motifs: 1) the pre-existence of souls; 2) the soul-infusing angel; 3) the predetermination act; 4) ensoulment; 5) the journey through Paradise and Hell/teaching of the Torah; and 6) physical description of the pregnancy. Subsequently, I will analyse each motif in the context of rabbinical and non-rabbinical Late Antique literature.

## 1.2 *Pre-existence of souls*

The TanA text emphatically stresses the pre-existence of souls. Suggested already in late biblical literature,<sup>84</sup> the pre-existence of souls seems to have been a widespread motif of Jewish anthropological speculation as reflected in post-biblical literature<sup>85</sup> (Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha),<sup>86</sup> and as I will stress below, it became part of early Christian anthropological discourses.<sup>87</sup>

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83 *Tanḥuma* (1960), I, 133b.

84 Eccl. 12:7; Wisdom 8:19-20; see also CONGOURDEAU, *L'Embryon et son âme* (note 54).

85 1. Hen 39:4-8; 2. Hen 23:4-5; 2. ApocBaruch (Syr) 23:4-5; 4. Ezra 4:40-42; 7:78. See MARC PHILONENKO, “l’âme à l’étroit,” in: ANDRÉ CAQUOT (ed.), *Hommages à André Dupont-Sommer* (Paris, 1971), pp. 421-428.

86 The pre-existence of souls is also a part of Philo’s thinking. See Philo, *De gigantibus*, 6. Josephus’ conception of the soul stays somewhat ambiguous; he speaks about the soul being a “divine part”, “living in bodies” (θεοῦ μοῖρα τοῖς σώμασι ἐνοικίζεται), but does not develop this statement with a description of the prenatal life of souls; cf. GUY G. STROUMSA, *Another Seed. Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Nag Hammadi Studies, vol. 24; Leiden, 1984), p. 28.

87 The Hellenistic (or the Platonic) origin of this conception was discussed at length by many authors. See WILLIAM K. C. GUTHRIE, *Recherches sur la tradition platonicienne : sept exposés* (Entretiens sur l’Antiquité Classique / Entretien sur l’Antiquité Classique, vol. 3 ; Vandœuvres / Genève, 1957), pp. 3-19; URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), pp. 234-236; CONGOURDEAU, *L'Embryon et son âme* (note 54), pp. 37-54. In spite of its obvious parallels to Hellenistic ideas, I do not



In the early layers of the rabbinic literature, Mishnah and Tosefta, we do not find very clear statements concerning the pre-existence of souls.<sup>88</sup> According to later sources, however, it seems that the idea of the pre-existence

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necessarily perceive of this idea as an artificial import from outside biblical and post-biblical thought. Besides Philo, who obviously uses a very Platonized language in this context, the authors writing about pre-existing souls are deeply rooted in biblical imagery. With that, I do not reject the effect Hellenistic speculation had on Jewish and then Jewish-Christian questions about the origin of the soul. I think that the cultural encounters between the biblical and the Hellenistic heritage had a tremendous impact on the development of such matters. How this happened is still a matter of discussion; however, concepts like “import” should be avoided because they offer too simplistic and thus misleading solutions to the question of transcultural transmission. See GALIT HASAN-ROQEM, *Tales of the Neighborhood. Jewish Narrative Dialogues in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley / Los Angeles / London, 2002); BOYARIN, “Beyond Judaism” (note 14); JUAN SEGOVIA, *The Quranic Noah and the Making of an Islamic Prophet* (Berlin / Boston, 2015).

- 88 This fact led some scholars to see in the pre-existence of souls an idea alien to rabbinic Judaism and to regard it as a ‘foreign’ or ‘Platonic influence’ whenever it appears in later sources. See PORTER, “Pre-Existence of the Soul” (note 24); URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), p. 236. Such conclusion, however, does not necessarily reflect the actual situation of Judaism in Tannaitic times. First and foremost, Judaism in Tannaitic times was anything but a compact religious system under the religious authority of the rabbis; see LEVINE, *The Rabbinic Class* (note 14); CATHERINE HEZSER, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, vol. 66; Tübingen, 1997); SETH SCHWARTZ, *Imperialism and Jewish Society* (Jews, Christians, and Muslims from the ancient to the modern world; Princeton, N.J., 2001). Secondly, 4. Ezra, a Jewish writing from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century (the time of the Tannaim) attests to the pre-existence of souls; see URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), p. 241. The work was certainly not written in rabbinical circles, but it should be regarded as reflecting religious views of a broader Jewish landscape. Furthermore, we find in Tannaitic literature famous rabbis (such as R. Aqiva) rebuked for statements rejected elsewhere in the same corpus (evidently for polemical purposes). We could presume that the redactors of the Mishnah avoided this subject on purpose, mainly for polemical reasons. Editing anthropological material, the Tannaim seem to have been very aware of the development of Christian ideas, like the participation of the pre-existing Christ in the creation of the world, and of numerous Jewish ideas according to which beings from the human realm took an important role in the creation: “Why was man born last? That the *minim* should not say that he was a partner with him in his work” (tSanh 8:4-5). Regarding the identification of the *minim* With Christian Jews or with other Jewish circles as well as the sustained polemic of the Tannaim against them, see ALAN. F. SEGAL, *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Studies

of souls was known to Tannaitic authorities as well.<sup>89</sup> In the literature of the Amoraim,<sup>90</sup> this becomes a well-known and widespread motif, and although it was not the only anthropological narrative, it was by far the most popular one.<sup>91</sup> The souls are said to have been created during the days of creation<sup>92</sup> and to dwell in a place different texts give different names: גוף *guf* (body),<sup>93</sup>

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in Judaism in Late Antiquity from the 1<sup>st</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, vol. 25; Leiden, 1977); PETER SCHÄFER, *Die Geburt des Judentums aus dem Geist des Christentums: fünf Vorlesungen zur Entstehung des rabbinischen Judentums* (Tria Corda, vol. 6; Tübingen, 2010); ADIEL SCHREMER, *Brothers Estranged: Heresy, Christianity and Jewish Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2009).

- 89 See the prayer in bBer 60b, which should be regarded as Tannaitic. According to this prayer, “God of the souls” (אדון כל הנשמות) created the soul in a pure state and gave it into the body from which he will take it to return it into the same body in the future: אלהי נשמה שנתת בי טהורה אתה נפחתה בי אתה יצרתה בי ואתה משמרה בקרבי ואתה עתיד ליטלה ממני ולהחזירה בי לעתיד לבא כל זמן שהנשמה בקרבי מודה אני לפניך אלהי ואלהי אבותי רבון כל העולמים אדון כל הנשמות ברוך אתה ה' ההמחזיר נשמות לפגרים מתים.
- 90 The Literature of the Amoraim contains the Palestinian and Babylonian Gemara (commentaries on the Mishnah which together with the text of the Mishnah make up the Talmud as well as the Midrashim of Palestine (Bible commentaries) composed between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- 91 URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), pp. 235-245. The popularity of the idea in Amoraic literature as well as its use by Tannaitic authorities suggests that it was known in Tannaitic times as well.
- 92 The main difference to older (pre-rabbinic) texts is that the rabbis deny the creation of the souls (together with the angels) on the first day of creation. The rabbinic formulations stress the fact that the souls were created בששת ימי הבריאה *be-šešet yeme ha-beri'ah* (“during the six days of creation”). The reason is evidently the rejection of any participation by a creature in the creation of the world. There is at least one exception, however: “R. Joshua of Sikhnin said in the name of R. Shmuel: *They dwelt occupied with the King's work* (I. Chron. 4:23), with the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, blessed be he, dwelt the souls of the righteous, with whom He took counsel and created the world” (BerR 8:7). The pre-existent souls of the righteous appear also in the Hekhalot literature, which seems to advocate a certain form of predestination: “R. Yishma‘el said: ‘Metatron spoke to me and said: Come, and I will show you the souls of the righteous, the ones that have been born and came back and the ones who have not yet been born’ (3 Enoch § 61).” SCHÄFER, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), § 61; SCHÄFER, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), vol. I, p. 134.
- 93 bAZ 5a; bYev 63b; bNid 13b. Although the word “body” may suggest that the dictum refers to the future dwelling place of the soul, Talmudic tradition, including Rashi, clearly refers to a “space” near God where the created souls wait to be sent into bodies. See URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), p. 237, and the quoted Talmudic passages.

אוצר *oṣar* (treasure-house),<sup>94</sup> ערבות *‘aravot* (steps / fields),<sup>95</sup> גן עדן *gan ‘eden* (Paradise). The pre-existence of souls is a central motif of the Hekhalot literature as well.<sup>96</sup> Consequently, although rarely mentioned in early rabbinic literature, the pre-existence of souls characterizes Jewish rabbinic and non-rabbinic anthropological imageries alike.<sup>97</sup>

### 1.3 *The soul-infusing angel*

The “angel entrusted with the pregnancy” (המלאך הממונה על ההריון) is called Layla (‘night’) by TanA *peq.3*. A similar angel appears in the same Midrash in different contexts. In TanA *meṣora*,<sup>98</sup> listing the causes of leprosy, the text mentions an angel entrusted with the forming of the child (המלאך הממונה על צורת הולד *ha-mal’akh ha-memunneh ‘al ṣūrat ha-walad*):

If your woman told you that she is *nidda* (menstruating), do not sin in your body and do not touch her and do not say before the angel entrusted with the form of the child: ‘I acted inadvertently and I did not know [...]. R. Aḥa said: ‘If the man sleeps with his wife in the days of her menstruation, the (conceived) children are going to be leprous.’<sup>99</sup>

The same paragraph mentions an angel called “the angel entrusted with you”

94 QohR 3:21; SifBem § 139; SifDev § 344.

95 bHag 12b; bYev 63b. The term ערבות *‘aravot* as the name of the seventh and highest heaven is a recurrent subject of the Hekhalot literature according to which this is also the home of all the (pre-existing) souls. The name comes supposedly from a falsely spelled word in Ps. 68:5. See SCHÄFER, *Ursprünge der jüdischen Mystik* (note 15), p. 118 n.102. The basic meaning of the term, “steps” or “fields”, is reminiscent of the concept of *Ēlysion Pedion* (Ἠλύσιον Πεδίον, lat. *Campi Elysi*), the “blessed field” (the “field of the blessed”), the place where according to Greek Mythology the souls of pious men (heroes) live forever. See RÜDIGER WELTER, “Elysium.”, in: *Goethe-Wörterbuch*, vol. 3: *Einwenden - Gesäusel* (Stuttgart, 1998), p. 50.

