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'Lifting the Veil': The Challenges Posed by 2 Corinthians 3

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Paul of Tarsus: The Apostle to the Gentiles in His Jewish Context

Second Corinthians 3 raises problems and challenges for Jewish-Christian relations. It is in this chapter that Paul refers to the Mosaic covenant as “the old covenant” whose glory has been so surpassed that it no longer has glory. It is here that he portrays the ministry of the Mosaic covenant as one of “condemnation,” even of “death.” It is here that he describes his Jewish contemporaries as suffering from a pervasive spiritual blindness. And it is here that he sets forth his Christ-centered hermeneutical principle for the interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures.



So what do we do with this text, a text that is also replete with content dear to Christian hearts¹ (e.g., the effects of God’s outpouring of the Spirit; the intimate encounter with Christ mediated through the gospel)?

Victor Paul Furnish begins his Anchor Bible commentary, “No Pauline letter requires more of its readers...than 2 Cor.”² In a similar vein, Daniel J. Harrington, S.J. has publicly observed that 2 Corinthians is the most challenging document in the New Testament on which to give a clear, coherent lecture. I would add that, within this most difficult

¹ The March 15-16, 2009 Boston College conference “Paul of Tarsus: The Apostle to the Gentiles in His Jewish Context” was fittingly dedicated to honor the memory and contributions of Krister Stendahl. In the discussion following the presentation of an earlier version of this paper, his son, Pastor John Stendahl, informed the conference that 2 Cor 3:18 was read at Bishop Stendahl’s funeral liturgy.

² Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 32A (New York: Doubleday, 1984) 3.

writing, chapter 3 poses the most demanding test for the interpreter.

Second Corinthians 3 raises a number of challenging questions: What lies behind Paul’s bringing up the notion of “a new covenant” in v. 6? How does he regard the figure of Moses—as an ally or as part of the problem? How are we to understand Paul’s four-fold use of the verb *katargeomai*—usually rendered “fading,” at least in its first three occurrences—in vv. 7-14? Why does he focus on the image of veiling? Why does he take up the issue of Jewish rejection of the gospel here? Is Paul responding to criticism of his ministry? If so, what precisely is the critique? And who is doing the criticizing: other missionaries? members of the nascent Christian community in Corinth? Jews in Corinth? a combination thereof? And, perhaps most fundamental of all, how does chapter 3 fit within its larger literary context?

Situating 2 Corinthians 3

The last question raises the issue of whether the canonical form of 2 Corinthians is a single letter or a composite of parts of two or more letters. Fortunately for our purposes, we do not need to settle this question definitively (although, in the spirit of full disclosure, I read the letter as a single, unified text). Even the most ambitious partition theories set chapter 3 within the section of Paul’s discourse on his apostleship that runs from 2:14-7:4.³ More precisely, I

³ See, e.g., Hans Dieter Betz, “Corinthians, Second Epistle to the,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 1, ed. David Noel Freedman *et al.* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1149-1150. Betz divides 2 Corinthians into five letters, or parts of letters, in the following chronological order: A) first apology, 2:14-6:13 + 7:2-4; B) second apology, 10:1-13:10; C) letter of reconciliation, 1:1-2:13 + 7:5-16 + 13:11-13; D) administrative letter to

want to situate chapter 3 within the first division of that discourse, 2:14-4:6. This chapter is thus bracketed by two small units, 2:14-17 and 4:1-6, units that contain a number of points in common.

First, in both units Paul alludes to his call to be an apostle. In 4:1 he talks about having “the ministry” because of God’s mercy, a reference to his awareness that he received his mission in a most unexpected time and manner, when he was persecuting the church (1 Cor 15:9-10; see also 1 Tm 1:13-14). That Paul has his encounter with the risen Jesus in mind is strongly suggested by 4:6, where he refers to the glory of God shining “on the face of Christ.”⁴ Similarly, in 2:14 Paul’s adaptation of the Roman triumphal procession—in which he sets God in the position of the conquering general and himself as a prisoner of the *triumphator*—conveys his sense that God had “captured” him in order to promulgate “the knowledge of [Christ] in every place.” Not to be overlooked is Paul’s question, found two verses later, where he asks who is “sufficient” (*hikanos*) for such a calling (2:16). Scott J. Hafemann has argued that Paul alludes here to the call of Moses, who protested to God that he was not *hikanos* (LXX Ex 4:10). As was the case with Moses, so the apostle has come to understand that his sufficiency comes from God (3:5-6).⁵ If Hafemann is correct, and I think he is on to something here, then Paul has Moses in mind from the outset of 2:14-4:6, as a figure with whom he has an important connection.

Corinth, 8:1-24; E) administrative letter to Christians of Achaia, 9:1-15. He regards 6:14-7:1 as a non-Pauline interpolation.

⁴ All translations of the biblical text are my own.

⁵ Scott J. Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel: The Letter/Spirit Contrast and the Argument from Scripture in 2 Corinthians 3*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 81 (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1995) 39-47.

A second common feature of the bookend units is that Paul intimates the presence of opposition from other missionaries or preachers of the gospel. In 2:17 he distances himself from a group, dubbed “the many,” whom he accuses of ‘peddling’ or, worse, of ‘diluting’⁶ God’s word. And in 4:2 Paul insists that he has renounced shameful and underhanded ways, and that he neither conducts himself with cunning nor distorts God’s word. Admittedly, there is no explicit reference here to others acting in this manner. However, given that these same criticisms resurface in connection with his polemic against a group he derisively names “superlative apostles” (see 12:16-18), I submit that he has a competing group in mind in 4:2. Hints of opposition against Paul also appear in 5:12—where he distinguishes his way of being an apostle from those “who boast about appearances and not on what is in the heart”—and 7:2—where he defends himself against charges that were likely exacerbated, if not originated, by other missionaries.

