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Moshe Rabbeinu Never Died: The Hidden Ending

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Elijah carried away into heaven by a chariot of fire. [James Tissot](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Tissot)

The Five Books of Moses conclude with the death of the eponymous prophet, and it is hard to imagine a more fitting conclusion to the Torah. Biblical books often end with the death of a major character, a feature that serves as a literary coda that both wraps up the book and looks forward to its sequel.[1]

But rather than serving as a satisfying postscript to Moses’ peroration in *Devarim*, the pericope that recounts the leader’s final passage leaves its readers with the feeling that we are missing something (Deut 34):

א וַיַּ֨עַל מֹשֶׁ֜ה מֵֽעַרְבֹ֤ת מוֹאָב֙ אֶל הַ֣ר נְב֔וֹ רֹ֚אשׁ הַפִּסְגָּ֔ה אֲשֶׁ֖ר עַל פְּנֵ֣י יְרֵח֑וֹ וַיַּרְאֵ֨הוּ יְ-הֹוָ֧ה אֶת כָּל הָאָ֛רֶץ אֶת הַגִּלְעָ֖ד עַד דָּֽן:ב וְאֵת֙ כָּל נַפְתָּלִ֔י וְאֶת אֶ֥רֶץ אֶפְרַ֖יִם וּמְנַשֶּׁ֑ה וְאֵת֙ כָּל אֶ֣רֶץ יְהוּדָ֔ה עַ֖ד הַיָּ֥ם הָאַחֲרֽוֹן: ג וְאֶת הַנֶּ֗גֶב וְֽאֶת הַכִּכָּ֞ר בִּקְעַ֧ת יְרֵח֛וֹ עִ֥יר הַתְּמָרִ֖ים עַד צֹֽעַר: דוַיֹּ֨אמֶר יְ-הֹוָ֜ה אֵלָ֗יו זֹ֤את הָאָ֙רֶץ֙ אֲשֶׁ֣ר נִ֠שְׁבַּעְתִּי לְאַבְרָהָ֨ם לְיִצְחָ֤ק וּֽלְיַעֲקֹב֙ לֵאמֹ֔ר לְזַרְעֲךָ֖ אֶתְּנֶ֑נָּה הֶרְאִיתִ֣יךָ בְעֵינֶ֔יךָ וְשָׁ֖מָּה לֹ֥א תַעֲבֹֽר:

1 Moses went up from the steppes of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the summit of Pisgah, opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan; 2 all Naphtali; the land of Ephraim and Manasseh; the whole land of Judah as far as the Western Sea; 3 the Negeb; and the Plain — the Valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees — as far as Zoar. 4 And the Lord said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, ‘I will assign it to your offspring.’ I have let you see it with your own eyes, but you shall not cross there.”

ה וַיָּ֨מָת שָׁ֜ם מֹשֶׁ֧ה עֶֽבֶד־יְ-הֹוָ֛ה בְּאֶ֥רֶץ מוֹאָ֖ב עַל פִּ֥י יְ-הֹוָֽה: ו וַיִּקְבֹּ֨ר אֹת֤וֹ בַגַּיְ֙ בְּאֶ֣רֶץ מוֹאָ֔ב מ֖וּל בֵּ֣ית פְּע֑וֹר וְלֹֽא יָדַ֥ע אִישׁ֙ אֶת קְבֻ֣רָת֔וֹ עַ֖ד הַיּ֥וֹם הַזֶּֽה:ז וּמֹשֶׁ֗ה בֶּן מֵאָ֧ה וְעֶשְׂרִ֛ים שָׁנָ֖ה בְּמֹת֑וֹ לֹֽא כָהֲתָ֥ה עֵינ֖וֹ וְלֹא נָ֥ס לֵחֹֽה: ח וַיִּבְכּוּ֩ בְנֵ֨י יִשְׂרָאֵ֧ל אֶת מֹשֶׁ֛ה בְּעַֽרְבֹ֥ת מוֹאָ֖ב שְׁלֹשִׁ֣ים י֑וֹם וַֽיִּתְּמ֔וּ יְמֵ֥י בְכִ֖י אֵ֥בֶל מֹשֶֽׁה:

5 So Moses the servant of the Lord died there, in the land of Moab, at the command of the Lord. 6 He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, near Beth-peor; and no one knows his burial place to this day. 7 Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died; his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated. 8 And the Israelites bewailed Moses in the steppes of Moab for thirty days. The period of wailing and mourning for Moses came to an end.

Gaps in the Story

A careful reading of Deuteronomy 34 leaves us with many questions, for example:

The Lost Tomb

* How is it that so much detail is provided about the vicinity of Moses’ grave, and yet the precise location of the tomb is unknown?
* Why is it necessary for the Torah to point this out—there were many ancient sites, the locations of which were lost in the vicissitudes of time, why bother to note this one?
* How did it come to pass that the (presumed) tombs of other figures (like Rachel) were maintained, but Moses’ final resting place was not preserved?
* Why does the Torah assert so forcefully such certainty about this lack of knowledge?