96 See SCHÄFER, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15); KLAUS HERRMANN, *Massekhet Hekhalot: Traktat von den himmlischen Palästen*, Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentar (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, vol. 39; Tübingen, 1994), § 15, pp. 261-267.

97 As URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), p. 234 reasonably points out, the idea of the pre-existence of souls should not be regarded as a marginal (!) aspect of Judaism, since the way the Rabbis imagined the relationship between the body and the soul is heavily influenced by the idea of the pre-existence of the soul.

98 Parasha *meṣora* contains the verses Lev. 14:1-15:33, which deals with the illness of leprosy, its healing, and ritual cleaning after having been cured.

99 *Tanḥuma* (1960), II, 23a. The same idea appears in WayR 14, although without mentioning the angel.

(הַמַּלְאָךְ הַמְמוֹנֶה עֲלֵיךְ) *ha-mal'akh ha-memunneh 'alekha*),<sup>100</sup> yet it is not clear whether the two angels are identical.<sup>101</sup> The designation of the angel of “the form of the embryo” (צוּרַת הַיֶּלֶד *surat ha-walad*) is noteworthy. According to the rabbinic literature, the formation of the child is supposed to take place on the 40<sup>th</sup> day in case it is a boy and on the 80<sup>th</sup> day if it is a girl.<sup>102</sup> As I will show, it is unlikely that the text speaks of a different angel than the one mentioned in TanA *peq.* 3. In this case, the task of the soul-infusing angel would thus not only be to infuse the soul, but to give the child its form as well.<sup>103</sup> The angel entrusted with the forming of the child is also mentioned in TanA, *toldot* 1:

Come and see how important peace-making is. At the time when Sarah was handed over from Pharaoh to Avimelekh and became pregnant with Yiṣḥaq, the nations of the world were saying: ‘A hundred-year-old man to conceive a son?!? She was not made pregnant but by Avimelekh or by the Pharaoh.’ And Avraham was filled with doubt about these things. And what did the Holy One, blessed be he? He told the angel entrusted with the forming of the child: ‘Make all his resemblances (אִיקוֹנִין *iqonin*) according to his father’s, so that they may bear witness that he (Yiṣḥaq) is the son of Avraham.’ Because of that the Scripture says: *And Avraham begot Yiṣḥaq* (Gen. 25:19).<sup>104</sup>

According to the two texts, there is an angel entrusted with forming the child. Another Midrashic text puts the two designations of the angel together:

The nations of the world made accusations against the Israelites and said, ‘they are descendants of the Egyptians. They (the Egyptians) ruled over their bodies. How much more over their wives.’ Because of that, the Holy One, blessed be

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100 *Tanḥuma* (1960), II, 22b: “Do not allow yourself to say a (bad) word with your mouth, and (in this way) to punish your body. And do not say before the angel: ‘I acted inadvertently’ and do not say before the angel entrusted with you: ‘I said the word inadvertently’, because each word which comes out of your mouth will be written in the book.” The dictum calls to mind the New Testament saying: “But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken” (Matth. 12:36), as well as texts from the apocalyptic tradition: “And there are angels over each soul of the men and they write down all they do and all they say before God” (2 Hen. 8:6).

101 Sometimes it seems the rabbis differentiate between ‘soul-infusing’ and ‘guardian angel’, in some texts (as here) it seems the discussion is about the same angel.

102 *tNid* 4:8; *bNid* 30b. That is one of the theories the rabbinic literature records. According to others, they are 41 and 81 days respectively. According to R. Yishma‘el, both a male and a female embryo are formed on the 40<sup>th</sup> day.

103 It seems that the authors of these texts perceived the formation/shaping of the embryo to occur at the same moment as ensoulment.

104 *Tanḥuma* (1960), I, 34b.

he, called in that hour the angel entrusted with the pregnancy – so said R. Hosha‘ya – and said unto him: ‘Well now, form the shape of the children according to the image of their fathers.’ (ShirR 4:12;<sup>105</sup> PesK 11:6).

According to the tradition in ShirR 4:12, it is the angel entrusted with the pregnancy which is responsible for forming the child as well. The angel entrusted with the pregnancy is known also from Talmudic sources. As seen in bNid 16b, for instance, the tradition of the angel entrusted with the pregnancy was known in rabbinic circles centuries before the composition of TanA:

As to Resh Laqish,<sup>106</sup> how does he expound R. Yohanan’s text? He requires it for the same exposition as that made by R. Ḥanina bar Pappa.<sup>107</sup> For R. Ḥanina bar Pappa made the following exposition: ‘The name of the angel who is in charge of conception is "Night", and he takes up a drop and places it in the presence of the Holy One, blessed is He, saying, ‘Sovereign of the Universe, what shall be the fate of this drop? Shall it produce a strong man or a weak man, a wise man or a fool, a rich man or a poor man?’ Whereas ‘wicked’ or ‘righteous’ he does not mention’ – this is in agreement with the (well-known opinion) of R. Ḥanina. For R. Ḥanina stated (in another instance): ‘Everything is in the hands of heaven, except the fear of heaven, as (the Scripture) says, *And now Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear* (Deut. 10,12), etc.’

R. Ḥanina bar Pappa was a Talmudic scholar of the third Amoraic generation of Palestine,<sup>108</sup> and the tradition of the angel is quoted in support of another tradition going back to his master, R. Yoḥanan. According to it, R. Yoḥanan disputes the legitimacy of sexual intercourse during the day:

And R. Yoḥanan said: ‘A man is forbidden to have intercourse during the day [...]. The night is given for conception and the day is forbidden for conception.’ (bNid 31a).

Besides R. Ḥanina bar Pappa, the text mentions R. Shim‘on b. Laqish and Rav Hamnuna as supporting the opinion of R. Yoḥanan. Their evidence is taken from the name of the angel – Layla, ‘Night’, although in the quoted

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105 The Midrash *Shir hashirim Rabba* is generally dated to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, although some scholars propose a later date (from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 8<sup>th</sup> century). See STEMBERGER, *Einleitung* (note 23), pp. 349-351.

106 The companion (and brother-in-law) of R. Yoḥanan, both scholars of the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation of the Amoraim (3<sup>rd</sup> century) who lived and taught in Tiberias. See STEMBERGER, *Einleitung* (note 23), pp. 101-102.

107 A younger colleague and former disciple of R. Yoḥanan; he lived and taught in Caesarea, next to the most famous figure of this city, R. Abahu. See STEMBERGER, *Einleitung* (note 23), p. 105.

108 Approximatively 290-320 CE. See, STEMBERGER, *Einleitung* (note 23), p. 105.

dictum ascribed to R. Ḥanina bar Pappa, the main idea lies elsewhere.<sup>109</sup> The angel called Layla is mentioned in other Talmudic contexts as well, with the same tasks,<sup>110</sup> and we encounter an angel called Layly'el in 3 Enoch § 18,<sup>111</sup> although he is not described any further. The preserved Hekhalot literature does not describe the ensoulment of the embryo, although a fragment tries to deal with the souls of those embryos who returned to heaven before they could have come to live:

Each day Meṭaṭron<sup>112</sup> sits in the highest heaven for three hours and gathers all the (souls of the) embryos who died in the womb of their mothers, and the sucklings who died at their mothers' breast, and the small children who died during (the study of) the Torah. He brings them under the Throne of Glory, lets them sit around him in classes over classes, in groups over groups, in divisions over divisions, and teaches them Torah (*Miqra* and *Mishnah*),<sup>113</sup> wisdom, *Aggadot*, and traditions, and accomplishes for them their (study of the) Torah scroll.<sup>114</sup>

According to this text, the souls of the dead embryos are taken into heaven where the highest angel of God, Meṭaṭron,<sup>115</sup> is teaching them the Torah, which seems to be understood as revelation of God's mysteries.

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109 Obviously, the dictum of R. Ḥanina deals with the topic of predetermination / predestination.

110 See bSanh 92a.

111 Without even mentioning the Talmudic angel called by (almost) the same name, SCHÄFER, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), vol. I, p. 42, fn. 16 writes in his edition of 3 Enoch: "Es wäre denkbar, dass der Schreiber hier an die Klasse der Nachtdämonen der *lilin* gedacht hat". I would rather think of the angel described in Jub 2:1: "For on the first day, He created the heavens, which are above and the earth and the waters and all the spirits, which serve before him – the angels of the presence, and the angels of sanctification [...] and the angels of eventide and *night*, and the light, dawn and day, which He has prepared in the knowledge of his heart."

112 The angel Meṭaṭron is a principal figure in this literary corpus, described mainly as the "angel of the presence" (*sar ha-panim*) or the "angel of the Torah" (*sar ha-tora*); he also has (semi)divine characteristics. See BOYARIN, "Beyond Judaisms" (note 14); SCHÄFER, *Ursprünge der jüdischen Mystik* (note 15).

113 Only in Ms. Vatican 228. See SCHÄFER, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), vol. I, p. 175.

114 Translation according to SCHÄFER, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), § 75; SCHÄFER, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), vol. I, pp. 174-175.

115 One of the possible etymologies of this name is "(the one who sits) next to (God's) throne". See GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *Die jüdische Mystik in ihren Hauptströmungen*, Frankfurt am Main 1980, p. 75.



BerR 53:6<sup>116</sup> mentions the angel entrusted with “desire / pleasure” (מלאך *mal’akh še-bu memunneh ‘al ha-ta’awa*), and from the context it seems that his main task is shaping the child.<sup>117</sup> The angel entrusted with ensoulment or with shaping the child is thus a commonplace motif in rabbinic Judaism. Its mention in most cases serves to emphasize some other aspects of the tradition complex.<sup>118</sup> This would explain its widespread familiarity at least within rabbinic Talmudic circles. The Hekhalot literature mentions an angel of the night as well, Layly’el, without specifying its tasks. It is the highest angel of God, Metatron, who is in charge of teaching the souls the Torah, yet not before they were sent into bodies, but after their premature return to heaven.

