

The Assumption of Mary - Part I: Introduction

By Greg Witherow

Each year on August 15th the Catholic Church celebrates the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Assumption of Mary, the belief that Mary's body was assumed into heaven, is one of four Marian dogmas defined by the Church. The four dogmas include the Marian title of *Theotokos*, Mother of God (defined at the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431), Mary as the *Perpetual Virgin* (defined at the Lateran Council in A.D. 649), the *Immaculate Conception* (defined in 1854 in the Bull *Ineffabilis* by Pope Pius IX) and the *Assumption* (defined in 1950 in the Bull *Munificentissimus* by Pope Pius XII).

While all four dogmas rely on both Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture as interpreted by the Magisterium, the events surrounding the Assumption are found most clearly in Sacred Tradition. But this does not mean that Sacred Scripture is silent on the matter. This short essay will be the first of three articles that will tackle our topic from a scriptural perspective.

To begin with, are there any Biblical clues that something like the Assumption of Mary *could* have taken place? The answer is yes. We are given two explicit examples where men were bodily assumed into heaven. The first is Enoch as found in Genesis 5:24 where scripture states that, "*And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.*" His assumption into heaven is attested to in Hebrews 11:5 where scripture states, "*By faith Enoch was taken away so that he did not see death, and was not found, because God had taken him; for before he was taken he had this testimony, that he pleased God.*"

The second example is that of Elijah, who at the end of his life was bodily lifted into heaven in a chariot of fire. Second Kings 2:11 states, "*Then it happened, as they continued on and talked, that suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire, and separated the two of them; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.*" A search for Elijah's body by the local prophets was fruitless just as Elisha, who had witnessed the assumption, had predicted. All of Christendom concurs that these men were taken bodily to heaven as our Bibles attest. But were there any others?¹ Possibly.

In the book of Jude the author describes a scene where Satan and Michael the archangel are disputing over the body of Moses. Jude 1:9 states, "*Yet Michael the archangel, in contending with the devil, when he disputed about the body of Moses, dared not bring against him a reviling accusation, but said, The Lord rebuke you!*" This event is nowhere recorded in the Old Testament. Commentators² have opined that Jude is quoting from an Apocryphal work known as the Assumption of Moses, where the story concludes that Moses was bodily assumed into heaven. But was he? We don't know. But we do

¹ The Ascension of Christ took place under Christ's own power. It therefore does not perfectly mirror the assumptions of the individuals we're discussing here, nor the assumptions that all of mankind will undergo on the Last Day.

² The Protestant study Bible known as the Geneva Study Bible (currently renamed the Reformation Study Bible) makes this point in its comments on Jude 1:9.

have one more bit of information about Moses, one other New Testament event that needs to weigh in. And that event would be the Transfiguration.

At the Transfiguration Christ momentarily appeared to Peter, James and John in his glorified state. Elijah and Moses accompany Christ and discuss the upcoming Passion with our Lord. Of the three individuals, we know that two of them (Christ and Elijah) appear in bodily form. That being the case, it would seem odd for Moses to be present in some merely concocted pseudo-body, while in reality only his soul-spirit was present. (Note: I can think of no reason for Elijah to temporarily step out of his assumed body for the purposes of making this cameo appearance; unless of course he felt sorry for a bodiless Moses?). Is this conclusive evidence of Moses' assumption? No it is not. But based on the gospel accounts of the Transfiguration and the reference in the epistle of Jude, it seems that assumption of Moses is within the realm of possibility.

So what. What have we proved? Only this. That Christ was willing, that Christ was able and that Christ *did in fact* provide a great gift to two, or perhaps three of his friends. Each of these men was distinguished for their holiness, humility and desire to please God. That being the case, and in light of the 4th Commandment³ to honor your father and mother, we begin to see the reasonableness of why Christ might do for his mother what he was willing to do for his friends.

In our next essay we will examine Marian typology in light of our topic.

³ The Catholic Church and the Lutherans use one numbering system (based on the Hebrew text and used by St. Augustine) and the Protestant churches use another. The Protestant numbering takes the Catholic-Lutheran first commandment and derives commandments 1 and 2 and then combines the Catholic-Lutheran 9 and 10 for the final commandment. All the commandments and their entire wording is in tact for both lists, it is just the numbering (which is not found in the Bible) that is different.