

How Did Moses Die?

by

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1 Introduction

One mystery of the Torah is “Exactly how did Moses die on Mount Nevo?” The last chapters of Deut. explain only that God commanded Moses to die on Mount Nevo, that Moses *did* die there, and that God buried him in a nearby valley in a place not known to any person. In particular, the text explains neither the exact mode nor the exact cause of Moses’s death. This article pieces together a possible exact mode and cause of Moses’s death by pulling in evidence from Torah quotations.

2 Moses Learns That He Must Die

Deut. 32:48–50, in which God announces Moses’s upcoming death reads,

וידבר יהוה אל משה, ... עלה אל הר ... הר נבו, ... ומת, בהר
...

These verses are occasionally, e.g., by the JPS⁴ and Plaut⁷, translated as something

like,

And God said to Moses, ... ascend the mountain ... Mount Nevo, ... you will die, on the mountain ...

or as

And God said to Moses, ... ascend the mountain ... Mount Nevo, ... you shall die, on the mountain ...,

as if the all-knowing God is informing Moses that he *will* die on Mount Nevo, i.e., Mount Nevo is the place where he will die, by natural causes or by God's action. However, that meaning would have been written in Hebrew as

וידבר יהוה אל משה, ... עלה אל הר ... הר נבו, ... ותמות,
בהר ...

using the singular future form, **תמות**, of **למות**, “to die”. What is written there in the beginning of Deut. 32:50, **מת**, after the **ו** for “and” is the singular imperative form of **למות**, a very blunt command saying, “and *die* on the mountain”. It is the pure, unmitigated, and impolite imperative form of the verb. God is telling Moses, not just that he will die and where the death will occur, but that he, Moses, has to *do something active* to bring about his own death.

In modern Hebrew, the future form, such as **תמות**, “you will die”, is used as a more polite, softened way to give a command. The imperative **מת** sounds so blunt, like from a soldier charging the enemy with a bayoneted gun in his hand, yelling, “Die!” How is Moses supposed to fulfil this command to end his life? He cannot be expected to know how to stop his heart. Could he, perhaps, intentionally throw himself off a cliff, hit himself with a rock, or take poison? Also, as nearby text describes Moses as healthy and vigorous at age 120, he is unlikely to die of natural causes from hiking up Mount Nevo. Finally, since God is commanding Moses to die, God is saying to Moses, “Don't expect me to stop your heart or to take any explicit action to kill you.” The variation in translations that we see — R.

³ E. Friedman, ⁴ the JPS, and ⁷ W. G. Plaut use future tense, ⁶ J. H. Hertz and the JPS

in 1917 use direct imperative, while R. E. Fox uses elements of both with his translation, “You are to die”² *— says that translators over the years have struggled with this command.

* Among the translations available at the Blue Letter Bible¹, the King James Version, New King James Version, New American Standard Bible, Young’s Literal Translation, Webster’s Bible, Latin Vulgate, Targum Onkelos, and Septuagint translations use imperative, while the New Living Translation, New International Version, and New English Translation translations use future tense.

3 Carrying Out the Command

There is no explanation of how Moses carried out this command in Deut. 32:50 or anywhere nearby. All that is said, in Deut. 34 is that Moses died in the land of Moab, that God buried him in the valley, and no one knows his burial place to this day. Specifically, Deut. 34:5 says,

וימת שם משה עבד יהוה, בארץ מואב על פי יהוה.

Moses the servant of YHWH died there, in the land of Moab according to the word of YHWH.

The last three words, **על פי יהוה**, literally means “according to the mouth of YHWH”. This phrase and its variation, **את פי יהוה**, are found several places in the Torah, e.g., Ex. 17:1, Lev. 24:12, Num. 3:16, 39, 51, 4:37, 41, 45, 49, 9:18, 20, 23, 10:13, 13:3, 24:13, 33:2, 38, 36:5, Deut. 9:23, 34:5, and even in the liturgy, as in

וזאת התורה אשר שם משה לפני בני ישראל, על פי אדוני ביד משה.

This is the Torah that Moshe put before the Children of Israel, according to the word of God, by the hand of Moshe.