### 1.3 Predetermination<sup>119</sup>

The predetermination act is an important motif in both the TanA and the bNid 16b versions of the soul-infusing angel tradition,<sup>120</sup> and as we saw above, it took an extreme form in *Hadīth* literature. Both Jewish traditions emphasize the tension between the two principles of divine predetermination vs. human free will, which are expressed throughout rabbinic literature starting with R. Aqiva.<sup>121</sup> Rejecting the belief in a radical predestination of

116 The text refutes the idea of the above-quoted TanA, *toldot*, 1, by stating: “Sarah did not need such things (the angel is meant), because He himself did it (God), as it is written: *And God visited Sarah* (Gen. 21:2)”. See also BerR 53:5. The insistence of this text that God himself “visited” Sarah is interesting insofar as the word used by the biblical verse, *paqad*, occurs in rabbinic literature as denoting sexual intercourse. Anyway, the text continues and says that the child reassembled its father, Avraham, and that Sarah did not “steal” the semen from another place (*še-lo’ ganva zera’ mim-maqom ‘aḥer*). Some other statements in the Palestinian Talmud refuse any direct contact between God and a woman (incl. Sarah) and stress that God used an angel in his “visit” to Sarah. See yYev 4:11 (6a); yNid 1:4 (49b).

117 Based on the name of the angel, the task of driving people to procreation is also thinkable. This detail is noteworthy since Clemens of Alexandria describes the soul-infusing angel as “pushing the woman to intercourse”. See below.

118 TanA *peq.* 3, is the very first text which uses the tradition for an exposition about the beginning of embryonic life.

119 I use the term “predetermination” to differentiate between the ideas mirrored by the rabbinic texts in discussion and “predestination” that implies giving up of free will due to the overwhelming weight of fate, divine decision, and so forth.

120 As already stated, the two versions adopt a saying attributed by two Talmudic texts to the same R. Hanina bar Pappa.

121 The famous rabbinic formula which recapitulates both predetermination and free will, “everything is (for)seen and freedom of choice is given” (הכל צפוי)

human fate professed by certain Second Temple Jewish groups,<sup>122</sup> the early Tannaim stressed the very opposite of it, namely the importance of free will. Later on, the Amoraim developed a more differentiated discourse in which both aspects were equally emphasized, in spite of their paradoxical formulations.<sup>123</sup> Urbach stressed the correspondence between the Talmudic discourse and that of the surrounding culture. Both the main principles as well as the results of the rabbinical debates correspond to a greater or lesser extent to the views of the Church Fathers and the Hellenistic philosophers and writers of the time.<sup>124</sup> And yet, as already pointed out, the rabbinic tradition itself contains traces which may hint at extreme forms of predetermination present among the beliefs of certain rabbis and some Jewish circles even in Talmudic times. R. Yehoshua of Sikhnin teaches in the Name of R. Shemuel that God was counselled at the creation of the world by the souls of the righteous ones,<sup>125</sup> while the Hekhalot literature attests the “souls of the righteous” before their birth as well.<sup>126</sup>

#### 1.4 *Ensoulment*

The moment of the embryo’s ensoulment is often a disputed matter in the discussions about Jewish embryology.<sup>127</sup> In the halakhic discussions about

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והרשות נתונה, mAvot 3:15) is attributed to R. Aqiva, as well as many discussions on this topic. See URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), pp. 255-285.

122 The sect of Qumran, identified by many scholars with the Essenes described by Josephus (*Antiquitates*, I, 2, 8, 2-13), was characterized by an extreme form of predestination. According to them, humans were predestined by God to be either “sons of light” or “sons of darkness”. For further details, see I. R. TANT-LEVSKIJ & R. V. SVETLOV, “Predestination and Essenism”, in: *Ancient Philosophy and Classical Tradition* 8 (2014), pp. 50-53, here pp. 50-51. Urbach counts Paul and his (Christian) communities to a Jewish predestinationist stream as well. See URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), pp. 258-259.

123 The Amoraim were more willing to accept a restraint of free will and to enlarge the sphere of aspects decided by divine predetermination. See URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), pp. 276-280.

124 The Talmudic sources often mention discussions on this topic between rabbis and “the Alexandrines” (bNida 70b), between rabbis and “gentiles” (BerR 27:4). See URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), pp. 264-265, 281-282.

125 BerR 8:7. A later Midrash (10<sup>th</sup> century?), ShirZ 3 (ed. Buber), emphasizes that the souls of the righteous were created before the creation of the world (together with the Torah, the Throne of Glory, and so forth).

126 SCHÄFER, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), vol. I, pp. 134-137.

127 This difficulty is based on the complexity of rabbinic attitudes to this topic.



pregnancies, less importance is given to this topic. The Talmudic literature nevertheless reproduces many discussions and questions concerning the nature of the soul, including the moment it is infused into the body,<sup>128</sup> and it seems that there is a tendency toward accepting ensoulment as happening at the very beginning of pregnancy.<sup>129</sup> This is illustrated by a polemic between Rabbi and Antoninus<sup>130</sup> on this topic, which was preserved in two slightly different versions:

Antoninus asked Rabbi: ‘When is the soul (נשמה *nešama*) endowed in man; from the time of conception (פקידה *peqida*),<sup>131</sup> or from the time of formation

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For a survey of the different aspects of discussion, see APTOWITZER, “Observations” (note 24), pp. 69-70; VICTOR APTOWITZER, “The Status of the Embryo in the Criminal Law of the Jews,” in: *Sinai* 6 (1942), pp. 29-32 [Hebrew]; DAVID M. FELDMAN, *Birth Control in Jewish Law*, New York <sup>3</sup>1995, pp. 271-273; WOLFF HIRSCH *Rabbinic Psychology. Beliefs about the Soul in Rabbinic Literature of the Talmudic Period* (New York, 1947; <sup>3</sup>1973), 188-189; I. JAKOBOVITZ, *Jewish Medical Ethics. A Comparative and historical study of the Jewish Religious Attitude to Medicine and its Practice* (New York, 1975), p. 182; STEPHEN NEWMYER, “Antoninus and Rabbi on the soul: stoic elements of a puzzling encounter,” in: *Koroth* 9 (1988) [special issue], pp. 108-123, JULIUS PREUSS, *Biblisch-talmudische Medizin. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Heilkunde und der Kultur überhaupt* (Berlin, 1923; reprint 1992), p. 450; URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24), p. 220.

128 There is no doubt that for the rabbis, the origin of the soul (*nešama*) was a creational act of God, be it that it was created at or before the creation of the world (bHag 12b; bAZ 5a; bNid 13b; bYev 62a; BerR 24; WayR 15), at conception or at the formation of the embryo (bMen 99b), and that *it was given* (*nitna*) into the embryo. See bBer 60b: “My God, the soul which you have given into me (נשמה שנתת בי *nešama še-natatta bi*) is pure [...]”

129 See KESSLER, *Conceiving Israel* (note 19), pp. 67-69.

130 Polemics between Rabbi (R. Yehuda ha-Nasi, representative figure of Palestinian Jewry vis-à-vis the Roman imperial administration at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century) and Antoninus on different topics are a well-known motif in Talmudic literature (there are around thirty topics, which the two debate). On this literary motif and the identity of Antoninus, see ARNOLD BODEK, *Marcus Aurelius als Zeitgenosse und Freund des Rabbi Jehuda Ha-Nassi* (Leipzig, 1868); SAMUEL KRAUSS, *Antoninus und Rabbi* (Wien, 1910); RUDOLF LESZYNSKY *Die Lösung des Antoninusrätsels* (Berlin, 1910); LUITPOLD WALLACH, “The Colloquy of Marcus Aurelius with the Patriarch Judah I,” in: *Jewish Quarterly Review* 31 (1940), pp. 259-286; CURT LEVIANT, “Rabbi Judah the Prince and the Emperor of Rome,” in: *Jewish Heritage* 6 (1964), pp. 34-41; MENAHEM STERN, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1980), vol. II, pp. 606-607, 626-627.

131 The Hebrew term (> *p-q-d*, ‘to visit, to look for, to take care, to command’) is used in Talmudic literature as a euphemism for sexual intercourse (bYev 62b;

(*yešira*) [of the embryo]?’ He replied, ‘From the moment of formation.’<sup>132</sup> He [Antoninus] objected: ‘Can a piece of flesh be unsalted for three days without becoming putrid? But it must be from the moment that God decrees (its destiny).’ Rabbi said: This thing Antoninus taught me and Scripture supports him, as it is said: *And thy providence<sup>133</sup> hath preserved my spirit* (רוח *ruhi*, Job 10:12). (bSanh 91a-b; BerR 34:10).<sup>134</sup>

As Aptowitzer,<sup>135</sup> Hirsch,<sup>136</sup> and Kessler<sup>137</sup> stressed, the central point of this tradition (that the embryo has a soul from the beginning) resonates in the

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Sem, 8). Rashi interprets it in this context according to the meaning ‘to command’ and refers to the decision made by God concerning the fate of the embryo, which for him coincides with the moment of conception. See Rashi to bSanh 91a-b.

132 The version in BerR 34:10 has another wording: “From which time is the soul endowed in man, after he leaves his mother’s womb, or before he leaves his mother’s womb? He told him: After he leaves his mother’s womb. He (Antoninus) told him: “There is a parable (to this): If you will leave meat without salt for three days, it will putrefy. [The, see comment above] Rabbi acknowledged at once that Antoninus adapted his view to the view of Scripture, because it is written: *You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in your providence watched over my spirit* (Job 10:12). From which time do I have a spirit (*nešama*)? From the time of my conception.” The authors dealing with the disputation between Antoninus and Rabbi do not pay much attention to differences between the versions.

133 For God’s care/providence, the biblical text uses the same root, *p-q-d* (*pequdat-keha*), which was understood by the rabbis as sexual intercourse.