The Death and Burial Details

* If Moses ascends Mount Nebo in verse 1, how does he end up buried in the valley below in verse 6?
* Where precisely does he meet his demise—on the mountain, in the valley, or somewhere in-between?
* How is he transported to his final repose, and by whom?
* Who is the unnamed “he” that buries Moses in verse 6?

These questions make plain that we are dealing with an incomplete story.  As with the narrative of his youth and upbringing in Exodus 2, the story of Moses’ death is replete with gaps, and lacking in important detail.[2]

Medieval and Modern Approaches to Textual Gaps

For two millennia, rabbinic Midrash has sensitized readers of the Bible to lacunae in the Hebrew biblical text. The elaborate stories that *chazal* tell of the early lives of Moses, Abraham, and other biblical figures point to holes and fissures in the written Torah (תורה שבכתב), and sensitize the reader to the fact that large swaths of biblical narrative are not included in our received text.[3]

We can only speculate why these pieces are missing, but using the insights of classical Jewish exegesis, modern biblical scholarship offers tools for the curious reader to recover and reconstruct the missing parts of these narratives and, in the process, respond to the queries that arise from these gaps.

מעשה אבות סימן לבנים: Medieval, Contemporary, and Critical Approaches

Building on early rabbinic writings[4], the medieval exegete Nachmanides noted that events, themes and stories that occur early in the Bible often repeat themselves in later narratives, with different characters and in other settings. Ramban lays out this observation in his commentary to Gen. 12:6 and 12:11:

כל מה שאירע לאבות סימן לבנים.

Whatever occurred concerning the (fore)fathers, is a sign to the children.

Later generations reformulated Ramban’s principle as “מעשה אבות סימן לבנים,” and it has grown to be a significant notion in traditional Jewish theology. Ramban himself, for example, uses the idea as a theodicy to explain how and why later generations suffer for the sins of their ancestors.

Contemporary students of the Bible, including many in classically Orthodox circles, utilize מעשה אבות as a literary tool in close reading, noting how narratives adapt and play upon earlier texts.[5] Modern critical scholarship takes this methodology further. Since later biblical stories are often reflections of earlier narratives, these later narratives can be utilized as critical tools to recover and reconstruct missing or lost parts of the text.[6]

Leaders Stories that Mimic that of Moses

With his status as the greatest of all Israelite leaders, it follows that any aspiring biblical leader would wish to present himself as a latter-day Moses. (We find a similar instinct among many modern political aspirants in the United States who present themselves as reincarnations of John F. Kennedy or Ronald Reagan.) The narratives that recount the lives of these figures further mold their biographies to mimic that of the paradigmatic predecessor, relaying the subliminal message that the successor possesses the same qualities as the original.

For example, the life of Joshua, Moses’ acolyte, closely parallels that of his mentor: Joshua splits a body of water so that the Israelites may cross it dry-shod (Josh 3, Exodus 14); Joshua encounters a Divine apparition that commands him to remove his shoes (Josh 5:13-15, Exod 3:1-6); and Joshua sends out spies to reconnoiter the land before entering (Josh 2, Num 13).[7]

So, too, the life of the prophet Elijah closely tracks with the life of Moses: After committing murder in the name of a higher cause, Elijah flees from Queen Jezebel, who seeks to kill him in retribution. This parallels Pharaoh’s pursuit of Moses, and the latter’s flight following the murder of the Egyptian (1 Kings 19:1-3, Exod 2:12-14). In both cases the fugitive ends up at a bush (1 Kings 19:4, Exod 3:1-2) and wanders in the desert until he arrives at Horeb (=Sinai) (1 Kings 19:8, Exod 3:1[8]). There, at the mountain, the prophet receives a revelation as the Presence of God passes by him (1 Kings 19:11ff., Exod 33:21-22, 34:6ff.) Like Moses (and Joshua), Elijah also splits and passes through a major waterway (2 Kings 14:21f.).[[](http://thetorah.com/moshe-rabbeinu-never-died-the-hidden-ending/%22%20%5Cl%20%22_ftn9)9]

The Death Scenes of Moses and Elijah: Parallels?

The end of Elijah’s earthly sojourn is marked by the appointment of his acolyte, Elisha, as his successor, just as Joshua is anointed to lead after Moses (2 Kings 2, Deut 34). Moreover, the geographical information offered in 2 Kings 2:8 places the prophet Elijah precisely in the vicinity of Mt Nebo during his final moments on earth.[10]

But here the stories diverge. Deuteronomy 34 narrates Moses’ death. 2 Kings 2:1, on the other hand, rather than telling of Elijah’s death,  recounts that he was carried off—alive!—to heaven via a fiery chariot.