A third shared quality is that Paul indicates that his apostolic ministry entails humble service and even suffering. The notion of humble service is evident in 4:5, where he describes his proclamation of the gospel as involving his becoming a “slave” (*doulos*) to the Corinthians “for the sake of Jesus.” That is, he is committed to serving the community in response to Jesus’ call to him (1:1), a service that is patterned after Jesus’ loving, self-giving manner (see, e.g., Gal 2:20; Phil 2:7-8). Paul’s use of the Roman triumphal procession metaphor in 2:14 also suggests his slave-like status. In addition, he refers to the self-sacrificial quality of his ministry by describing himself in 2:14-15 as “odor” (*osmē*) being spread by God and as “the aroma (*euōdia*) of Christ.” Interestingly, Paul elsewhere juxtaposes *osmē* and *euōdia* to indicate a fragrant sacrificial offering to God (Phil

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⁶ The verb *kapēleuō* can denote both meanings.

4:18; see also Eph 5:2).⁷ In short, he alludes in the bookend passages to the paradoxical quality of his apostleship: he claims that divine power and glory are revealed through what appears on the surface as weakness and dishonor. It is this paradoxical quality that others, including members of the Corinthian church, do not understand and is the cause for some of the criticism leveled against him.

A fourth common feature in the bracketing passages is Paul's acknowledgement that his proclamation of the gospel has not been accepted by all. He employs dramatic imagery to describe the cause and consequence of rejection of the gospel message. In 4:3-4 Paul declares that "the god of this world"—that is, Satan—has blinded the minds of unbelievers. Lying behind this declaration seems to be a criticism leveled against him that his preaching of the gospel is somehow "veiled." And in 2:15-16 Paul portrays the rejection of the gospel as leading to death.

Gathering together these commonalities, we see that 2 Corinthians 3 is set within a freighted context. Paul is on the defensive. Rival missionaries lurk in the background. Indeed, within the past generation there was a cottage industry in scholarly monographs that attempted to identify these rivals and their ideology.⁸ While I think that the quest for

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⁷ The phrase *osmē euōdias* appears forty-nine times in the LXX; in most cases, it refers to the sweet aroma of the burnt offering. See, e.g., Gn 8:21; Ex 29:18, 25, 41; Lv 1:9, 13, 17. Paul employs the phrase in Eph 5:2 in connection with Jesus' self-giving love.

⁸ See, e.g., Derk W. Oostendorp, *Another Jesus: A Gospel of Jewish-Christian Superiority in II Corinthians* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1967); Walther Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters of the Corinthians*, trans. John E. Stealy (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971); Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians: A Study of Religious Propaganda in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Jerry L. Sumney, *Identifying Paul's Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series* 40 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990).

pinpointing Paul's opponents in Corinth has led the interpretation of 2 Corinthians down wrong paths, there is no doubt that there *were* rival missionaries at work there. And it does not stretch the imagination to picture them criticizing Paul's manner of being an apostle, especially his servile ways and his penchant for suffering. Nor does it seem farfetched that the truth and efficacy of his message would be called into question, as the number of adherents to Paul's gospel was relatively small. Furthermore, the Jews, the people of God to whom he claimed to belong, were not flocking to the house churches. How reliable, then, is this man who claims to be "an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God" (1:1)? And how trustworthy is his message about God's bringing salvation through Jesus, whom he insists is the Christ, the Messiah?⁹

Confronted with such circumstances, Paul goes back to the basics in 2 Corinthians 3, just as he does elsewhere when under attack. That is, he points to his divine calling, insists on the efficacy of his ministry, and draws on biblical texts—in this case, in order to set forth his claim that God's promises to Israel are now being fulfilled, especially as manifested by the outpouring of God's Spirit through his ministry.¹⁰

Before proceeding with our analysis, it is worth pausing a moment to reflect on what has just been set forth. The content of 2 Corinthians 3 is, in large part, a product of

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⁹ Cf. Thomas E. Provence, "Who is Sufficient for These Things? An Exegesis of 2 Corinthians ii 15-iii 18," *Novum Testamentum* 24 (1982): 56.

¹⁰ Paul employs a similar strategy in his letter to the Galatians, a letter occasioned by the encroachment of his missionary foundation by rival preachers who led (at least some of them) the community to doubt his apostolic credentials and the gospel he preached. Paul reminds the Galatians of his call and its aftermath (1:11-2:21); invites them to recall the salutary effects of his proclamation of the gospel to them (3:1-5); and offers a number of arguments from Scripture (3:6-4:31).

Paul's defensiveness. Experience teaches that a defensive posture does not always produce a measured response. This observation merits consideration, especially when the question of appropriation of this text arises. I will return to this point in the concluding section. But let's now delve more deeply into the text.

2 Corinthians 3:1-6

Second Corinthians 3 begins with a reference to recommendation letters. Paul's defensive posture is evident from the outset, as he aggressively raises two questions about commendation and letters of recommendation (v. 1). It seems that the missionaries who have come to Corinth brought with them letters of recommendation; moreover, they may have been soliciting letters from the Corinthian community to take elsewhere. Behind the text lie two pointed questions: Did Paul bring such letters with him when he first came to Corinth? If not, what does that say about him and his claim to be an apostle? Paul's initial response is to claim that the very existence of the nascent *ekklesia* in Corinth functions as his recommendation letter (cf. 1 Cor 9:2). His ministry there has borne fruit—or, as the apostle would express it, God has worked through him (see 1 Cor 3:6). But there is more going on here than Paul's basic assertion that the establishment of "the church of God that is in Corinth" (1 Cor 2:1) is his recommendation letter. His manner of expressing this claim—in which he employs a number of biblical allusions—begins to set the stage for a more fundamental defense of his apostleship.