134 PREUSS, *Biblisch-talmudische Medizin* (note 127), p. 450, declares that such “theoretical” discussions like about ensoulment have no relationship with Talmudic jurisprudence and even wonders that the text found its way into the Talmud. APTOWITZER, “Observations” (note 24), p. 115, contradicts him and sees the text as a “canonization by Rabbi and his school of the idea that the embryo is ensouled from conception. [...] [Rabbi] previously considered the embryo to be a part of the mother’s body (*‘ubbar ‘erekh immo*)”. HIRSCH, *Rabbinic Psychology* (note 127), pp. 188-189 disregards the fact that Rabbi learned the concept of ensoulment at conception from Antoninus and sees ensoulment at conception as representing the belief of the majority of Jewish Sages. KESSLER, *Conceiving Israel* (note 19), pp. 67-69, 163 n. 12 and 13, has skilfully shown that although of little importance in the halakhic discussions, the assumption that the embryo has a soul (from the very beginning?) lies behind many Tannaitic traditions connected to embryology.

135 APTOWITZER, “Observations” (note 24), pp. 117-118.

136 HIRSCH, *Rabbinic Psychology* (note 127), p. 188, n. 6.

137 KESSLER, *Conceiving Israel* (note 19), p. 68.

majority of the rabbinic texts concerning embryonic life. There are nevertheless contradictory traditions (although minor) which offer different solutions to the question, a fact which reflects on the one hand the concern of the Jewish Sages for an appropriate answer, and on the other hand the diversity of rabbinic opinions reflecting the polyphony of answers to this question in a Hellenistic cultural milieu.<sup>138</sup>

### 1.5 *The heavenly journey and the teaching of the Torah*

The soul's journey through Paradise and Hell together with the teaching of the Torah is an important motif of the TanA *peq.* 3 discourse on embryonic life. The soul is said to be led by the same angel of the pregnancy (?) through Paradise and Hell as part of a religious instruction before birth. Meyer argues that the motif of the celestial journey of the soul cannot be derived from Judaism, while he agrees that the teaching of the Torah before birth enjoyed popularity among the Sages.<sup>139</sup> Consequently, he tries to show the strong influence of a Platonic myth recorded in *Republic* 614B-621D on the Tanḥuma text.<sup>140</sup> While a certain familiarity<sup>141</sup> of the rabbinic literature with Hellenistic literary topoi is beyond doubt, I propose a reading according to which the Tanḥuma motif of the heavenly journey of the soul rests on much

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138 Nowadays, there is no or little doubt about the great familiarity of the Jewish Sages with Hellenistic schools of thought concerning embryonic life. See MEYER, *Hellenistisches* (note 24); KOTTEK, "Embryology" (note 53); URBACH, *The Sages* (note 24); KESSLER, *Conceiving Israel* (note 19); PREUSS, *Biblisch-talmudische Medizin* (note 127).

139 MEYER, *Hellenistisches* (note 24), p. 103.

140 MEYER, *Hellenistisches* (note 24), pp. 103-114. Meyer forces the alleged 'parallel' between the two texts without any textual basis. In the Greek myth, there is one figure, Er, the son of Armenius, who is randomly chosen after his apparent death to be a messenger to the people on earth and to tell them what he saw in the afterworld (Er sees the afterworld during his apparent death). The souls, "which arrived from time to time, appeared to have come as it were from a long journey", are coming to earth from two direction, some pure and others full of squalor and dust, in order to reincarnate. The text does not speak of a journey of the souls, but rather about their metempsychotic wandering, which "appears" as if they have come "from a long journey". See Plato, *Republic*, 614d.

141 The familiarity of the rabbis with Hellenistic literature varies from subject to subject and from situation to situation, and so it does not have to be accepted or rejected as a whole. See SAUL LIEBERMAN, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York, 1942); LEE I. LEVINE, *Judaism and Hellenism in Antiquity: Conflict or Confluence?* (Washington, 1998); DANIEL SPERBER, *Greek in Talmudic Palestine* (Ramat Gan, 2012).

older Jewish traditions, even rabbinic ones, which are reworked within a new theological program.<sup>142</sup> The journey to Paradise is not a foreign motif either in pre-rabbinic<sup>143</sup> or rabbinic Judaism,<sup>144</sup> although it is restricted to specific personalities like Enoch, R. ‘Aqiva, R. Yishma‘el, and some other rabbinic figures.<sup>145</sup> Whereas in the Talmudic literature such heavenly journeys are mostly regarded with suspicion,<sup>146</sup> there is an impressive amount of Jewish texts<sup>147</sup> dealing with heavenly journeys during which a celestial companion (mostly an angel) reveals to the soul<sup>148</sup> heavenly mysteries.<sup>149</sup>

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142 For more details about such a “theological” program of reworking apocalyptic traditions by the rabbis, see PETER SCHÄFER, “From Cosmology to Theology. The Rabbinic Appropriation of Apocalyptic Cosmology,” in: Rachel Elijor & Peter Schäfer (eds.), *Creation and Re-Creation in Jewish Thought. Festschrift in Honor of Joseph Dan on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* (Tübingen, 2005), pp. 39-58.

143 Here I refer to the late and postbiblical apocalyptical tradition, where a certain figure (Daniel, Enoch, Moses, and John) is carried by God or by angels into heaven, where they receive specific revelations. See SCHÄFER, *Ursprünge der jüdischen Mystik* (note 15), pp. 59-162.

144 See bKet 77b; bBM 114b; bPes 50a; QohR 9:10; bBer 17a. Meyer acknowledges the occurrence of these motifs in rabbinic Judaism, although he sees no connection between this old Talmudic motif and the journey of the souls through Paradise and Hell. See MEYER, *Hellenistisches* (note 24), pp. 99-102.

145 See SCHOLEM, *Die jüdische Mystik* (note 115), p. 45; SCHÄFER, *Ursprünge der jüdischen Mystik* (note 15), pp. 245-446; SCHÄFER, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), vol. I, pp. 134-138.

146 See SCHÄFER, *Ursprünge der jüdischen Mystik* (note 15), pp. 245-335. The rabbis stress the importance of the Torah as a way of growing into the understanding and knowledge of God’s mysteries, and they regard ‘personal’ revelation / mystic experiences with suspicion. See also PETER SCHÄFER, *Hekhalot-Studien* (Tübingen, 1988); C. R. A. MORRAY-JONES, “Hekhalot Literature and Talmud Tradition: Alexander’s three test cases”, in: *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 22 (1991), pp. 1-39.

147 I refer here to *Hekhalot* literature. For a detailed overview on this type of literature, see GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York 1941; GERSHOM SCHOLEM, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* (New York, 1960); DAVID J. HALPERIN, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven, 1980); SCHÄFER, *Hekhalot-Studien* (note 146); SCHÄFER, *Ursprünge der jüdischen Mystik* (note 15).

148 Schäfer convincingly shows that contrary to the old, post-biblical apocalyptic works (1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, where body *and* soul are taken into heaven), here it is only the soul of the receiver of revelation, while his body remains in the earthly order. See SCHÄFER, *Ursprünge der jüdischen Mystik* (note 15), pp. 348-349.

149 The relationship of this corpus of texts with “classical” Rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Talmud, Midrashim, Targumim) is still a highly disputed matter. (We

As I hope to show, there are motifs of this literature, which resemble both motifs of the Tanḥuma's story and the motifs of the old, post-biblical apocalyptic literature.<sup>150</sup> First and foremost, there is the journey itself which has to be emphasized. Being taken by an angel on a journey to Paradise and Hell recalls the main concern of a rich corpus of ancient Jewish Apocalypses<sup>151</sup> (1 Enoch, 2 Enoch) as well as Hekhalot literary topoi (3 Enoch).<sup>152</sup> The journey is an instructive one and the companion, most often an angel, has the task of *angelus interpres*.<sup>153</sup>

And they took and brought me to a place in which those who were there were like flaming fire, and, when they wished, they appeared as men. And they brought me to the place of darkness, and to a mountain the point of whose summit reached to heaven [...]. The angel said: *This place is the end of heaven and earth* [...] (1 Enoch 18).<sup>154</sup>

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have to stress here the fact that academic preoccupation with this literary corpus is very recent. See SCHÄFER, *Hekhalot-Studien* (note 146), pp. 1-7). I do not ignore the differences between the main theological concerns of rabbinic literature and those of the Hekhalot literature, but I doubt the (total) separation of the two corpuses and of their milieus of origin. I rather see them as expressions of Jewish religious streams which not only existed side by side, but coexisted within the same religious space, intimately known to each other and even inspiring each other in different emphases of religious priorities. As BOYARIN, "Beyond Judaism" (note 14), p. 360, convincingly showed in discussing the relation between these two literary corpuses, the paradigm of "Judaisms" (Rabbinic Judaism, Apocalyptic Judaism) no longer resists a minute analysis of the literary material we possess: "[...] there are multiple and overlapping conversations taking place across the broad spectrum of Jewish religious imagination, a spectrum that no longer will allow talk of separate (even if equal) Judaism[s] [...]. It will not do, any longer, as I hope to have shown, to draw sharp – or even blunt – distinction between types of Judaism as we proceed in our study of the histories of ancient Judaism. No more "Judaisms then but an archaeology of ancient Judaism that considers the highways and byways, the stream and the eddies, as all part of one non-triumphalist flowing flux of religious creativity."

150 In some cases, even the Talmudic literature.

151 Although it originated in post-biblical Jewish circles, the motif entered Christian ethos and literature as well (see the Apocalypse of John, as well as a large number of non-canonical apocalypses). HIMMELFARB, *Ascent to Heaven* (note 21).

152 The intimate relation between 3 Enoch (part of the Hekhalot literature) and its predecessors (especially 1 and 2 Enoch) is an accepted notion among scholars. See HUGO ODEBERG, *3 Enoch, or the Hebrew Book of Enoch* (Cambridge, 1928), pp. 174-180.

153 On the subject of the main difference between these apocalyptic texts and the Tanḥuma motif of the celestial journey, see below.