Elijah’s miraculous and nearly singular[11] assumption already enjoyed popular circulation in biblical times,[12] and became the stuff of Talmudic and later Jewish legend.[13]  In traditional Jewish lore and practice, Elijah regularly reappears to help the indigent, attend a *brit milah*, or visit the Passover *seder* due, in no small measure, to the fact that he is not constrained by the bounds of death that limit other biblical figures.

Considering the number of episodes in Elijah’s story that have parallels in the life of Moses, I would like to suggest that the story of Elijah’s supernatural assumption to heaven had its antecedent in the life of Moses.  Moreover, it is hard to imagine that such a monumental end would have been recounted of a relatively minor 9th century prophet and not the great lawgiver of Israel.

The Impossibility of Moses’ Death

In fact, some pre-rabbinic and rabbinic sources struggle with the idea of Moses dying and have the problematic nature of the idea expressed by characters in their stories. For instance, in the *Assumptio Mosis*—a Second Temple (or post-Second Temple) apocalyptic work that retells the story of Moses’ death—Joshua reacts with shock and horror when Moses tells him of his (Moses’) imminent death (ch. 11):

5 What place will receive you, 6 or what will be the monument on your grave 7 or who, being human, will dare to carry your body from one place to another? 8 For all who die when their time has come have a grave in the earth. But your grave extends from the East to the West and from the North to the extreme South. The entire world is your grave.

Joshua’s reaction implies that he thought Moses’ death to be an impossibility. In the rabbinic work (of unknown date), *Midrash Petirat Moshe*, a similar thought is put in the mouths of angels:

כיון שהשלים נפשו למות, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא למיכאל וגבריאל: “צאו והביאו לי נשמתו של משה.” אמר גבריאל: “מי ששקול כנגד ששים רבוא היאך אני יכול ליטול נשמתו ולהיות חצוף לפניו? אח”כ אמר למיכאל כך ובכה, מיכאל ואמר לו, לזנגזיאל כך, אמר לפניו: “רבש”ע אני הייתי רבו והוא תלמידי איך אטול נשמתו?”

Once he (Moses) made his peace with dying, the Holy One said to Michael and Gabriel: “Go and bring me Moses’ soul.” Gabriel said: “How can I take the soul of a man who is equal to 600,000 men, and be found wanton in his eyes?” Afterwards he said this to Michael, and Michael cried. He said this to Zangaziel, and he said: “Master of the universe, I was his teacher and he was my student, how can I take his soul?”

Again, we see bewilderment when confronted with the possibility of Moses dying. Thus, I suggest that even if the details of the story of Moses’ ascension were left out of the Torah and eventually lost, the idea of Moses’ dying remained problematic to many Jews, and the possibility that he never really died remained in the popular consciousness if not in the canonical texts.[14]

The Ascension of Moses?

If Moses did not actually die but was rather taken unto God alive, a great number of the problems in the text of Deuteronomy 34 can be solved. We now know why the grave of Moses is not only unknown, but unknowable—it simply does not exist. The mysterious “he” who “buries” Moses is none other than God Himself.  This latter answer was already suggested by traditional and modern commentators,[15] but we now understand why it could only have been the Almighty who tended to Moses at his end.

The original story of Moses’ assumption to heaven has left traces in the extant verses that tell of the end of his life.  But why would such a narrative about the exalted end of the great leader of Israel have been omitted from conclusion of the Torah?

Here too, we may turn to the intuition of the classical Jewish sources.  The medieval commentator Ralbag, Rabbi Levi ben Gershon, offered a now well-known explanation as to why the Torah made sure that there would never be an earthy tomb for the greatest of all prophets:

…סבב השם יתעלה שלא יהיה מקום קבורתו נודע לאחד מן האנשים, והנה עשה את זה השם יתעלה כי אולי אם נודע מקום טעו יטעו הדורות הבאים ויעשו ממנו אלוה…

…Hashem, may He be exalted, determined that no one would ever know [Moses’] place of burial, and Hashem, may he be exalted, did this lest if the place be known, later generations might [turn the tomb into a shrine and] and worship him [there] as a god…

Ralbag intuited the Torah’s fear of the deification and worship of Moses and the veneration of his grave.  The deeper fear was the potential to worship him as a member of the heavenly court.[16]

Postscript: Jesus Modeled after Moses and Elijah

The authors of the New Testament, especially in the book of Matthew, modeled the life of Jesus after the life of Moses.  This was an early attempt to appeal to Jews familiar with the Hebrew Bible, who would have expected the future redeemer of Israel to resemble the original deliverer.  The story of the gospel reaches a climax in an episode known as the transfiguration, recounted in Matthew 17:

1 After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. 2There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. 3Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

The placement and purpose of this passage as foreshadowing Jesus’s assumption suggests that it develops the motif of a trinity of Israelites who never died.