Paul informs the Corinthians that they are "a letter about Christ"¹¹ authored by "the Spirit of the living God," written

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¹¹ For rendering *epistolē Christou* as "a letter about Christ" and its significance, see Thomas D. Stegman, *The Character of Jesus: The*

"not on tablets of stone but on tablets of fleshy hearts" (v. 3). The phrase "tablets of stone" is an allusion to Ex 31:18, which recounts Moses' receiving from God, on Mount Sinai, the two stone tablets that "were written by the finger of God." The phrase "fleshy hearts" (*kardiaī sarkinaī*) and the reference to the bestowal of God's Spirit within them allude to the divine promises made to exiled Israel found in Ez 11:19; 36:26-27. Moreover, Paul's statement in v. 2—that the Corinthians are a letter written "on our hearts" (i.e., on his heart and those of his co-workers)—echoes LXX Jer 38:33 (MT Jer 31:33), where God promised Israel that, in days to come, God would write the Law upon their hearts. Crucial to Paul's train of thought here is that this promise pronounced by Jeremiah takes place in the context of God's pledge to make "a new covenant" (*kainē diathēkē*) with God's people (LXX 38:31; MT 31:31). That Paul has the Jeremiah text in mind is clear from his statement, a few lines later (v. 6), that God has made him "sufficient" to be a minister of "a new covenant."¹²

We now arrive at the heart of Paul's self-understanding, one that is intricately connected with his belief concerning how God has acted in and through Jesus. Lying just beneath the surface of Paul's presentation in vv. 1-6 is his conviction, as he explicitly declares in 2 Cor 1:18-20a, that all the promises of God have their "Yes"—that is, their fulfillment—in "the Son of God, Messiah Jesus."¹³ Moreover, in the latter

Linchpin to Paul's Argument in 2 Corinthians, *Analecta Biblica* 158 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2005) 315-318.

¹² The figure of Jeremiah is important for Paul. The latter describes his call to be an apostle in Gal 1:15 in language that echoes LXX Jer 1:5, especially the notion of being set apart and called when he was in his mother's "womb" (*koilia*). Paul also understands his God-given authority for the purpose of "building up" others (*eis oikodomēn* – 2 Cor 10:8; 13:10) with reference to LXX Jer 1:10.

¹³ One of the reasons for reading 2 Corinthians as a literary unity is that Paul's claim in 1:18-20 provides the foundation for what he writes in 3:1-6.

passage, Paul goes on to insist that the fulfillment of God's promises has two interrelated, ongoing manifestations.¹⁴ First, he states in 1:20b that "through [Jesus] the Amen goes to God for glory through us." Observe that Paul raises here the issue of "glory" (*doxa*), an issue he takes up in earnest in 2 Corinthians 3, beginning with v. 7. Second, Paul asserts in 1:21-22 that God has bestowed the gift of the Spirit "in our hearts." Texts like Gal 3:1-5—where the apostle appeals to the Galatians' experience of receiving the Spirit—and 1 Cor 12:1-14:40—where he discusses the manifestations and gifts of the Spirit—attest to Paul's sanguine belief in the powerful presence of God's Spirit among those who have accepted the gospel proclamation and have been baptized. What is pertinent for our purposes is that he regards this outpouring of the Spirit *as the fulfillment of the prophetic passages* about God's promises of a new covenant. Moreover, he considers his ministry of proclaiming the gospel as continuing the work of salvation God has brought about through Jesus.

This brief detour positions us to understand better Paul's presentation in 2 Cor 3:4-6. He states in v. 4 that his confidence in God is *dia tou Christou*—"through the Messiah." Here Paul points to the centrality of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection in God's salvific activity. He goes on to explain, in vv. 5-6, that this saving action is now extended through the ministry of "a new covenant."¹⁵ We are not surprised to hear that the distinguishing characteristic of this new covenant is *pneumatos*—it is "of the Spirit." Observe that Paul alludes once again to his call, as he insists that his

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¹⁴ Paul signals this ongoing significance, at least in part, by his use of the perfect tense verb *gegonen* in v. 19. The perfect tense in Greek indicates a past action that has enduring ramifications, even to the present.

¹⁵ Elsewhere Paul refers to "new covenant" when passing on the tradition of Jesus' words over the cup at the last supper (1 Cor 11:25; see also Lk 22:20).

sufficiency¹⁶ comes from God, who has made him a minister of this covenant. Therefore, in vv. 1-6 the apostle has insisted on the efficacy of his ministry and, even more fundamentally, on his divine call. And he has done so by drawing on Israel's Scriptures.

But this is where Paul's presentation begins to take on an incendiary quality. Starting in v. 7, he goes on to accentuate the greatness of the new covenant ministry by contrasting it with that of the covenant given to Moses. Actually, the first salvo was sounded back in v. 3, where he contrasted "tablets of stone" with "tablets of fleshy hearts." Now, at the end of v. 6, he remarks, "The letter kills but the Spirit gives life." It is important to be clear that Paul does *not* say that the Law in and of itself brings about death; notice that he says *to gramma* ("the letter"), not *ho nomos* ("the law"). His position, as he will later explain in Rom 7:7-8:11, is that the Law of itself cannot grant life; rather, life is bestowed only by the life-giving power of God's Spirit.