In each of these contexts, the phrase is commonly translated as “according to the word of YHWH” or as “according to the command of YHWH”. Moreover, there are many instances in the same books of just פִּי or פֶּה, “mouth”, understood to mean “command”. Therefore, we understand that Moses died *as commanded by God*, in Deut. 32:50.

Still later, the end of Deut. 34:10 says,

ולא קם נביא עוד בישראל, כמשה, אשר ידעו יהוה, פנים אל פנים.

And there never arose again in Israel a prophet like Moses whom YHWH knew face to face.

This phrase seems to be implying that Moses had seen God’s face. However, in contrast, Ex. 33:20—23 makes it clear that when Moses asked to see God’s face, God said to Moses that no one could see His face and live. So, God placed Moses in a crack in the mountain and put His hand over him, removing His hand only after He had passed over. All Moses saw was God’s back, because God knew that if Moses were to see His face, Moses would be killed instantly.

If indeed Moses had seen God’s face on Mount Nevo, what was different this time that did not apply some 40 years earlier? In the Ex. event, Moses still had to stay alive to lead His people through the wilderness to the promised land. In the Deut. event, Moses had already completed this task, was at the end of his life, and, most importantly, had an explicit command from God to obey, that is, *to take some willful action in order to bring about his own death*. So, could Moses’s asking again to see God’s face be the way that he (Moses) could actively carry out His command to die? Moses would have known, from God’s answer the first time he asked, that doing so would be fatal. This time, God would cooperate, granting Moses his wish, allowing Moses to see His face, knowing that Moses had to obey His command to die.

4 Knowing God Face to Face

Look again at verse Deut. 34:10. Not only does it say פנים אל פנים, “face to

face”, but it uses **ידעו** when it says “whom YHWH *knew* face to face”. This is the very intimate “to know” that is used as a euphemism for sexual relations throughout the Torah. The image here is that God and Moses are face to face, as close as two naked lovers are. That some translators have problems with **ידעו** is indicated by the JPS⁴ and Plaut⁷ translations of **אשר ידעו יהוה, פנים אל פנים** as “whom the Lord singled out, face to face”.

The phrase **פנים אל פנים** appears several times in the Torah. However, the appearance in Deut. 34:10 is the only one in which the phrase appears with the very strong verb **ידעו**.

The phrase does appear in Gen. 32:31 with the verb **ראיתי**, “I saw”, to quote Jacob’s naming of the place where he thought he wrestled with God:

ויקרא יעקב שם המקום, פניאל: כי ראיתי אלהים פנים אל פנים, ותנצל נפשי

And Yaaqov named the place, Pni’el, because I saw God face-to-face, and my life was preserved.

However, the sentence *does* express a recognition that seeing God’s face is normally fatal. While Jacob believes that he had been wrestling with God and had seen God’s face, and therefore, attributes his survival to a divine miracle, the text in Gen. 32:25 says only that a man wrestled with Jacob until dawn. Thus, Jacob saw only the face of a man. Maybe this man was in fact an angel assuming the form of a man. Maybe this man was even God in disguise as a man to prevent Jacob’s death from seeing His face. Regardless, Jacob ended up believing that he had seen God’s face, because the man with whom Jacob wrestled took the unusual step of renaming Jacob to Israel, **ישראל**, meaning “you have struggled with God”. All other previous occurrences of **פנים אל פנים** or the similar **פנים בפנים**, also “face to face”, in the Torah are with a form of the verb **לדבר**, “to speak”. For example, Ex. 33:11 says

ודבר יהוה אל משה פנים אל פנים, כאשר ידבר איש אל רעהו

And YHWH spoke to Moses face to face, like a man speaks to his neighbor.,

and Deut. 5:4 has Moses saying to the Children of Israel,

פנים בפנים, דבר יהוה עמכם בהר מתוך האש

Face to face, YHWH spoke with you in the mountain from within the fire.

