

# HOW DID MOSES DIE?

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### INTRODUCTION

God announces Moses's upcoming death in Deuteronomy 32:48–50. He tells Moses, *'aleh el har . . . har nevo, . . . umut, be-har*, translated by the JPS<sup>1</sup> and Plaut<sup>2</sup> as, *And God said to Moses, . . . ascend the mountain . . . Mount Nevo, . . . you will [or shall] die, on the mountain . . .* While it reads as if the all-knowing God is informing Moses that he will die on Mount Nevo, by natural causes or God's action, that meaning would have been written in Hebrew as *ve-tamut*,<sup>3</sup> using the singular future form of *lamut*, "to die". What is actually written in the beginning of Deuteronomy 32:50 is *mut*, the pure, unmitigated, and impolite singular imperative form of the verb. God is telling Moses, not just that he will die and where his death will occur, but that he, Moses, must do something active to bring about his death.

God's command to Moses is very different from God's command, given in Numbers 20:26, regarding Aaron's death. In that command, God says, *And Aaron shall be gathered and die there*, which hints at God's intervening and causing Aaron's death, as opposed to the command given to Moses in Deuteronomy 32:50 to actively bring about his own death. Although God adds to this command *and be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his people*, the phrasing of the command for Moses's death is very different from that of Aaron's death.

How is Moses supposed to fulfill this command to end his life? Since Deuteronomy 34:7 describes Moses as healthy and vigorous at age 120, we think that he is unlikely to die of natural causes from hiking up Mount Nevo. More importantly, since God is commanding Moses to die, God is saying to Moses that He will not take any explicit action to end Moses's life for him. The variation in translations that we see – R. E. Friedman,<sup>4</sup> the JPS,<sup>5</sup> and W. G. Plaut<sup>6</sup> use future tense; J. H. Hertz<sup>7</sup> and the 1917 JPS<sup>8</sup> use direct imperative; while R. E. Fox<sup>9</sup> uses elements of both with his translation, *You are to die* – shows that translators over the years have struggled with this command.<sup>10</sup>

The classic commentators avoid this difficulty. Ibn Ezra explains that the

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command *mut* here means “prepare yourself for your death”, and Sforno explains that it means “accept upon yourself your death.”<sup>11</sup> However, clearly the simpler, more accurate reading is that Moses is being commanded by God to actively end his life.

#### CARRYING OUT THE COMMAND

The Torah gives no explanation of how Moses carried out this command to end his life. All that is said, in Deuteronomy 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, Deuteronomy 34:5 says, *Moses the servant of the LORD died there, in the land of Moab according to the word of the LORD* (*‘al pi YHWH*). The last three words literally mean “according to the mouth of the LORD”. This phrase and its variations are found several places in the Torah, e.g., Exodus 17:1, Leviticus 24:12, Numbers 3:16, 39, 51, 4:37, 41, 45, 49, 9:18, 20, 23, 10:13, 13:3, 24:13, 33:2, 38, 36:5, Deuteronomy 9:23, 34:5. In each of these contexts, the phrase is commonly translated as “according to the word of the LORD” or as “according to the command of LORD”. Moreover, there are many instances in the same books of just *pi* or *peh*, “mouth”, understood to mean “command”. Therefore, we understand from Deuteronomy 32:50 that Moses died *as commanded by God*.

Later, the end of Deuteronomy 34:10 says, *And there never arose again in Israel a prophet like Moses whom the LORD knew face to face*. This phrase seems to be implying that Moses had seen God’s face. However, in contrast, Exodus 33:20 – 23 makes it clear that forty years earlier when Moses asked to see God’s face, God replied that no one could see His face and live. So, God placed Moses in a crevice in the mountain and put His hand over him, removing His hand only after He had passed over, and all Moses saw was God’s back.

If indeed Moses had seen God’s face on Mount Nevo, what was different this time that did not apply forty years earlier? In the Exodus event, Moses still had to stay alive to lead God’s people through the wilderness to the Promised Land. In the Deuteronomy event, Moses had already completed this task and, most importantly, had an explicit command from God to obey, that is, to take some action in order to die. Could Moses’s asking again to see God’s face be the way that he could actively carry out God’s command to die? Moses would have

known, from God's answer the first time that seeing God's face would be fatal. This time, God would cooperate, granting Moses his wish to see His face, knowing that Moses had to obey His command to die.

#### KNOWING GOD FACE TO FACE

Deuteronomy 34:10 says, in praise of Moses, that he is the only prophet *whom the LORD knew (ye-da'u) face to face (panim el panim)*. While the phrase *panim el panim* appears several times in the Torah, Deuteronomy 34:10 is the only verse in which the phrase appears together with the very strong verb *ye-da'u*. This is the very intimate "to know" that is used as a euphemism for sexual relations throughout the Bible. The image here is that not only are God and Moses face to face, but they are extremely close, perhaps even touching. That some translators have problems with *ye-da'u*, "knew him", is indicated by the JPS and Plaut translations of this verse as *whom the Lord singled out, face to face*.<sup>12</sup>

The phrase *panim el panim* appears in Genesis 32:31 with the verb *raiti*, "I saw", when Jacob names the place where he wrestled with a mysterious entity: *And Jacob called the name of the place Pniel, because I saw God (Elohim) face to face (panim el panim), and my life is preserved*. This statement expresses the recognition that seeing God face to face is normally fatal.