What motivates Paul to embark on a comparison between the covenants (vv. 7-11)? To use Moses as a foil for his own comportment (vv. 12-13)? To account for the rejection of the gospel by the majority of the Jews of his day (vv. 14-15)? And to describe how he and all those who possess God's Spirit behold the glory of the Lord (vv. 16-18)? Here is where, in my opinion, a veil can easily fall over the eyes of the commentator who attempts to identify with precision what lies behind the text and what was in Paul's mind as he wrote. But try one must! My sense is that a number of factors were at play—two that are suggested in the text, and two that lie behind the text:

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¹⁶ Paul employs three cognates of the root *hikan-* in 3:5-6. This picks up the issue of "sufficiency" raised in 2:16.

- Paul alluded to the call of Moses in 2:16, and this figure and the story of Exodus has been in his mind since then.
- The background of the prophecies from Jeremiah and Ezekiel was the failure of the people to heed God's ways as set forth in Torah. Paul now sees Israel's rejection of the gospel as a similar failure.
- Paul was aware that some in Corinth were questioning why Jews, for the most part, did not respond favorably to the gospel.¹⁷
- Paul's way of being an apostle, marked by self-giving and suffering, seemed in the eyes of others to be the antithesis of reflecting divine *doxa*.

I now propose to work through the remainder of 2 Corinthians 3, keeping the focus on what I consider to be the positive points Paul makes while flagging the controversial and problematic aspects of his exposition vis-à-vis Jewish-Christian relations. The latter will then serve as the subject of my concluding section.

2 Corinthians 3:7-11

The usual manner of approaching vv. 7-11 is to see this unit as Paul's contrast and comparison of two covenants. To be sure, this seems to be what these verses ultimately boil down to. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that what he compares and contrasts here are two "ministries" (*diakonias*). Recall that Paul and his ministry are under attack. Hence he

¹⁷ This was John Chrysostom's explanation. See *Homilies on 2 Corinthians*, 7:2.

is determined to set forth the greatness of the ministry to which he has been called.

Given what Paul believes about the outpouring of God's Spirit in connection with the proclamation of the gospel, it is not surprising that he now refers to the new covenant ministry in v. 8 as *hē diakonia tou pneumatos*, "the ministry of the Spirit." He also calls it *hē diakonia tēs dikaiosynēs*, "the ministry of righteousness," in v. 9. This appellation has deeper resonances than the immediate context suggests. "Righteousness," for Paul, is first and foremost an attribute of God (*dikaiosynē theou*). God's righteousness refers to God's covenantal faithfulness, the faithfulness that reveals itself in salvific activity.¹⁸ The *locus classicus* of Paul's understanding of *dikaiosynē theou* is Rom 3:21-22: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested...through the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah for all who believe."¹⁹ Notice that Paul identifies Jesus as the Messiah and, as Rom 3:24-25 goes on to explain, his expiating death (that expressed his faithfulness to God) as the eschatological revelation of God's saving righteousness. God has acted through Jesus' death (and resurrection) to bring about the

¹⁸ See N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 100-110.

¹⁹ Along with a growing number of scholars, I read the phrase *pistis Iēsou Christou* as a subjective genitive, referring to Christ's faithfulness (rather than the objective genitive rendering 'faith in Christ'). For more on the *pistis Christou* debate, see Richard B. Hays, "ΠΙΣΤΙΣ and Pauline Christology: What Is at Stake?" in *Pauline Theology: Volume IV: Looking Back, Pressing On*, ed. E. Elizabeth Johnson and David M. Hay (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 35-60; and, in the same volume, James D.G. Dunn, "Once More, ΠΙΣΤΙΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΥ," 61-81. Paul's parenthetical statement in Rom 3:21—that "the law and the prophets" bear testimony to the revelation of God's righteousness—is explained, in part, by his interpretation of texts like those from Jeremiah and Ezekiel referred to above.

possibility of salvation. Moreover, according to Paul, Jesus' death reveals God's reconciling love (Rom 5:8-11).

The manifestation of God's righteousness, however, is not exhausted in the Christ-event. It now continues in the exercise of the Spirit-empowered ministry of righteousness that Paul is presently discussing. Elsewhere in 2 Corinthians, he explains two major facets of this ministry. First, it entails the proclamation of God's work of salvation, what Paul calls "the ministry of (*diakonia*) reconciliation" (5:19). Second, it must be embodied through the praxis of self-giving love within real life circumstances.²⁰ An important instantiation of such incarnated love, for Paul, is the collection for the poor of the Jerusalem church (8:1-9:15). Indeed, he employs the term *diakonia* in this connection—the collection is, literally, "the ministry unto the holy ones" (8:4; 9:1). Not only was it to be marked by self-giving (8:5) and love (8:8, 24); it was also a sign of the reconciliation that Jesus has brought about, at least potentially, between Gentiles and Jews, within the *ekklēsia* (see Eph 2:14-16).²¹ Now, because Paul considers the new covenant ministry as part of the definitive divine eschatological action to bring about salvation, he views this ministry as permanent and enduring, as he states in v. 11 of our passage.

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²⁰ Paul succinctly expresses this two-fold expression, through preaching and praxis, of the new covenant ministry in 2 Cor 4:5: "We proclaim... Jesus Christ as Lord, and [we proclaim] ourselves as your slaves for the sake of Jesus."

²¹ For Paul's understanding of the theological and symbolic significance of the collection, see Keith F. Nickle, *The Collection: A Study in Paul's Strategy*, Studies in Biblical Theology 48 (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, 1966); and Dieter Georgi, *Remembering the Poor: The History of Paul's Collection for Jerusalem* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991). Paul's authorship of Ephesians is, of course, a disputed issue. If this writing is deuterio-Pauline, it is significant to note that some of Paul's earliest interpreters understood him as valuing the Jewish tradition.

