

## The Death of Moses

Ask any ten people you know, and nine of them would probably tell you they'd rather go through life as a master than as a servant. Sin has made our nature, to use Luther's revealing phrase, "deeply curved in upon itself," and so we want other people to serve us, not we them. But our Lord Jesus redefined what true greatness means: "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant," Jesus explained, "and whoever wants to be first must be your slave - just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:26-28). Though Jesus was "in very nature God," He willingly made Himself nothing, "taking the very nature of a servant, ... and became obedient to death - even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8).

The final measure of Moses' long life was that he was the Lord's servant. Moses was in good company. Abraham (Genesis 26:24), Joshua (Joshua 24:29), David (2 Samuel 7:5), the prophets (2 Kings 9:7), and Paul (Romans 1:1) were also called the Lord's servants.

Our First Reading from today, Deuteronomy 34:1-12, gives us the account of Moses' death. We are told that "*Moses, the servant of the LORD, died there in the land of Moab as the LORD had said. He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-Peor, and to this day no one knows where his grave is,*" (34:5-6). There's an air of mystery in the words, "*to this day no one knows where his grave is.*" As the Lord buried Moses, some have suggested that his body may not have suffered the physical decay that unavoidably follows death. In his epistle, Jude makes passing reference to a dispute between the archangel Michael and the devil over Moses' body (Jude 9). According to legend, when Moses died (by the kiss of God), the Lord delegated Michael to bury his body, but the devil tried to claim the body for himself. At least one version of the legend adds that Moses' body was later "assumed" into heaven, accompanied by angels.

Since Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus at His transfiguration, and since Elijah's body didn't deteriorate because the Lord transported it in a whirlwind directly to heaven (2 Kings 2:11, 12), could the Lord also have preserved Moses' body unspoiled through the centuries? However intriguing this notion may be, we don't have enough information to speak with certainty.

Moses also wrote Psalm 90, and it's more likely that the death he described as the common experience of all people was what he suffered too:

You turn men back to dust,  
saying, "Return to dust, O sons of men."  
You sweep men away in the sleep of death;  
they are like the new grass of the morning -  
though in the morning it springs up new,  
by evening it is dry and withered.  
The length of our days is seventy years -  
or eighty, if we have the strength;  
yet their span is but trouble and sorrow,  
for they quickly pass, and we fly away.  
(Psalm 90:3, 5, 6, 10)

Moses lived well beyond eighty years. His 120 years divides neatly into three 40-year spans: the first, in Egypt as a young man in Pharaoh's household; the second, in Midian shepherding his father-in-law's flocks; the third, in the wilderness leading Israel to the edge of Canaan (Exodus 7:7; Acts 7:23-30). Although he lived much longer than most other people at his time, his eyesight was keen and his physical strength unimpaired.

Did Moses write the account of his own death? The Lord could have revealed to him how he would pass away, and the Holy Spirit could have inspired him to compose it shortly before he died. If the Lord enabled Moses to predict with startling accuracy the future developments of Israel's tribes, he could certainly provide Moses with details of the very near future. Both Philo and Josephus, Jewish historians of the first century A.D., believed Moses wrote the words of this chapter.

That's possible, but it's not likely. It's doubtful that Moses, humble as he was (Numbers 12:3), would appraise himself as he did in the last three verses of this book. Most commentators, Jewish and Christian, agree that Joshua wrote this chapter and added it as a sort of postscript to the five books of Moses.

Deuteronomy 34, the final chapter of Deuteronomy, signals a transition in leadership from Moses to Joshua, a transition from the oral communication of the Word to the written communication of the Word, a transition from the wilderness wanderings to the eventual occupation of the Promised Land. Moses' final messages to the people included both warnings (in the words of a song) and promises (in the words of a blessing). The promises in Moses' blessing point to the One "counted worthy of more glory than Moses" (Heb. 3:3), namely Christ, because while Moses was a faithful servant of God who spoke God's Word, Christ is Son of God (Heb. 3:6), whom God appointed heir of all things (Heb 1:2). "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17). Although Moses disqualified himself from entering the Promised Land because of his disobedience, God allowed him to see firsthand the fulfillment of all Scripture, for Moses and us, at Christ's Transfiguration.