All other occurrences of *panim el panim*, or the similar *panim bifnim*, in relation to the Divine in the Torah are with a form of the verb *ledaber*, "to speak". For example, Exodus 33:11 states: *And the LORD spoke to Moses face to face, like a man speaks to his neighbor*, and Deuteronomy 5:4 states: *Face to face, the LORD spoke with you in the mountain from within the fire*. These interactions involve only speaking, not seeing or the more intimate knowing. Similarly, other interactions with God are termed *peh el peh*, "mouth to mouth". For example, Numbers 12:7–8 states: *Not so, my servant Moses: in all my house, he is trusted. Mouth to mouth I speak with him*. Again, this interaction involves only speaking.

The classic commentators, like Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Sforno, and Hizkuni, all explain that the phrase, in Deuteronomy 34:10, *whom the LORD knew face to face* is referring to the way God *spoke* with Moses. Even Abrabanel, who in his questions about this phrase, raises the idea that the phrase is describing Moses's seeing God, in the end, follows the traditional approach that the

reference in the phrase is to a *mode of speaking*<sup>13</sup>. However, the phrase, distinctly from every other appearance of *face to face*, specifically does not use speaking terminology. Deuteronomy 34:10 describes a new and unique situation, of being *known* by God *face to face*. It is the first time that Moses, or anyone, had an interaction with God that involved *knowing*, in the intimate sense of the word, God's face, that is, a fatal viewing of God's face.

#### THE DIVINE KISS

Interestingly, TB *Moed Katan* 28a, quoted by Rashi in commenting on Deuteronomy 34:5, mentions the tradition that Moses died from a Divine kiss. This tradition is attributed to the phrase *And Moses the servant of the LORD died there . . . 'al pi YHWH*, literally "by the mouth of the LORD", with the implicit understanding that a kiss is conveyed by the mouth.<sup>14</sup> However, this midrashic explanation requires an unusual interpretation of *'al pi YHWH*, an oft-occurring phrase that means "as commanded by the LORD" everywhere else.<sup>15</sup> On the surface, this tradition is similar to this article's conclusion that Moses died from knowing the face of God. However, this article's conclusion is derived from a different verse, Deuteronomy 34:10, and it leaves Deuteronomy 34:5's *'al pi YHWH* referring to God's command to Moses to die.

#### CONCLUSION

God had known for over forty years that Moses wanted to see His face, but He could not have granted this wish earlier because He needed Moses to lead the Children of Israel to the Promised Land. Now, the circumstances are very different. Moses is not permitted to enter the Land, and has to die anyway, as commanded by God. We propose that Moses explicitly asked God again to see His face, and God granted Moses's wish this time, and Moses died on Mount Nevo, specifically as a result of seeing God's face.

#### NOTES

1. *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh* (New York, NY: Jewish Publication Society, 1999).
2. W. G. Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, NY: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981).
3. In modern Hebrew, the future form, such as *tamut*, "you will die", is used as a more polite, softened way to give a command, as opposed to the more blunt imperative, in this case, *mut*.
4. R. E. Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah: With a New English Translation* (New York, NY: Vol. 46, No. 2, 2018

Harper Collins, 2001).

5. *JPS Hebrew–English Tanakh*.

6. Plaut, *op. cit.*

7. J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs: Hebrew Text English Translation and Commentary* (Brooklyn, NY: Soncino, 1960).

8. Following the JPS 1917 edition.

9. E. Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1995).

10. Among other translations available at the Blue Letter Bible, <http://www.blueletterbible.org/>, Targum Onkelos, the Septuagint, Latin Vulgate, King James Version, New King James Version, New American Standard Bible, Young’s Literal Translation, Webster’s Bible, use imperative, while the New Living Translation, New International Version, and New English Translation translations use future tense.

11. Aharon Mirsky, *Da‘at Mikra – Devarim* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 2001), p. 472.

12. *JPS Hebrew–English Tanakh*; Plaut.

13. Rashi, Ibn Ezra, Sforno, *Hjzkuni*, and Abrabanel reference.

14. TB *Moed Katan* 28a, quoted by Rashi to Deuteronomy 34:5 reference.

15. The phrase ‘*al pi YHWH*’ is used also in Num. 33:39’s description of Aaron’s death, and there the phrase relates to Aaron’s fulfilling God’s *command* to ascend Mount Hor: *And Aaron the priest ascended Mount Hor at the command of the LORD (‘al pi YHWH) and died there.*

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For a version of this paper with details omitted in the interest of brevity, see; [https://cs.uwaterloo.ca/~dberry/FTP\\_SITE/tech.reports/HowDidMosesDie.pdf](https://cs.uwaterloo.ca/~dberry/FTP_SITE/tech.reports/HowDidMosesDie.pdf).