But Paul is not content with setting forth the new covenant ministry in positive terms—as empowered by the Spirit, as manifesting God's righteousness, and as enduring forever. He contrasts this ministry with that of the Mosaic covenant, the covenant "carved in letters of stone" (v. 7), and adds corresponding negative attributions to the latter. Thus he calls it "the ministry of death" (v. 7) and "the ministry of condemnation" (v. 9). Paul's reasoning seems to be as follows: the Mosaic covenant concluded with a long list of curses that would come upon Israel if the people were not faithful to the covenant (Dt 28:15-68), including the punishment of exile. The passages from Ezekiel and Jeremiah cited above are from the context of the Babylonian exile, from the context of Israel's failure to obey the divine commandments and of their subsequent punishment. To Paul's way of thinking, the Spirit prophesied by Ezekiel—the Spirit that would bring the dry bones of exiled Israel back to life (37:1-14)²²—has only now been poured out. And it has been poured out on those who have believed the gospel proclamation and been baptized. What is crucial to appreciate is that it is only from the perspective of his encounter with the risen Jesus and his experience of the outpoured Spirit that Paul declares that the ministry of the Mosaic covenant has now "been set aside," even "rendered inoperative" (the sense of the verb *katargeomai*—vv. 7, 11).²³

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²² For the significance of Ez 37:1-14 for Paul, see Carol Kern Stockhausen, *Moses' Veil and the Glory of the New Covenant: The Exegetical Substructure of II Cor. 3,1-4,6*, *Analecta Biblica* 116 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1989) 67-71, 78-82.

²³ Although many commentators translate *katargeomai* as "fade" in vv. 7, 11, and 13, there is no lexical support for this translation. In fact, the twenty-two other usages of the verb *katargeō* in the Pauline corpus are best rendered "set aside" (as in v. 14 of the present passage), "nullify," and even "destroy"—but in no case as "fade."²³ See John M. McDermott, "II Corinthians 3: the Old and New Covenants," *Gregorianum* 87 (2006): 34-35.

What do we make of Paul's negative assessment? From one perspective, he is simply setting forth the counterpoints to his robust characterization of the new covenant ministry. From another perspective—for instance, one that realizes how a text like this has been used by some Christians to regard Judaism as obsolete and, even worse, as condemned—we must not pass over this language uncritically.

It is important to point out that, in vv. 7-11, Paul's assessment of the Mosaic covenant is not entirely negative. Even his harshest criticism is nuanced. Observe that he acknowledges that the Law given to Moses "came to be in glory" (*egenēthē en doxēi* – v. 7), an allusion to the tradition that Moses' face reflected the glory of God (Ex 34:29). And as the argument continues, Paul will appeal to Moses in a positive way. Admittedly, he also states three times that the new covenant ministry surpasses in glory the ministry of the Mosaic covenant. But this claim raises an apparent problem for the apostle: his own face does not literally shine with the glory of God. In fact, his life—marked by humility, self-giving, and suffering—seems anything but glorious, something about which the rival missionaries and some of the Corinthians likely reminded him. So how does Paul deal with this paradox?

2 Corinthians 3:12-13

Paul takes up the story of Moses' face reflecting God's glory in vv. 12-13. He declares that, because of his hope in the enduring character of the new covenant, he acts with "boldness" (v. 12). The term *parrēsia* can also mean "frankness" in the sense of "open speech." Given that Paul will soon insist that he acts and speaks openly (4:2)—as well as deny that his gospel is "veiled" (4:3)—he likely also

intends the connotation of frankness. He then compares his boldness and openness to Moses' act of veiling his face (v. 13). So, at one level, Moses simply plays the role of foil for Paul, who continues to defend his manner of being an apostle.

But there is something else going on here. Paul attributes a peculiar reason for Moses' act of veiling, namely, so that the Israelites would not look intently. That is, according to Paul, Moses wanted to *prevent* the Israelites from staring or fixating (the sense of the verb *atenizō*). But this differs from what is narrated in Ex 34:29-35—not to mention from what Paul himself implied back in v. 7, where he wrote, "the Israelites could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face...." Exodus 34:29-35 recounts Moses' descent from Mount Sinai, carrying the Ten Commandments inscribed on two stone tablets. Because he had been in the glorious, divine presence, the appearance of his face was transformed: he now radiated God's glory. The Israelites, however, were afraid to approach Moses because of his shining face. He responded by covering his face with a veil after transmitting God's commandments to them. Although no explicit reason is given in the Exodus text, one can infer from it that Moses veiled his face because the people were unnerved at seeing its radiance.

Paul thus attaches a different motive to Moses' act of veiling in v. 13. He regards it as a preventative measure. But what, exactly, did Moses want to prevent the Israelites from seeing? *To telos tou katargoumenou*. The meaning of this phrase has long been debated.²⁴ In my opinion, the best interpretation is: "the cessation of what was being set

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²⁴ See Margaret E. Thrall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, vol. 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark: 1994) 259-261. Thrall sets forth seven interpretations that have been offered.

aside.”²⁵ That is, Paul provocatively suggests here that Moses veiled himself so that the Israelites would not fixate on what was ultimately bound to be rendered inoperative. In other words, Moses desired to keep the people from so focusing on the ministry bestowed on him that they would fail to see that, in the end, it would be set aside at the coming of Messiah Jesus. Similar to how Paul can claim that Abraham was foretold the gospel (*proeuangelizomai*—Gal 3:8), he now intimates that Moses foresaw the coming of a new covenant in the Spirit.