154 MATTHEW BLACK, *The Book of Enoch or I Enoch: A New English Edition*. With

And there appeared to me two men, exceedingly big, so that I never saw such on earth; their faces were shining like the sun, their eyes too were like a burning light [...] and those men said to me: ‘Have courage, Enoch, do not fear; the eternal God sent us to thee, and lo! You shalt today ascend with us into heaven [...]’ (2 Enoch 1:6-10).<sup>155</sup>

R. Yishma‘el said: When I ascended on high to behold the vision of the Merkava and had entered the six halls [...], Metatron, the angel, the prince of presence said to me [...] (3 Enoch 1:1; 6:1).<sup>156</sup>

And he (the soul) beholds and sees from one end of the world until the other end. And the angel takes him and leads him into Paradise.” (TanA *peq.* 3).<sup>157</sup>

The heavenly journey is thus an old Jewish literary topos.<sup>158</sup> There are also significant differences between the journeys of the apocalyptic and Hekhalot literature and the Tanḥuma text. While according to the Apocalypses, the subject of the journey is a chosen, distinctive personality from biblical or rabbinic history (Enoch, Moses, R. Yishma‘el, R. ‘Aqiva), in TanA *peq.* 3 the subject of the journey is every soul God created at the beginning of the world and who is going to be sent into a body.<sup>159</sup> Furthermore, in the ‘apocalyptic’ (and Hekhalot) journeys, the human receives endless detailed revelations in regard to cosmology, theology, and eschatology; in the TanA *peq.* 3, the object of revelation is reduced to the righteous ones and their merit of having kept the commandments of the Torah:

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Commentary and Textual Notes. In Consultation with James C. Vanderkam, with an Appendix by Otto Neugebauer (Studia in Veteris Testamenti Pseudepigrapha, vol. 7; (Leiden, 1985).

155 R. H. CHARLES, *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1963-1964), vol. II, p. 431.

156 SCHÄFER, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), § 1; SCHÄFER, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), vol. I, p. 1.

157 Tanḥuma (1960), I, 133b.

158 For more details, see HIMMELFARB, *Ascent to Heaven* (note 21). For the origin and evolution of the motif of the companion angel (*angelus interpres*) in Judaism, see MICHAEL MACH, *Entwicklungsstadien des jüdischen Engelglaubens in vorrabbinischer Zeit* (Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism, vol. 34; Tübingen, 1992), pp. 144-159. For the characteristics of the “rabbinic” heavenly journey, see SCHOLEM, *Die jüdische Mystik* (note 115), pp. 61- 72, who stresses the ascetical practices that were meant to facilitate the ascent. See also PETER SCHÄFER, *The Origins of the Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, N.J. / Oxford, 2009; 2011), p. 410.

159 Although not expressly said, it seems the text thinks of the souls of the people of Israel. They are the pre-existent souls of the sons of Israel, who according to Talmudic literature participated in the giving of the Torah on Sinai (*Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma‘el* zu Ex 15,1 and the parallels *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shim‘on bar Yohai* zu Ex 15,1 and tSoṭa 6,2-4), a motif underlined in the Tanḥuma text as well.



He shows him the righteous sitting in glory, and crowns are on their heads. And the angel says to the soul: ‘Do you know who these ones are?’ And the soul answers: ‘No, my Lord.’ And the angel tells him: ‘These ones, whom you see, were created at the beginning, like you, and from the womb of their mothers they went into the world and kept the Torah and the commandments and because of that they deserved to sit in this glory. Know that you also will go out from the world and [...]’.<sup>160</sup>

The righteous sitting crowned in God’s glory is a widespread motif, characteristic of apocalyptic literature as well.<sup>161</sup> A parallel text in the Hekhalot literature, which I already pointed out, describes seeing the righteous as well as the wicked, while stressing an extreme form of predestination:

R. Yishma‘el said: (The angel) Metatron said to me: ‘Come and I will show you the souls of those righteous, who have already been born and come back, and the ones who have not yet been born [...] come and I will show you the souls of the wicked [...]’.<sup>162</sup>

Contrary to the Hekhalot text, the emphasis in the TanA *peq.* 3 is not Paradise with its ‘mysteries’, but the Torah and its commandments. We are not told of anything else the soul sees on its journey save the reward for keeping the Torah and the commandments, and the punishment for not doing so. The journey thus turns out to be just an exterior formal act with a strong emphasis on the Torah.<sup>163</sup> I therefore propose to read this detail of the story as a ‘rabbinic’ theological reworking of a wide-spread Jewish apocalyptic motif, the heavenly journey. The reworking of the apocalyptic/mystic motif has two main results: the heavenly journey is no longer the privilege of an initiated mystic, but instead becomes a Torah-centred pre-natal mystical experience of each soul (of Israel).<sup>164</sup> Also, the description of the embryo as “seeing from one end of the world until the other end” hints at accounts in the Hekhalot literature according to which the mystic, after contemplating the heavenly throne (*merkava*), receives a kind of prophetic capacity of seeing the hidden things of the whole world.<sup>165</sup> Similarly, the soul of the

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160 *Tanhuma* (1960), I, 133a.

161 See MACH, *Entwicklungsstadien* (note 158), pp. 194-205; SCHÄFER, *Ursprünge der jüdischen Mystik* (note 15).

162 Translation according to SCHÄFER, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), § 61; SCHÄFER, *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur* (note 15), vol. I, § 61-62, pp. 134-136.

163 The emphasis on the Torah is found also in Hekhalot literature and hints at the on-going fusion of apocalyptic and ‘rabbinic’ ideas. See SCHÄFER, *Origins of the Jewish Mysticism* (note 158), p. 344.

164 See KESSLER, *Conceiving Israel* (note 19), pp. 29-46.

165 SCHÄFER, *Origins of the Jewish Mysticism* (note 158), pp. 344-345 remarks that the

embryo is taken on a journey into the world during which it sees its own future (its hour of hour and burial place) as well as the deeds of the righteous and the wicked. The story mentions a burning candle being placed on the head of the embryo and explains this by quoting a biblical verse: *How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone on my head and by his light I walked through darkness!* (Job 29:2-3) The days Job refers to are understood by the author as the time before his birth, and the shining lamp developed into the motif of the burning candle on the embryo's head. There is a silent connection between the burning lamp and the power of the embryo to see hidden things, and maybe a further hint at the apocalyptic scenarios in which light plays a major role.<sup>166</sup> In conclusion, we may well say that the journey in TanA *peq.* 3 is a rather old Jewish apocalyptic motif which is reworked with an emphasis on rabbinic theological views.

### 1.6 *Physiological description of the pregnancy*

We turn our attention now to a further section of the Tanḥuma fragment, which seems to focus on a physiological description of the pregnancy. After having described in detail the main aspects of the soul's experience during the pregnancy, the author turns to the pregnancy in a bodily meaning:

And the embryo resides in the womb of its mother for nine months. The first three months the baby stays in the lower chamber of his mother's womb; the second three months, it stays in the middle chamber; and the last three months, it stays in the upper chamber. And when the time to be born arrives, it turns around<sup>167</sup> and descend in one instant from the upper chamber into the middle one and from there into the lower chamber. And it eats and drink from everything its mother eats and drinks and does not produce excrements. And because of that it was said (in the Scripture): *He performs wonders that cannot be fathomed, miracles that cannot be counted* (Job 9:10).<sup>168</sup>

The fragment seems to be a mixture of details from different traditions which are quoted in the Palestinian Midrash as well as in the Babylonian

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prophetical ability of the mystic turns into a sharp criticism of the community, since the seer reveals the hidden sins of Israel. In the Tanḥuma text, there is no trace of criticism of the 'rabbinic' community. We are not told explicitly what the embryo sees, but it is supposedly mysteries of the world rather than the sins of its co-religionists.

166 See SCHÄFER, *Origins of the Jewish Mysticism* (note 158), pp. 336-386.

167 The turning around of the foetus is mentioned elsewhere in rabbinic literature as well, and provides the rabbinic explanation for labour (bNid 31a, WayR 14).

168 Tanḥuma (1960), I, 133a.



Talmud.<sup>169</sup> The Midrashic and Talmudic traditions are underpinned by quotations from the Book of Job as well and are introduced in the name of various rabbis like R. ‘Aqiva,<sup>170</sup> R. Yishma‘el,<sup>171</sup> and R. Simlai:<sup>172</sup>

R. Simlai exposed: ‘What does a foetus in his mother’s womb resemble? A folded scroll,<sup>173</sup> and it lies with its arms on its sides, its elbows on its thighs, its heels against its buttocks. Its head is resting between its knees.<sup>174</sup> Its mouth is closed and its navel open. And it eats from what its mother eats and drinks from what she takes in. It does not excrete any waste matter lest it should cause its mother’s death. When it comes out to the open air, what was closed opens and what was open closes, if not, the child could not survive one single hour. And there is a burning candle on its head and it beholds and sees from one end of the world until the other one, as it is written: *How I long for the months gone by, for the days when God watched over me, when his lamp shone on my head and by his light I walked through darkness* (Job 29:2-3). These are the months of the pregnancy. And the foetus is taught all the Torah, as it is written: *Then he taught me, and he said to me, ‘Take hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands, and you will live.’* (Prov. 4:4) And it is also written.’ (bNid 30b).

R. Simlai gives a description of the foetus’ position in its mother’s womb and mentions the burning candle on the embryo’s head as well as the capacity of the embryo to see the world’s mysteries.<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, the text mentions the teaching of the Torah during pregnancy.

As we have already seen, another Talmudic text mentions the story of the Tanḥuma *peq.* 3 text, albeit in a short form:

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169 See bNid 31a; WayR 14.

170 The most important rabbinic figure of mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century Palestine.

171 A contemporary and the leader of a school often opposed to that of R. Aqiva.

172 From Babylonian Amora, living in Palestine in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.

173 The word for scroll used here is פנקס *pinqas* (> πίναξ), which actually means ‘writing board’.

174 Noteworthy is the similarity between the description of R. Simlai and a description of the posture of the mystic attributed to R. Aqiva: “R. Aqiva said, ‘Each one who wants to learn this teaching and to explain the Name should fast for forty days and rest his head between his knees, until his fasting masters him.’” See Schäfer (2009), 410; It is possible that certain mystic practices tried to imitate to position of the embryo’s body in an attempt to reiterate the journey of the embryo’s soul through the heavenly palaces.

175 These traditions are recorded in WayR 14:2 as well: “When the embryo is in its mother’s womb, He (God) causes a light to shine for it there, wherewith [with which?] It can see from one end of the world to the other.”