Each of these interactions involves only speaking, which can be done from a distance with the speaker's face hidden. Thus, God is only *speaking* with Moses or to the Children of Israel, with His face hidden. The other interactions with God are *פה אל פה*, “mouth to mouth”. For example, Num. 12:7–8 has God speaking to a jealous Aaron and Miriam, saying,

לא כן, עבדי משה: בכל-ביתי, נאמן הוא. פה אל פה אדבר בו,

Not so, my servant Moses: in all my house, he is trusted. Mouth to mouth I speak with him.

These interactions involve only speaking. Therefore, Deut. 34:10 is the first time that Moses, or anyone, had an interaction with God that involved a fatal viewing of and thus, *knowing*, in the intimate sense of the word, God's face.

5 The Tradition That Moses Died With a Divine Kiss

Interestingly, as indicated by Plaut's commentary⁷ on Deut. 34:5,

וימת שם משה עבד יהוה, בארץ מואב על פי יהוה.

“At the command of the Lord. Literally, ‘by the mouth of the Lord,’ whence the tradition arose that Moses died by a divine kiss”. Plaut is referring to a tradition reported elsewhere [<http://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-divine-kiss/>]. See also [<https://rabbibrant.com/2007/10/05/gods-kiss/>], [<http://forward.com/culture/140842/legend-of-moses-death-sets-the-example-for-an-easy/>]. On the surface, this tradition is similar to this article's conclusion that Moses died from knowing, in the intimate sense, the face of God. However, this article's conclusion

is derived from a different verse, Deut. 34:10,

... כמשה, אשר ידעו יהוה, פנים אל פנים.

The death-by-divine-kiss tradition requires a very unusual interpretation of על פי יהוה, an oft-occurring phrase that means “as commanded by YHWH” everywhere else. Specifically, there is no other use of על פי יהוה that can be read as the “kiss of God”.

The supposition of the authors of this article is that Plaut, having translated ומת, בהר as “You will die on the mountain” knows of no command with which to reconcile the usual meaning of על פי יהוה as “by the command of YHWH”. So, he is forced to find another meaning of על פי יהוה. Since a kiss comes from a mouth, perhaps this instance of על פי יהוה means “by a kiss from YHWH”. This article’s interpretation of the verse ומת, בהר avoids this linguistic gymnastics with על פי יהוה and is able to reconcile the command ומת, בהר with the declaration כמשה, אשר ידעו יהוה, פנים אל פנים to arrive at its conclusion about the death of Moses.

6 God’s Good-Bye and Thank-You Gift to Moses

As a punishment for Moses’s sin of disobeying God at the waters of Meribah Kadesh, God did not allow Moses to enter the Promised Land. So, just as the Children of Israel arrived at the Promised Land, God commanded Moses to climb Mount Nevo, from whose summit, God would show him the land that he was not allowed to enter. Showing Moses the Promised Land and then not allowing him to enter it could be considered somewhat mean spirited, rubbing salt into a wound. However, another way to look at this event is that God’s allowing Moses to see the Promised Land from the top of Mount Nevo is a consolation prize. Moses could not enter because he had disobeyed God. So did most of the Children of Israel who left Egypt when they made the golden calf, but Moses got special treatment. He was the only *sinner* who got to even *see* the Promised Land; all the other sinners died during the 40 years of wandering, before even arriving at the entrance

to the Promised Land.

Also, it seems to these authors that despite Moses's sin of disobedience — which was so noteworthy that it is mentioned in the Torah — after all his years as a faithful servant, surely God would not treat Moses badly. These authors suggest that granting Moses his greatest wish to see God's face before he died could actually be God's unique way of rewarding Moses, of saying “Thank you for all that you have done for me!” God knew that Moses had wanted to see His face for over 40 years, but He could not have granted this wish earlier because He needed Moses to lead the Children of Israel to the Promised Land. But now, since Moses *has to* die anyway at God's own command, why not grant this wish as a very special thank-you gift?

7 Conclusion

This article has gathered from the Torah evidence that

1. God commanded Moses to take active steps to die on Mount Nevo,
2. the main active step on Moses's part was to request again to see God's face, the showing of which both knew would be fatal to Moses, and
3. after God denied Moses's first such request, forty years earlier, God granted Moses's repeated request, both to allow Moses to actively carry out His command to die and to thank Moses for his loyal service.

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