Notice what Paul has done vis-à-vis the figure of Moses. Although the apostle regards Moses’ ministry as marked by condemnation and death, he also enlists Moses as one who knew—presumably by divine revelation—what God was going to bring about in the future. On this reading, Moses is on the side of the new covenant. While Paul initially contrasts his comportment with Moses’ act of veiling, he favorably regards the latter’s beholding and radiating the glory of God. Just as Paul claims elsewhere that Moses prefigures baptism and the eucharist (1 Cor 10:1-4), so here the latter’s experience of transformation in the divine presence is the prototype for the Christian experience of being transformed while “gazing at the glory of the Lord” (v. 18).

Paul’s reading of the story in Exodus 34 raises some important questions: Is this a legitimate way of interpreting the biblical text? Is it not tendentious? What control, if any, does the literal meaning of the text exercise? Does Paul’s interpretation, as part of what is now regarded as a canonical text (i.e., as part of the New Testament), trump the

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²⁵ So also, e.g., Jan Lambrecht, *2 Corinthians*, Sacra Pagina 8 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999) 52; and Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 92-93.

literal meaning? To be sure, he reads this text (and many others) through a christological lens, from the same perspective now employed by most Christian lectionaries. Do such readings vitiate how others – namely, Jews – read these texts which they too regard as divine revelation?

2 Corinthians 3:14-15

We now come to the most contentious section of Paul’s argument in 2 Corinthians 3, where he discusses the veil over Jewish minds and hearts. At the beginning of v. 14, he states that “their thoughts were hardened”—referring to the people at the time of Moses. The verb *pōroō* means “petrify.” Paul’s imagery hearkens back to the stony hearts (Ez 11:19; 36:26) alluded to above in v. 3. Indeed, the hardened “thoughts” (*noēmata*) in v. 14 become the veiled “heart” (*kardia*) in v. 15.²⁶ But Paul’s real concern is not with the Israelites of Moses’ time. Rather, as the phrase “to this day” makes clear, it is with his Jewish contemporaries, the majority of whom have not accepted the gospel proclamation “Messiah Jesus is Lord!” (2 Cor 4:5; Phil 2:11). Paul here employs the veil of Moses metaphorically to explain what he regards as Jewish blindness: “when they read the old covenant,²⁷ the same veil remains unlifted.” He then makes explicit his christological hermeneutical principle for reading Scripture, namely, that only “in Christ” is the veil set aside.²⁸

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²⁶ The RSV fails to convey Paul’s movement from *noēmata* (“thoughts” – v. 14) to *kardia* (“heart” – v. 15); rather, it renders both terms as “minds.”

²⁷ This is the only place in the entire Bible—in both testaments—where the phrase “old covenant” (*palaiā diathēkē*) appears.

²⁸ Here is where all translations and commentators agree that the verb *katargeomai* should be rendered “set aside” (or something similar in meaning). See note 21 above. It is interesting to note that Paul does not make explicit what is the subject of *katargeomai*. It could be either “old covenant” or “veil.” Given how Paul’s argument proceeds (especially in v. 16), it is better to take “veil” as the subject. If this is correct, it is worth

According to the apostle, the veil that blinds is removed only when one recognizes that the Jewish Scriptures point to and are fulfilled by Christ Jesus.

Paul reiterates the blindness of his Jewish contemporaries in v. 15, but with some subtle changes. He refers to the *reading* of Moses, that is, to the reading of Torah in the synagogue. He thus distinguishes between the figure of Moses and the writings attributed to him. Paul claims Moses as the forerunner of the fruit of the new

covenant ministry—beholding the glory of the Lord—while acknowledging that the written Torah led to a different *diakonia* (vv. 7-11). In addition, he replaces the phrase “the same veil” with simply “a veil,” thereby intimating that an even more pervasive spiritual blindness has descended on the people, resulting in hardened “hearts.”²⁹ Observe the transition from Moses’ face—that is, from an exterior aspect of human existence—to minds and hearts—that is, to the interior, the very core, of human existence. This is significant because Paul is about to point to the *inner* transformation empowered by the Spirit.

Before proceeding to the final unit of 2 Corinthians 3, it is worth flagging issues raised by vv. 14-15. The mixed imagery of hardened/veiled minds/hearts and the use of the phrase “old covenant” raise some of the same problems we saw in connection with vv. 7-11, except that now the negative assessment touches, literally, on the very condition of the Jewish people. Verses 14-15 also bring to the fore the issue of Paul’s Christ-centered hermeneutic for reading

observing that he does *not* claim here that the “old covenant” has been set aside.

²⁹ Cf. Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985 [1915]) 101.

Scripture, which we noted in connection with vv. 12-13. Moreover, Paul’s use of the passive voice in v. 14—“their thoughts were hardened (*epōrōthē*)”—raises an important question: Is this an instance of the divine passive (cf. Is 6:9-10)?³⁰ If so, what does that say about the apostle’s understanding of God’s fidelity to Israel?

2 Corinthians 3:16-18

Paul now moves to the climax of 2 Corinthians 3. Recall that God’s promise to make a new covenant with Israel (Jer 31:31)—one marked by God’s removing stony hearts and replacing them with fleshy hearts into which God would send the Spirit (Ez 11:19; 36:26-27)—has been in the background throughout the chapter. In vv. 16-18 Paul explains how these promises are now enacted. He begins by offering the remedy for spiritual hardening and blindness: “whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” (v. 16). This line is an allusion to LXX Ex 34:34, which reads: “Whenever Moses entered in the presence of the LORD to speak with him, he [i.e., Moses] removed the veil....” The reference is to Moses’ practice of entering the meeting tent to discourse with God face to face (see Ex 33:7-11).

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³⁰ As suggested by R.V.G. Tasker, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983 [1958]) 65.