R. Yoḥanan taught: Sexual intercourse during the day is forbidden.<sup>176</sup> R. Menu-  
na said: We learn that from the verse: *May the day of my birth perish, and the night  
that said, 'A boy is conceived'* (Job 3:3). The night is given for conception and the  
day is not given for conception. R. Shim'on ben Laqish (said): We learn that  
from the verse: *He who is careless of conduct will die* (Prov. 19:16). As to R. Shim'on  
ben Laqish, how does he expound R. Yoḥanan's text? He requires it for the  
same exposition as that made by R. Ḥanina bar Pappa. For R. Ḥanina bar Pappa  
made the following exposition: The name of the angel who is in charge of con-  
ception is "Night," and he takes up a drop and places it in the presence of the  
Holy One, Blessed is He, saying, "Sovereign of the Universe, what shall be the  
fate of this drop? Shall it produce a strong man or a weak man, a wise man or a  
fool, a rich man or a poor man?" Whereas 'wicked' or 'righteous' he does not  
mention, in agreement with the view of R. Ḥanina. For R. Ḥanina stated: Every-  
thing is in the hands of heaven, except the fear of God, as it says, *And now Israel,  
what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear*, etc. (Deut. 10:12). (bNid 16b).

Here we have the main motif as well as a short scenario of the Tanḥuma  
story of the soul-infusing angel whose name is Layla (Night). The story  
should underpin here the statement of R. Yoḥanan according to which sex-  
ual intercourse has to be carried out only at night.<sup>177</sup> The argument used is  
the name of the angel. The story is quoted in the name of R. Ḥanina bar  
Pappa, a R. from the third generation of Amoraim<sup>178</sup> who lived in Caesarea  
in Palestine. R. Ḥanina is also quoted elsewhere with the same conclusion  
of his soul-infusing story: everything is in the hands of heaven except the  
fear of heaven.<sup>179</sup>

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176 Lit.: "it is forbidden to a man to use his bed during the day."

177 'Discussions' about the prohibition of sexual intercourse during the day occurs  
in other contexts as well. See bShab 87a; bKet 65a.

178 Late 3<sup>rd</sup> early 4<sup>th</sup> century.

179 bBer 33b; bMeg 25a. Noteworthy is a short story about R. Ḥannina which is  
quoted in both sources: "One man descended before the ark (as prayer leader)  
in the presence of R. Ḥannina. He extended his prayer and said: 'God, the great,  
mighty, awesome, powerful, awe-inspiring, strong, fearless, steadfast, and hon-  
oured.' R. Ḥannina waited for him until he completed his prayer. When he fin-  
ished, R. Ḥannina asked him: 'Have you concluded all of the praises of your  
Master? Why do I need all of this superfluous praise? Even these three praises  
that we recite: The great, mighty, and awesome, had Moses our teacher not said  
them in the Torah and had the members of the Great Assembly not come and  
incorporated them into the Amida prayer, we would not be permitted to recite  
them. And you went on and recited all of these [...].'" Gershom Scholem points  
to the fact that the man in the story recites a list of God's attributes which  
appears to have been an apocalyptic practice. The story places the 'mystic'  
inside the rabbinic community whom R. Ḥannina admonishes, but does not

The preceding discussion showed that all the details of the Tanhuma story as the core story were widespread and well known in late Talmudic literature as well as among the Talmudic redactors, and that it should be regarded as an integral part of an open and fluid embryologic Jewish imagery.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, we have seen that many of the details of the story remain in a close relationship with (rabbinic) apocalyptic motifs. All this suggests the fact that the motif of the soul-infusing angel is to be regarded as an essential part of Late Antique Jewish Embryology.

## 2. *The soul-infusing angel in the postbiblical Apocalypses*<sup>181</sup>

Since the rabbinic motif of the soul-infusing angel shows affinities with motifs of late Jewish Apocalyptic literature, we should ask about the relationship of this motif with the older, post-biblical Jewish (and Christian) Apocalypses.<sup>182</sup>

### 2.1 *1 and 2 Enoch*<sup>183</sup>

In the preserved post-biblical Jewish Apocalyptic literature, we do not find an angel who is expressly said to be in charge of conception. Nevertheless, we do find many details which could be perceived as hinting at such a tradition. The first (Ethiopic) Book of Enoch knows an angel, *Refa'el*, who is said to be *over the spirits of the men* (1 Enoch 20:3).<sup>184</sup> The second (Slavonic)

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exclude him (the mystic is not a “min [?]”). See SCHOLEM, *Die jüdische Mystik* (note 115), p. 65.

180 A noteworthy aspect is that the majority of the discussed traditions are quoted in both Talmudim and in Midrashim as *baraitot*.

181 Post-biblical Apocalypses developed roughly between the 3rd century BCE and the 4th CE. See HIMMELFARB, *Ascent to Heaven* (note 21), MARTHA HIMMELFARB, *The Apocalypse: A Brief History* (Malden / Oxford, 2010).

182 For an overview of this corpus of literature, see JOHN J. COLLINS (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia, vol. 14; Atlanta, GA, 1979); MICHAEL E. STONE, “Apocalyptic Literature,” in: MICHAEL E. STONE (ed.), *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period* (Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum, vol. II/2; Assen / Philadelphia, PA, 1984), pp. 383-441; CHRISTOPHER ROWLAND, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York, 1982).

183 For a short description of Enoch books see MICHAEL E. STONE, “The Book of Enoch and Judaism in the Third Century B.C.E.,” in: *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40 (1978), pp. 479-492.

184 1 Enoch 32:6 mentions the same angel ‘over the spirits’, *Refa'el*, who leads Enoch through Paradise, serving him as ‘angelus interpres’. See BLACK, *The Book of Enoch* (note 154), pp. 36-41, and 162.

Book of Enoch mentions those angels who are in charge of the souls of human beings:

And I saw the angels of all people, and all their lives they organize, and write it down before the face of the Lord. (2 Enoch 19:5).<sup>185</sup>

Further, Enoch is taught by his companion angel:

Sit down and write all the souls of men, whatever of them are not yet born, and their places prepared for eternity. (2 Enoch 23:4-5).<sup>186</sup>

In his heavenly journey, Enoch sees angels in charge of the souls of humans created before the creation of the world. These angels are not connected directly with the pregnancies or with ensoulment, yet they are in charge of the deeds of men. It is against this background that we should understand the New Testament's texts that mention 'personal' angels of human beings:

See that you do not despise one of these little ones.<sup>187</sup> For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father. (Matth. 18:10) 'You are out of your mind', they told her. When she kept insisting that Peter was at the door, they said: 'It must be his angel'. (Acts 12:15).<sup>188</sup>

Although the contexts of these sayings do not develop the idea of a 'personal angel', the early Church tradition connects them with the guardian angel who is said to be assigned at conception, simultaneous with ensoulment.<sup>189</sup> Acts 12:15 also seems to rest upon a tradition according to which the appearance of a human resembles his or her own angel, for which we saw some Talmudic parallels.

## 2.2 *The Apocalypse of Peter (ApocPetri)*

Although a Christian text, the Apocalypse of Peter<sup>190</sup> draws heavily on Jewish

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185 See CHARLESWORTH, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (note 21), vol. I, pp. 132-133.

186 See CHARLESWORTH, *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (note 21), vol. I, p. 140.

187 Seemingly, the text refers to the socially weak, the poor, the widows, the orphans. Not infrequently in the Christian tradition, the verse was understood as referring to embryos.

188 After Peter was miraculously set free from prison by an angel, he went to the gathered Christian group, yet when the servant girl told them that Peter was at the door, they could not believe it (Acts 12).

189 JEAN DANIELÉLOU, *Die Sendung der Engel* (Salzburg, 1963), pp. 89-90. See below.

190 The ApocPetri is a Christian text which has been preserved only in fragments. The work seems to have been very popular and widespread within the early Church (Clements characterizes it as "divine Scripture"). Its origin might have been Jewish, Bremmer (2003), 8-10, and the first half of the 2nd century could be taken into account as the time of composition E. TIGCHELAAR, "Is the Liar

models.<sup>191</sup> The work uses the same patterns of the apocalyptic genre.<sup>192</sup> The plot of the work is a heavenly journey of the apostle Peter, to whom revelations are made. Among other things, Peter is said to see an angel who keeps the souls of all men:

[...] And the angel showed me in his right hand the souls of all men.<sup>193</sup>

Although not specifically said, the text seems to allude to 2 Enoch 10:8, that describes the creation of the souls of all men before the creation of the world. Visiting Hell, Peter sees women who have ‘killed’ their babies in abortion:

[...] Then I saw women [...] tormented with great pain. These are that have caused their children to be born untimely, and have corrupted the work of God who created them. [...] And their children stand against them in a place of delight, sent sighs and cry unto God because of their parents, saying, ‘These are that have despised and cursed and transgressed thy commandments and delivered us unto death. They have cursed the angel that formed us, and have hanged us up and withheld from us the light which thou hast given unto all creatures.’<sup>194</sup>

This paragraph describes the conception of the embryo as being the work of God, who “creates” the embryo. Nevertheless, God does not “work” alone. An angel is mentioned whose task seems to be the formation of the embryo. Although not mentioned, it is highly probable that the shaping angel is entrusted with the ensoulment of the baby as well, given the fact that all souls are kept in the “right hand of the angel”. Another text, the Apocalypse of Paul (ApocPauli),<sup>195</sup> mentions personal guardian angels who write down the deeds of men. The moment when the deeds are written down is not specified

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Bar Kochba? Considering the Date and Provenance of the Greek (Ethiopic) Apocalypse of Peter,” in: JAN N. BREMMER & ISTVÁN CZACHESZ (eds.), *The Apocalypse of Peter* (Studies on early Christian Apocrypha, vol. 7; Leuven, 2003), pp. 63-77, here pp. 74-77. For more details on this Apocalypse, see the articles collected in that volume.

191 For this reason, I chose to discuss the work in the category of post-biblical Apocalypses.

192 See MARTHA HIMMELFARB, *Tours of Hell: An Apocalyptic Form in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Philadelphia, PA, 1983), pp. 67-68.