While the written Torah took pains to avoid the apotheosis of Moses, the oral tradition of his final ascent to heaven remained in the memory of Israel well into Second Temple times. Considering the perspective followers of Jesus eventually took with regard to the divinity of their leader who never died, the concerns of the Torah (as explained by Ralbag) appear to be well founded.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/moshe-rabbeinu-never-died-the-hidden-ending)

1. E.g. Genesis/death of Joseph; Joshua/death of Joshua; 1 Samuel/death of Saul.  We know now from the study of ancient orthographic practice that the end point of a biblical book was determined by a most prosaic reason, namely the standard length of an ancient scroll (much in the way that the length of a television episode today is driven by the standard half and full-hour programming slots).  Nevertheless, there was clearly an attempt to align the end of a biblical book with the death of a central figure.
2. Much has been written on Moses’ death by both traditional and critical scholars. One particularly important study is, Samuel Loewenstamm, “The Death of Moses,” in *Studies on the Testament of Abraham* (George W. E. Nickelsburg, ed.; SBLSCS 6; Missoula, MT; Scholars Press, 1976), 185-217.
3. The popular midrashim about the early life of Abraham, including the smashing of the idols and his escape from the fiery furnace, highlight the fact that the Torah provides virtually no information about the first 75 years of the life of the father of the Jewish people or the reason for his selection. For more on this, see James L. Kugel, *The Bible as it Was*(Harvard University Press, 1999), 131-148.
4. *Midrash Tanchuma,* “*Lech Lecha*” 9; *Bereshit Rabbah,*“*Lech Lecha*” 40.
5. See, for example, Marc Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (Routledge, 1998). For an example of this type of reading, see Ely Levine’s TABS essay, [“The Historical Circumstances that Inspired the Korah Narrative.”](http://thetorah.com/the-historical-circumstances-that-inspired-the-korah-narrative/)
6. I am indebted to my teacher, Prof. Yair Zakovich, for both this methodology and the insights contained in this essay.
7. For more on the parallels between Joshua and Moses, see: Elie Assis, “Divine Versus Human Leadership: Joshua’s Succession,” in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity* (eds. Marcel Poorthuis and Joshua Berman; Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series 7; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 25-47. The attempt to cast post-Mosaic Jewish leaders in Moses’ mold continued in later parts of the Hebrew Bible and beyond the close of the canon.  The Talmud further develops the idea of Ezra as a latter-day Moses, an image that has its seeds in the biblical books of Ezra/Nehemiah.
8. Elijah’s journey takes 40 days.  Although this has no exact parallel in Moses’ life, it is evocative of the 40 days and nights Moses spends on Mount Sinai and, to a lesser extent, to the 40 years Moses wandered in the desert.
9. Elijah rolls up his mantle and strikes the water before it parts.  The rolled up mantle would have resembled a staff, in imitation of Moses’ staff which he used to perform miracles in Egypt and afterwards, including hitting the rock to produce water (Exod 17:5-6) and which was presumably in his hand when he raised it over the Reed Sea (Exod 14:21, 26).  Being a shepherd, Moses naturally carried a crook, which became his miracle-working instrument (Exod 4:2-4).  For Elijah, a 9th century prophet/professional miracle worker, the medium of choice was a mantle; the narrative is tailored so that the mantle substitutes for the staff.  We see here how a later story recasts an earlier version taking into consideration the different context.
10. Crossing the river, Elijah ends up in the Transjordan, where Moses concluded his earthly life.
11. Cf. the brief note concerning Enoch in Gen 5:24.
12. Malachi 3:23.  The prophet envisions Elijah returning to herald the coming of the “…great and awesome Day of the Lord.”  Of all prophets, Elijah could easily return to earth, since he never died.
13. Cf. e.g. b. *Sanhedrin* 98a, 118a, b. *Baba Metzia* 85b, 114b,*Pesikta d’Rav Kahanna* 11:22.
14. Although the Torah says clearly that Moses died, the same is true of Jacob, and yet this did not stop at least one rabbi from suggesting that he did not (b. *Taanit* 5b).
15. See, for example, Rashi *ad loc*. In this case, Rashi is challenging the midrashic view of Rabbi Ishmael, found in *Sifrei Bemidbar*, “*Nasso*” 32 (and quote by Rashi *ad loc*.) which suggests that Moses buried himself.
16. Since Elijah was a less significant leader than Moses, the story of his immortality would not have aroused similar concern; there did not appear to be a perceived risk he would be venerated as a demigod.  Likely, this lack of fear would has allowed his story to remain part of the Bible and Jewish tradition.  The story of Elijah’s immortality has remained more of a curiosity in Judaism, rather than raising fears of apostasy.