Paul actualizes³¹ the Exodus text, adapting it for his purpose. He makes three important changes. First, he removes “Moses” as the subject of the opening clause; in doing so, he leaves open to *anyone* the possibility of coming before “the Lord.” That is, what was unique to Moses’ experience has now been universalized, at least potentially. Second, Paul replaces the past tense verb “entered” (*eiseporeuteto*) with the present tense verb “turns” (*epistrepsei*), thereby offering a *perennial* invitation to people to turn to the Lord. Third, he changes the verb *periaireō* from an imperfect middle—which conveyed Moses’ habitual practice of removing his veil—to a present passive—suggesting that it is the Lord who now removes the veil.³² In sum, Paul’s appropriation of Ex 34:34 functions to claim that *all* people are now offered the possibility of encountering God in glory. For the apostle, such an encounter is the fruit of the new covenant ministry.

Paul then offers an exegetical gloss in v. 17: “Now the ‘Lord’ is the Spirit.” Without doubt, “the LORD” refers to God (i.e., to YHWH) in the Exodus text. Paul, in actualizing this passage, asserts that “the Lord” stands for “the Spirit.”³³ The REB captures his sense well: “Now the Lord of whom this
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³¹ The Pontifical Biblical Commission’s document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (IV.A.) aptly defines the practice of “actualization” as re-reading biblical texts in light of new circumstances and applying such texts to a contemporary situation. For the full text of the English translation of the PBC document, see http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp-FullText.htm.

³² Of course, the middle and passive forms have the same spelling. That Paul uses the passive voice here is strongly suggested by the divine agency made explicit in 3:18 and 4:6. Cf. Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005) 309.

³³ See, e.g., Linda L. Belleville, *Reflections of Glory: Paul’s Polemical Use of the Moses-Doxa Tradition in 2 Corinthians 3.1-18*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series* 52 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991) 263-67.

passage speaks is the Spirit.” But what, precisely, does it mean to ‘turn to the Spirit’? James D.G. Dunn has argued, rightly in my opinion, that the phrase as used here is the equivalent of “receiving the Holy Spirit,” which is the fruit of the new covenant ministry.³⁴ Paul then adds that the Spirit brings freedom. Given the context of his appropriation of the Exodus passage, the words at the end of v. 17 suggest that the Spirit releases people from the veil that keeps them from recognizing the salvation God has effected in and through Messiah Jesus.

In v. 18 Paul describes what happens when a person turns to the Lord, that is, when he or she receives the Spirit. Like Moses, they—note the phrase “we all”—behold, with unveiled faces, the glory of the Lord. As the following verses will spell out, “the glory of the Lord” refers here to God’s glory as it has been revealed through Jesus (4:6), whom the apostle calls “the image of God” (4:4).

What, precisely, Paul means by ‘beholding’ has been the subject of some debate. The verb *katoptrizomai* is a New Testament *hapax legomenon*. Does it mean “to contemplate”/“gaze intently at,” like looking *into* a mirror, or “to reflect like a mirror?”³⁵ My sense is that Paul intends the former sense. That is, he refers to contemplating God’s glory as reflected in Jesus, the *imago Dei* (4:4), the New Adam, whose obedience to God—made manifest in his self-giving love unto death on the cross—revealed how human beings ought to show forth God’s holiness and likeness. To behold
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³⁴ James D.G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-Examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today*, *Studies in Biblical Theology* II.15 (Naperville, IL.: Alec R. Allenson, 1970) 136.

³⁵ For reading *katoptrizomai* in the sense of “contemplate,” see, e.g., Matera, *II Corinthians*, 96-97; for understanding it as “reflect,” see, e.g., N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 185-189.

this glory is tantamount to contemplating the story and character of Jesus as proclaimed in the gospel. Like Moses who once gazed “with unveiled face” on the divine glory, so now Christians can behold God’s glory reflected in Messiah Jesus through the medium of the gospel proclamation.

The result of such beholding is being transformed into “the same image.” The verb *metamorphoomai* is the same term used by Matthew and Mark to describe Jesus’ transfiguration.³⁶ Paul’s use of the passive voice points to the agency of the Spirit, as the end of v. 18 makes clear—“as from the ‘Lord,’ who is the Spirit.” His employment of *morph-* terminology elsewhere illuminates his meaning here. In Rom 8:29, in the context of expounding on the working of the Spirit, Paul describes people “being conformed

(*symmorphous*) to the image of God’s Son.” In Rom 12:2 he exhorts, “Be transformed (*metamorphousthe*) by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is God’s will.” Returning to v. 18, Paul is referring to a *process*—observe the present tense “we are being transformed”—in which the Spirit enlightens/renews people’s minds and empowers them to become more like Jesus. Such transformation is “from glory unto glory.” That is, when people are faithful to God’s ways and embody self-giving love after the manner of Jesus, they both reflect the holiness of God in whose image they are created and give glory to God.

Admittedly, the transformation Paul describes here is paradoxical. Taking on the likeness of Jesus is to enter the way of self-sacrifice and suffering, what the apostle will call “carrying in the body the putting to death (*nekrōsin*) of Jesus” in 2 Cor 4:10.³⁷ The faces of Christians do not shine like that

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³⁶ Mt 17:2; Mk 9:2.

³⁷ For more on Paul’s understanding of this paradoxical transformation as he sets it forth in 2 Cor 4:7-15, see Thomas D. Stegman, “□πίστευσα, δι□

of Moses. Rather, their renewal involves the “inner person,” even though what is exterior—as Paul readily acknowledges—seems to waste away (4:16).