193 MONTAGUE R. JAMES, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford, 1953), p. 512.

194 JAMES, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (note 193), p. 515.

195 The Apocalypse of Paul, a Christian work, seems to have been written between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> century somewhere in Egypt and it draws heavily on Peter’s Apocalypse as well as on some other Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts. See R. P. CASEY, “The Apocalypse of Paul,” in: *The Journal of Theological Studies* 34 (1933), pp. 1-32; JAN N. BREMMER, “Christian Hell. From The Apocalypse of Peter to the Apocalypse of Paul,” in: *Numen* 56 (2009), pp. 298-325.

in the majority of versions, but the Coptic and the Ethiopic versions locate it before birth and before the creation of Adam and Eve respectively.<sup>196</sup> The Apocalypse of Paul explains the guardian angel as

[...] the angel of every people and of every man and woman, who protects and keeps them, because man is the image of God (ApocPauli 7).<sup>197</sup>

If according to ApocPetri the angel is the one giving the embryo its form, according to ApocPauli, the angel is the protector of the new human being who has just been formed in the image of God.

We have seen that the post-biblical Jewish and Christian Apocalypses contain already all the elements of the later Jewish and Islamic story of the soul-infusing angel. The souls are said to have been created at once and kept by angels who are playing an active role in the formation/shaping of the embryo as well as in its development. Although the New Testament does not mention these traditions, they are some details which may point to the assumption, that such views were known in the religious and cultural environment in which it originated. In the next section we will have a look at Christian sources mentioning the formation of the embryo and the ensoulment.

### 3. *The motif of the soul-infusing angel in early Christian sources*

#### 3.1 *Clemens of Alexandria*

Deeply familiar with the writings of Philo and a disciple of Pantene of Alexandrina,<sup>198</sup> Clemens<sup>199</sup> was well-acquainted with the Hellenistic theories of soul and ensoulment.<sup>200</sup> Like Philo, Clemens was of the opinion that the intelligible world preceded the created sensible world.<sup>201</sup> The fact that

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196 See CASEY, "The Apocalypse of Paul" (note 195), p. 14, n. 4. The writing down of men's deeds before their birth or even the creation of Adam and Eve would speak for an extreme form of predestination in the communities which copied or translated the texts.

197 See JAMES, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (note 193), p. 528.

198 Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, V, 10, 1-11.

199 Born as a pagan (around 150), Clemens converted to Christianity after having completed his philosophical education. Between 180 and 200, Clemens led the catechetical school of Alexandria. He died around 215. See JOHN FERGUSON, *Clement of Alexandria* (New York, 1974), pp. 13-17; DENISE BUELL, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria and the Rhetoric of Legitimacy* (Princeton, N.J., 1999), pp. 10-12.

200 In his writings, Clemens discusses in detail the soul and ensoulment theories of his day. CONGOURDEAU, *L'Embryon et son âme* (note 54), p. 68.

201 I understand the soul in Clemens' thought as a part of the intelligible world

Clemens rejected and contradicted the Hellenistic theories of the ‘fall’ of the souls into bodies<sup>202</sup> led scholars to conclude that Clemens did not believe in the pre-existence of souls.<sup>203</sup> However, Clemens did not speak unequivocally about either the pre-existence or the non-pre-existence of the soul, limiting himself to hints.<sup>204</sup> What he unmistakably refuses is the embodiment of the pre-existing soul as a punishment for any sin: “The soul is not sent from heaven towards an inferior condition” (*Strommata* IV, XXVI, 167:4)<sup>205</sup> About the ensoulment of the embryo, Clemens said the following:

For the soul enters the womb [...] and is introduced by one of the angels provided to oversee birth, who know in advance the time of conception to push the woman toward intercourse and after the semen has been deposited, as it were, the spirit, which is in the seed, is adapted and this takes part in the formation [...] And if the angels bring good news to barren women, so also do they infuse souls at conception. In the Gospel, ‘the babe leapt (means that it is) ensouled [...]’ And because of this, barren women are barren, since the soul is not infused accompanying the depositing of seed for the retention of conception and birth. (*Excerpts from Theodotus*, 50).<sup>206</sup>

For Clemens, there are also *angels* provided to oversee birth,<sup>207</sup> and the soul is introduced into the sperm by one of those angels, too.<sup>208</sup> According to

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and thus as pre-existent. Like Philo, Clemens argued for the influence of the Torah on Greek culture in general and on Plato in particular. FERGUSON, *Clement of Alexandria* (note 199), pp. 117-119.

202 Philo also describes a kind of ‘fall’ (descent) of the soul into the body, although in a personal way, highly imbued with biblical quotation. For him, the biblical myth about the “Sons of God” marrying mortal women (Gen 6:1) signifies the descent of the souls that descend and ascend as the angels on the ladder in Jacob’s dream (Gen 28:12). Although exceedingly argued with biblical quotation, Philo owes his ideas about ensoulment to the Greek authors. CONGOURDEAU, *L’Embryon et son âme* (note 54), pp. 68-69.

203 See JEAN HÉRING, *Étude sur la doctrine de la chute et de la préexistence des âmes chez Clément d’Alexandrie* (Paris, 1923).

204 Clemens describes the righteous ones as “send down here as in a mission in a strange country”. See CONGOURDEAU, *L’Embryon et son âme* (note 54), p. 99.

205 Quoted from CONGOURDEAU, *L’Embryon et son âme* (note 54), p. 99.

206 Quoted from BUELL, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria* (note 198), p. 26; for a brief discussion of this fragment, see BUELL, *Making Christians: Clement of Alexandria* (note 198), pp. 25-27.

207 The designation of the angel (ὑπό τινος τῇ γενέσει ἐφεστώτων ἀγγέλων) comes very near to the rabbinic „angel entrusted with the pregnancy“.

208 The resemblance of Clemens’ theory with the Tanḥuma text’s opinion about ensoulment is striking.



Clemens, the angel of birth gives women the desire for intercourse. A noteworthy element of Clemens' text is the interpretation of the announcing angels of the Gospels (Mt 1:20-23; Luke 1:11-20, 26-38) as soul-infusing angels. Further, Clemens explains barrenness as the soul not being infused.<sup>209</sup> In his views on soul and ensoulment, Clemens is clearly dependent on Jewish-Christian Apocalypses,<sup>210</sup> as he himself witnesses in a further text: For example, Peter in the Apocalypse says that the children born out of due time that would have been of the better part (i.e. would have been saved, if they had lived) these are delivered to a care-taking angel, that they may partake of knowledge. (*Prophetical extracts* 48:1).<sup>211</sup>

Clemens is the first Christian writer working elements of the Apocalypses into a Christian anthropology, from which the ensoulment and the formation by an angel would be an important part. The second quoted text seems to imply as well elements of predestination.

### 3.2 Tertullian

Tertullian was a prolific early Christian writer<sup>212</sup> who among others was very receptive to contemporary discussions about soul and ensoulment theories. Tertullian himself composed a tractate on this topic.<sup>213</sup> Describing the process of the embryo's formation, Tertullian underlines the participation of "some powers" which he then calls angels:

Now the entire process of sowing, composing, shaping and completing the human embryo in the womb is no doubt regulated by some powers, which

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209 Clemens does not develop the topic to explain the reason according to which a soul is infused or not, or to explain the desire for intercourse which lacks an infusion of the soul and thus conception.

210 The origin of Clemens' ideas in Jewish apocalyptic literature was assumed already by Daniélou (1961), 407-425, and was more recently convincingly shown by Bogdan G. Bucur. "The Other Clement of Alexandria: Cosmic Hierarchy and Interiorized Apocalypticism," in: *Vigiliae Christianae* 60 (2006), pp. 251-268.

211 Quoted from JAMES, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (note 193), p. 506.

212 Tertullian was a North African Christian writer (lived approx. 150-220), contemporary with Clemens, and possessed a solid classical education as well. TIMOTHY D. BARNES, *Tertullian: A Historical and Literary Study* (Oxford, 1985); DAVID E. WHITE, *Tertullian the African. An Anthropological Reading of Tertullian's Context and Identities* (Berlin, 2007).

213 Tertullian, *De anima*, accessible on <http://clt.brepolis.net/lltadfg/pages/Toc.aspx> (last access May 03, 2017). Tertullian discusses contemporary theories of ensoulment and embryo formation and proposes Christian answers to the implicated questions. Tertullian could be considered as one of the first writers who generated a Christian embryology.

ministers herein to the will of God (*potestas diuinae uoluntatis ministra modulatur*), whatever may be the method which it is appointed to employ. Even the superstition of Rome, by carefully attending to these points, imagined the goddess *Alemona* to nourish the foetus in the womb; as well as (the goddesses) *Nona* and *Decima*, called after the most critical months of gestation; and *Partula*, to manage and direct parturition; and *Lucina*, to bring the child to birth and light of day. We, on our part, believe the angels to officiate herein for God (*nos complete diuina angelos credimus*). The embryo therefore becomes a human being in the womb from the moment that its form is completed (*ex eo igitur foetus in utero homo, a quo forma complete est*). (*De anima* 37).<sup>214</sup>

Tertullian does not go further in describing the exact tasks of the participating “powers” in the formation and ensoulment of the embryo, but comments shortly: “whatever may be the method which it is appointed to employ” (*quamcumque illam rationem agitare sortita*). However, he mentions four moments: sowing (*in utero serendi*), composing (*struendi*), shaping (*fingendi*), and completing (*paraturam*). We may assume that in ascribing these moments to angels, Tertullian refers (as Clemens does) to post-biblical (apocalypitical) traditions which may have been widespread in his North African Church.<sup>215</sup>

### 3.3 Origen

Origen<sup>216</sup> frequently writes about soul and ensoulment, reflecting in this way a much-discussed subject in the cultural milieu of the Eastern Roman

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214 Translated according to JAN HENDRIK WASZINK (ed.), *Tertullian: De Anima*, in: *TERTULLIAN: Opera* (Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina, vol. 2; Turnhout, 1954), pp. 781-869.

215 The paragraph could suggest also, as in the case of Clemens, that ensoulment was understood to be the task of the announcing angels of the Gospels. For the dependency of the North African church on Alexandrian traditions, see ÉRIC REBILLARD, *Christians and their many identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450* (Ithaca, 2012).

