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THE DEATH OF MOSES IN DEUTERONOMY 34 AND ITS AUTHORSHIP

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The final chapter in the book of Deuteronomy recounts how Moses ascended Mount Nebo at God's invitation to view the land of Israel, which the Lord had denied him to enter. It also mentions the place where Moses died and was buried in an undisclosed valley located in the country of Moab (Deut. 34:6). Since there is good evidence that Moses wrote all or most of the first five books of the Bible, what are we to make of the final chapter in the fifth book that records his death? Could he have predicted that this would be his final resting place and that no one would know where he was buried right up to that very day?

The Place of Burial: Was It on Mount Nebo or the Heights of Pisgah? Mount Nebo (Hebrew *Har Nevo*) is a ridge in the land of present-day Jordan, reaching approximately 2,680 feet above sea level. It provides a panorama of the Holy Land from a site just north of the northern end of the Dead Sea and east of the Jordan River. From that spot, the Lord showed Moses the whole land, including the land from Gilead to the territory of Dan, all of Naphtali, the area of Ephraim and Manasseh, and all the land of Judah as far as the Mediterranean Sea, the southern Negev, and the entire area from the Valley of Jericho all the way down to Zoar (Deut. 34:1b–3).¹ This was the very same land that the Lord had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, along with their descendants (34:4).

Moses pleaded with God to allow him to “go over and see the good land beyond the Jordan” (Deut. 3:25), but God was angry with Moses because he presumed to bring water from the rock on the authority of his person and Aaron's: “Must *we* bring you water out of this rock?” (Num. 20:10–12, emphasis added). God therefore declined to speak with him about his going into the land of Canaan any further (Deut. 3:26), but instead offered Moses the opportunity to “go up to the top of Pisgah” to view the land before he died (Deut. 3:27). Some declare that *Pisgah* and *Mount Nebo* present a contradiction in the Bible, since they are two different names for the same event, but most view these names as two alternative designations for the same site, just as Horeb

and Sinai are dual names for the same site. The highest peak on Nebo is Pisgah, usually identified with the peak of Ras es-Siaghah, on the west side of Nebo.

Did Moses Write the Whole Pentateuch? Some have argued that Moses wrote or, in some cases, dictated the entirety of the first five books of the Old Testament — including a prophecy about his own death in Deuteronomy 34. Indeed, both the Jewish sage Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BC–AD 50) and the Jewish historian Josephus Flavius (ca. AD 37–100) believed that Moses wrote the account of his own death. Josephus claimed that Moses did this “lest they [the people of Israel] should venture to say that, because of his extraordinary virtue, he went to God.”² The Talmud tractate *Baba Bathra* (14b), however, more plausibly assigns the last eight verses of Deuteronomy 34 to Joshua’s hand.

The argument for Moses composing his own prewritten posthumous notice of death becomes even more complicated, for he would have needed to describe his death as a prophecy, which is not how it is presented in the text. Instead, it is cast as a regular historical account of what happened. Moreover, Moses also would have needed to have known by revelation the added facts of what would take place subsequent to his burial; that is, that no one knew the location of his burial plot even “to this day” (Deut. 34:6). There was also another fact that Moses would have needed to be revealed to him: the number of days the mourning and lamentation for him would extend (34:8). However, Scripture presents both of these facts as if they were straightforward descriptions of what took place. There is no indication that any of these truths came from the hand of the Lord as predictions or prophecies.

Added to this discussion is the realization that several of the expressions make little or no sense if placed in the mouth of Moses as a prose description of what happened. For example, phrases such as “to this day” (Deut. 34:6), “since then no prophet has arisen” (34:10), and “no one has ever shown the mighty power or performed the awesome deeds that Moses did in the sight of all Israel” (34:12) would not be suitable speech for a man as humble as Moses. It is better coming from the lips of someone such as his understudy Joshua. In fact, Moses’ modesty never allowed him to put himself forward. This can be seen in his refusal to take any credit for the dividing of the Red Sea or in the construction of the tabernacle. Self-promotion was not in keeping with Moses’ character or his understanding of God and His works on behalf of Israel.

Therefore, it is for these reasons that the ancient Jews held the view that Joshua, Moses’ understudy, was the one who was authorized by the Spirit of God to add such “post-Mosaica” comments as they appear in this text of Deuteronomy 34. The evidence that is generally cited for such a claim is found in Joshua 24:26: “And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God.” A reference to the Book of the Law is a clear allusion to the work Moses accomplished as he wrote the first five biblical books of Genesis through Deuteronomy.

Moreover, the verb in 34:6 is singular; it does not read “they buried him.” Consequently, it could, perhaps, be translated impersonally: “One buried him”; or, better still, it was “the Lord who buried him.” That the grave was in an unknown

location adds more poignancy to the fact that none of Israel's men were said to go up with Moses on Nebo; nor were they there to dig his grave and see that it was covered over properly. —*Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.*

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NOTES

- 1 All Bible quotations are from the New International Version.
- 2 Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, IV, viii. 48.