Conclusion

Faced with opposition—from rival missionaries and from members of the church in Corinth, and perhaps even from Jews in Corinth—and with criticism—concerning his manner of being an apostle and the lack of reception of his gospel—Paul authored the lines now known as 2 Corinthians 3. He insists that God has made him a minister of “a new covenant,” the covenant marked by the outpouring of God’s Spirit into people’s hearts as envisioned by the prophets

Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The fruit of his ministry, through the proclamation and acceptance of the gospel, is the Spirit-empowered transformation of believers, who behold “the glory of God in the face of Messiah [Jesus]” (2 Cor 4:6).

But Paul’s exalted vision has also left much in its wake, not the least of which are: denigrating designations of the Mosaic covenant and its ministry; and his assessment of spiritual blindness on the part of Jews who do not recognize Jesus as Messiah, a blindness that manifests itself in their reading of Scripture. How do we deal with 2 Corinthians 3 in the context of Jewish-Christian relations? Or, to ask the question from a Christian perspective, what kind of “damage control,” if any, should we attempt to engage in our appropriation of this problematic chapter?

It might sound presumptuous to attempt to engage in damage control over what Christians regard as divine revelation. Nevertheless, I would like to offer two

□λάλησα (2 Corinthians 4:13): Paul’s Christological Reading of Psalm 115:1a LXX,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 69 (2007): 725-745.

suggestions that, I think, responsibly mitigate the harshness of the apostle's language and imagery. First, as I remarked earlier, Paul is writing from a defensive posture, the result of his coming under fire from various criticisms of his apostleship. Such a posture rarely promotes dispassionate and considered discourse. I suggest that we read 2 Corinthians 3 in such a way that allows Paul's positive contributions their full voice while critically analyzing his negative attributions, calling into question their abiding value. To be sure, such an approach runs the risk of devolving into picking and choosing only what we want to hear from Scripture rather than what should be our stance before the text: namely, humble listening.

But in this case—and here I segue to my second suggestion—Paul himself gives warrant for doing so.³⁸ As do many other exegetes, I date 2 Corinthians in close proximity to his letter to the Romans.³⁹ It is no accident, in my opinion, that he takes up the Jewish question there in chapters 9-11. Indeed, I cannot help but wonder whether Paul came to regret the way he expressed himself in 2 Corinthians 3 and thus sought to clarify his thoughts in Romans (although, to be clear, what the Apostle does in 2 Corinthians 3 is compare and contrast two *ministries*; he does not explicitly abrogate the Mosaic covenant itself). In any event, he sets forth a much more measured assessment of the Jewish people vis-à-vis God's promises in Romans 11, especially in verses 26-29, where he remarks that God's gifts and call to Israel are irrevocable and that "all Israel will be saved."

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³⁸ Of course, there are other warrants for reading 2 Corinthians 3 with a critical and discerning eye, such as the sensitivities gained from Jewish-Christian dialogue, especially in the post-Auschwitz context.

³⁹ Nearly all commentators agree that Paul wrote Romans from Corinth. If 2 Corinthians is a single, unified letter—as I argue elsewhere (see *The Character of Jesus*)—then the letter to the Romans can be dated within a year of 2 Corinthians.

These lines call into question any reading of 2 Corinthians 3 as Paul's definitive word on the Jewish people.

It is also worth pointing out that, in Rom 11:27, Paul applies the new covenant promises contained in Jeremiah 31 to Jews: "And this will be my covenant with them, when I take away their sins" (see LXX Jer 38:33-34; MT Jer 31:33-34). Observe that the prophetic promises that he sees fulfilled in the *ekklēsia* are not thereby exhausted; here he indicates that they also pertain to Israel. Moreover, in the preceding verse (Rom 11:26), Paul grounds his statement that "all Israel will be saved" by citing LXX Is 59:20: "The

Deliverer will remove ungodliness from Jacob." Chapters 40-66 of Isaiah are an extremely significant part of Scripture for the apostle. His understanding of Jesus is, in many ways, influenced by the portrayal of the Isaian servant.⁴⁰ Paul's self-understanding is also shaped by the later chapters of Isaiah.⁴¹ It is thus noteworthy that he appropriates a text from this part of Isaiah, a promise of deliverance and salvation, for the Jews. To say the least, these are extremely important observations, ones that illustrate the apostle's more careful and nuanced evaluation of the people he still regards as his brothers and sisters (Rom 9:3).

We are still left with Paul's Christ-centered biblical hermeneutic. In fact, it is his statement in 2 Cor 3:6—"the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life"—that various Church

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⁴⁰ For instance, Paul W. Barnett contends that 2 Cor 5:21a—where Paul writes, "[God] made the one who did not know sin to be sin for our sake"—can only be understood in light of Isaiah 53, the fourth servant song. See *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 313 n. 61.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Rom 10:15, where Paul alludes to LXX Is 52:7: "How beautiful are the feet of those who proclaim the good news (*tōn euangelizomenōn*)."

Fathers used to give Scriptural warrant for engaging in “spiritual exegesis,” the way of reading the Jewish Scriptures in light of the Christ-event.⁴² There is no getting around the fact that Jews and Christians read the same Scriptures differently. But difference does not rule out the possibility of mutual respect and of sustained dialogue. As the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 2002 document *The Jewish People and Their Scriptures in the Christian Bible* observes, “Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the Second Temple period, a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion” (22).⁴³ Both parties can profitably learn from one another. It is therefore important that Jews and Christians engage in respectful dialogue—a dialogue made possible, as the same document notes, because of the “rich common patrimony that unites” us (87).

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⁴² In this connection, the PBC has recently asserted that “the spiritual sense can never be stripped of its connection with the literal sense.” See *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II.B.2.

⁴³ For an English translation, see http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.