216 Born around 185 in Alexandria, Origen was one of the most complex personalities of the early Church. A disciple of Clemens and a prodigious writer, Origen visited many Christian communities (Rome, Greece, Palestine, and Petra) and spent the last 20 years of his life (230-250) in Caesarea (Palestine), where along with preaching and writing he was engaged in discussions with the rabbinic leaders of the city; see, NICHOLAS R. M. DE LANGE, *Origen and the Jews: Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in third-century Palestine* (Oriental publications, vol. 25; Cambridge [etc.], 1976). The influence of Origen on the theologians of the next generations and especially on monastic spirituality (in Egypt and Palestine) can hardly be overestimated. The theological heritage of Origen became a matter of theological scandals in the ‘Great Church’ and became an issue of some Church councils (among them the 5th Ecumenical Council). The Council

Empire.<sup>217</sup> As recently shown, Origen relied mainly on the exegetical school of Alexandria (post-biblical traditions, Philo, Clemens) in this matter, and not on the philosophical schools of the time.<sup>218</sup> In doing so, Origen expressed and defended time and again the pre-existence of souls,<sup>219</sup> a tradition that, as already stressed, was widespread in Egypt and Palestine. In his Commentary on John (chapter XIII), written (and probably preached as well) in Caesarea, Palestine, Origen writes about the ensoulment of the embryo:

[...] If it is like that,<sup>220</sup> we should examine if the angels' ministry (λειτουργία) of sowing souls into bodies (ἐνσπείρεσθαι ψυχὰς σώμασιν) is a tiresome one.<sup>221</sup> They reduce into one unique composition two things of opposite nature, granting at an appointed time (ἐν καιρῷ) the portion of each individual (τε τὴν περὶ ἐκάστου ποεῖν οἰκονομία) and bringing (thereafter) what they have previously formed (προπλασμενον), to mature development (εἰς τελεσφόρησιν).<sup>222</sup>

Like Clemens and Tertullian, Origen speaks about “angels” who are in charge of the ensoulment of embryos. It is not clear if he thinks of each soul as being infused by a ‘personal’ angel or if there is a ‘class’ of angels entrusted with this task. Furthermore, Origen mentions the granting at appointed times of the fate of each individual, which seems to coincide with divine decisions about the life of the future person. Does Origen take this point from the Apocalypses, which mention angels who write the deeds of humans, or does he refer to an oral tradition he received from the Jewish-Christian milieu of Caesarea? The question may have to be left open for now. In addition to that, Origen seems to consider ensoulment and the “granting of each one’s portion” to occur at a time when the embryo has a human form: “bringing thereafter to maturity what they have previously formed.” The task of the angels in Origen’s exposition has four moments:

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condemned specific aspects of Origen’s writings, which entered a long era of suspicion and disregard. The importance of Origen in and for the development of Christian Theology was discovered and stressed in modern times.

217 CONGOURDEAU, *L’Embryon et son âme* (note 54), pp. 100-109.

218 CONGOURDEAU, *L’Embryon et son âme* (note 54), pp. 107-108.

219 CONGOURDEAU, *L’Embryon et son âme* (note 54), p. 108.

220 Discussing angels, Origen stresses in the previous paragraphs the fact that angels are appointed for the conception and that ensoulment is done by an angel.

221 Origen explains the task of the angels based on the biblical verse John 4:38: *I sent you to reap what you have not worked for; others have done the hard work, and now you have taken up their labour.*

222 Translation according to CÉCILE BLANC, *Origène: Commentaire sur Saint Jean XIII* (Sources chrétiennes, n° 222), Paris 2006.

the ensoulment of the matter (sperm, formed embryo?), the granting of each one's portion, the formation of the embryo and its bringing to maturity.

### 3.4 *Methodius of Olympus*<sup>223</sup>

Although critical toward Origen, Methodius draws heavily on the Alexandrian theologian.<sup>224</sup> He clearly affirms his support of the idea of two creations, the intelligible and the sensitive world. He thus advocates the pre-existence of souls.<sup>225</sup> In the second chapter of his *Symposium*, he speaks about the union between the soul and body, writing:

By whose providence is it that the foetus is not strangled by the pressure of the fluids that course over it in its narrow confines within? [...] It is for this reason that we have been taught by the divinely inspired Scriptures that all babies, even those from unlawful unions, are entrusted at birth to the keeping of guardian angels (τηλεμαύχοις ἀγγέλοις).<sup>226</sup> Whereas if they come into existence contrary to the will and ordinance of that blessed nature of God, how could they be entrusted to angels to be brought to maturity<sup>227</sup> (τραφησόμενα) with great gentleness and indulgence?<sup>228</sup>

The following passage make clear that what Methodius mentions as “divinely inspired Scripture” is the Apocalypse of Peter. Methodius does not

223 About the martyr bishop Methodius of Olympus (d. 311) we know little beyond what Hieronimus (*De viris illustribus*, 83) and Eusebius (*Historia Ecclesiastica* 8:13) wrote. His works reflect a comprehensive classical and theological education. His most important work is the *Symposium*, a work about virginity. See, HERBERT MUSURILLO, *Saint Methodius (of Olympus), The Symposium: A Treatise on Chastity* (Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 27; New York, 1958), pp. 3-37.

224 CONGOURDEAU, *L'Embryon et son âme* (note 54), p. 109.

225 CONGOURDEAU, *L'Embryon et son âme* (note 54), p. 110. For a complete view of Methodius' anthropology, see KATHARINA BRACHT, *Vollkommenheit und Vollendung: Zur Anthropologie von Methodius von Olympus* (Tübingen, 1999).

226 What Musurillo renders in English as “birth” should be understood as “conception”. See the Greek text: ὅθεν δὲ καὶ τημελαύχοις ἀγγέλοις, καὶ ἐκ μοιχειῆς ὧσι, τὰ ἀποτικτόμενα παραδίδοσθαι παρειλήφμεν ἐν θεοπνεύστοις γράμμασιν (“for which reason the ones having been conceived, even those from adultery, and are given to guarding angels, as we are taught by the divinely-inspired Scriptures”). ἀποτίκτω means “to beget”, “to conceive” (lat. *procreo*). See FRIEDRICH AST, *Lexicon Platonicum sive vocum Platoniarum*, 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1835-1838; reprint Darmstadt / Bonn, 1956), vol. I (1835) p. 259.

227 Musurillo translates τρέφω as “to bring up”. When used for parts of the body or the [whole?] body, the verb means to “grow”, to “develop”. Being used by Methodius for conceived embryos, I choose to translate it as “being brought to maturity”.

228 According to MUSURILLO, *Saint Methodius* (note 224), p. 55.

speak about ensoulment by angels. Ensoulment for him is carried out by God, the newly conceived baby is according to his text entrusted to angels who take care of the development of the baby. Because Methodius quotes the Apocalypse of Peter in these matters, it is to be assumed that the shaping of the embryo is also a part of the angel's caring assistance.

Although the pre-existence of souls continues to be part of some Fathers' thought (Didymus, Evagrius, Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazians),<sup>229</sup> we no longer find a mention of the soul-infusing angel. The angels continue to figure as 'guardian' angels of the baby.<sup>230</sup> Starting with the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the pre-existence of souls makes way for the idea that the soul of the embryo is created by God at conception (or in some cases at the time the embryo receives its human shape).<sup>231</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

The TanA embryological fragment represents an outstanding synthesis of very old Jewish traditions regarding the question of the origin of an individual's life. This synthesis is built around what I call the "tradition of the soul-infusing angel", a belief according to which an angel (or angels) play(s) an active role at and around the conception of new human life. This tradition has old Jewish roots, circulating before and after the emergence and consolidation of Rabbinic Judaism in plenty of versions. This idea was adopted by the early Christian writers along with the prolific Jewish literary genre of Apocalypses and was reworked according to the anthropological interests of each context.

Peculiar for Judaism and early Christianity is the connection between the role of the angel as soul-infusing and the pre-existence of souls. The angel(s) infuse(s) into the embryo an existing or long-before-created soul. As the pre-existence of souls lost its importance for the Church,<sup>232</sup> the angel ended his career as infuser/sower of the soul. For Church writers, ensoulment was henceforward perceived as a creational act, simultaneous with conception (perceived as occurring during sexual intercourse) and then ascribed

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229 CONGOURDEAU, *L'Embryon et son âme* (note 54), pp. 109-130.

230 See DANIELLOU, *Sendung der Engel* (note 189), pp. 89-107.

231 CONGOURDEAU, *L'Embryon et son âme* (note 54), pp. 328-336; DAVID ALBERT JONES, *The Soul of the Embryo. An inquiry into the status of the human embryo in the Christian Tradition* (London / New York, 2004), pp. 92-109.

232 Around the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> century, the Church Fathers were more and more attracted to the idea of the spontaneous creation of body and soul because it offered a better explanation for the doctrine of original sin.

exclusively to God alone. The parable of the “three partners at the conception of man” in Rabbinic Judaism<sup>233</sup> may reflect the familiarity of Rabbinic Judaism with this model as well. For Church authors, the angel(s) continued to be perceived as the companion of the embryo and its caretaker, the emphasis being moved to the task of “guardian angel”. Yet, as I have suggested before, there is no reason to assume that the angel as the infuser of the soul disappeared from the broad spectrum of popular religiosity. Within Judaism, it seems that such (a) tradition(s) continued to live next to a religious imagery inherited from the same post-biblical (or apocalyptic) literature. The rabbis, like the Christian writers, knew it and used it in different contexts. It is not impossible, although not yet confirmable, that the tradition was also used by exponents of an extreme form of predetermination (we have seen that in some Jewish circles, certain souls were considered righteous already before birth), in a fashion similar to the *Ḥadīth* opening this article (the angel also decrees if the embryo is going to be righteous or wicked). In this regard, the Talmudic version of the tradition would be a refutation of such a belief as well as a “rabbinized” version of it. The version preserved by TanA *peq.* 3 may be regarded as such an example of “rabbinization” of apocalyptic traditions.

Accordingly, it seems very plausible that the *Ḥadīth* motif of the soul-infusing angel does *not* go back to a specific Jewish or Christian work or circle, but rather emerged from a shared late antique embryologic imagery, which transcended religious or communal boundaries. The analysis of this tradition thus shows the deep interlacing of the early Islamic tradition with the late antique heritage.

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233 bNid 31a, QohR 5,10.