

38. The Death of Moses

Deut 31-34

These four final chapters, with their long celebratory poems, transform Deuteronomy into a biography of Moses.

Deut 27-30 had brought the group of covenants to an end. These next four chapters are about Moses, and bring *his* story to an end. The last, Deut 34, also makes a transition to the book of Joshua and the Conquest, a Conquest which probably never took place. It follows that at least that passage was written at a time when the Conquest had become established as a tradition.

Here is a summary of these four chapters:

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| 31. Moses writes his laws; he will die | 33. Blessing of Moses (poetry) |
| 32. Song of Moses (poetry) | 34. Moses glimpses the Land |

The two poetic chapters, as is normal, are ornamental; the core narrative will be the prose sequence, Deut 31 and 34.

Deuteronomy 31, picking up on the end of Deut 30 and probably written with it in mind, has Moses bid farewell to the people:

Deut 31:2. And he said unto them, I am a hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no more go out and come in; and Yahweh hath said unto me, Thou shalt not go over this Jordan. [3] Yahweh thy God, he will go over before thee; he will destroy these nations from before thee and thou shalt dispossess them; Joshua, he shall go over before thee, as Yahweh hath spoken . . .

We also have a second writing of the law, not this time as a public document, *but to be kept by the priests*:

Deut 31:9. And Moses wrote this law, and delivered it unto the priests the sons of Levi, that bare the ark of the covenant of Israel. [10] And Moses commanded them, saying, At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, [11] when all Israel is come to appear before Yahweh thy God in the place which he shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing . . .

It is essentially an orally reiterated law; not a written one.

Deuteronomy 32, the Song of Moses, recounts the favors of Yahweh and the misdeeds of the people. Then Yahweh tells Moses to ascend Mount Nebo, to “behold the land of Canaan.” Mountains have always been the settings for Moses’ special moments, and this one will be no exception.

Yahweh also gives the reason why Moses will not enter the Land:

Deut 32:51. because ye trespassed against me in the midst of the children of Israel at the waters of Meribah of Kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin; because ye sanctified me not in the midst of the children of Israel. [52] For thou shalt see the land before thee; but thou shalt not go thither into the land which I give to the children of Israel.

Deuteronomy 33, the Blessing of Moses, another added song, is so far from being plausible as a work of Moses that it mentions him *in the third person* (33:4, “Moses commanded us a law / an inheritance for the people of Jacob”). The song goes back to the fate of Jacob’s sons in Genesis, where the first-born are eliminated from inheriting, Reuben by a sexual impropriety in Gen 35:22, Simeon and Levi for their violence in Gen 34:30. All three are reinstated, undoubtedly to legitimize their being assigned territory in the Promised Land.

Deuteronomy 34 returns to the scene of Deut 32, and repeats Moses’ one glimpse of the Promised Land. Then, abruptly, occurs the death of Moses:

Deut 34:5. So Moses the servant of Yahweh died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of Yahweh. [6] And he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab over against Beth-peor, but no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day. [7] And Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eye was not dim, nor his natural force abated. [8] And the children of Israel wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; so the days of weeping in the mourning for Moses were ended.

There follows immediately the beginning of the leadership of Joshua:

Deut 34:9. And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him, and the children of Israel hearkened unto him, and did as Yahweh commanded Moses.

In other words, following Joshua is in effect following Moses, and leadership of Joshua is not the break which it would otherwise appear to be.

Deuteronomy concludes with this retrospective appraisal of Moses:

Deut 34:10. And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom Yahweh knew face to face, [11] in all the signs and the wonders, which Yahweh sent him to do in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land, [12] and in all the mighty hand, and in all the great terror, which Moses wrought in the sight of all Israel.

And so, at the end, Moses is remembered for the magic power by which he induced Pharaoh to “let the people go.” It is a retrospective; a last summing up.

But it was not the end. Long afterward, that mountain moment of Moses was recalled on another mountain, with Moses himself being present:

Mark 9:2. And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James, and John, and bringeth them up into a high mountain apart by themselves; and he was transfigured before them; [3] and his garments became glistening, exceeding white, so as no fuller on earth can whiten them. [4] And there appeared unto them Elijah with Moses, and they were talking with Jesus . . .

And there follows, not a death, but a promise of immortality:

Mark 9:9. And as they were coming down from the mountain, he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, save when the Son of Man should have risen again from the dead . . .

And so, a thousand years later, the figure of Moses remained cogent.