
Exegesis 16: Lifting the Veil

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This study lifts the veil on 2 Corinthians 3:13-18 and looks at the way OT texts are used by NT writers and by us.

If we agree with F F Bruce that “of all the Pauline epistles, 2 Corinthians is probably the one which presents most problems to the interpreter”,¹ we might also add that chapter three is probably the most difficult to interpret, with verses 12-18 presenting the greatest problems. Van Unnik says about them, “The path to their right interpretation is beset with a great many difficulties and there is hardly a single point on which expositors agree.”² In her recent, detailed study of this passage Linda Belleville says, “Almost every exegete who has studied 2 Cor 3:12-18 has struggled with its apparent lack of cohesion and its exegetical ambiguities”,³ and when A T Hanson comes to v 17 he says, “we now approach what could be called the Mount Everest of Pauline texts as far as difficulty is concerned.”⁴ This article does not aspire to scale Everests, but presents a modest excursion into the foothills and hopes to cast some light on Paul’s use of the *veil* in these verses.

By way of introduction, we ought to comment on v 12 and what Van Unnik calls the key-word, *parresia*, because this provides the contrast to Moses veiling his face. Paul and his colleagues use great “openness”, unlike Moses who veiled his face. It is difficult to be certain of the exact nuance of *parresia*. Is it “boldness of speech”, “confidence”, or “openness of behaviour”? “Openness of behaviour” (at one point Belleville uses the phrase “up front”!) seems to suit the context best, and provides a suitable contrast to Moses’ action. Moses hid the glory that shone from his face, but the apostle and those with him live lives that are open to scrutiny (4:2; this verse indicates that “openness” also includes the clear preaching of the truth).

The Exodus background

The account of Moses veiling his face comes in Exodus 34 and is the background to Paul’s thinking here. So much does Paul depend on Exodus 34 that Colin Kruse in his commentary entitles the section 7-11, “Exposition of Exodus 34:29-32”, and verses 12-18, “Exposition of Exodus 34:33-35”.⁵ Part of Linda Belleville’s case is that Paul not only uses Exodus 34 but also elements of what she calls the “Moses-Doxa tradition” which she describes as a “tapestry of traditions rather than a single, unified Moses-Doxa tradition or midrash.”⁶ It is not surprising that Paul’s handling of the Old Testament should reflect his rabbinic training, and it is not necessary for us to assume that only what were uniquely Pauline insights could find a place in his letters, after all he can quote from a pagan poet if this is appropriate, Tit 1:12. However, Exodus 34:29-35 is clearly his basic text and the way he handles it has the stamp of his authority as an apostle.

Part of the difficulty in following Paul’s thought in this passage is that he does

not take up the picture of Moses veiling his face in v 13 and develop an argument from that. What he appears to do is to go back to the account in Exodus several times in order to bring out a fresh point each time. There are four main points that he makes in these verses and these are parallel rather than sequential. They could be set out like this:

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| Moses put a veil over his face etc | — so that Israel could not look at the end of what was passing away |
| | — the same veil still lies on the hearts of Israelites when they read the OT |
| | — when one turns to the Lord the veil is taken away |
| | — we all with unveiled face behold the glory of the Lord. |

In other words, what we have here is a number of points or headings arising out of the story of Moses veiling his face. It is necessary to go back in thought to the story in Exodus in order to understand the next point.⁷ There is sequence and development in the passage but the points flow out of Exodus, they are not simply the development of an argument from v 13.

Closer examination of the passage makes this even clearer. All the way through we need to refer back to Exodus to understand the flow of the passage, even though in the last two cases this is not explicitly stated. This can be set out also:

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|-----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Moses put a veil on his face | — so that Israel could not look...etc |
| Their minds were blinded | — the same veil ⁸ still remains on their hearts even to this day |
| When Moses turned to the Lord he removed the veil | — when one turns to the Lord the veil is taken away |
| Moses alone gazed with unveiled face on God's glory | — we all with unveiled face behold the glory of the Lord |

When we look at the passage in this way we have an outline of applicatory points from Exodus 34 to the situation Paul was addressing. It is therefore not altogether surprising to read in Martin about "Moule's hint that we have here the development of a synagogue sermon preached by Paul on some previous occasion".⁹ In fact even a quite unsophisticated expositor might note the parallels and draw the applications found here. Exodus 34 is understood in the light of the experience of those who have seen the far greater glory brought by the gospel.

Three comments might be made about this

First of all it is not being argued that this is precisely Paul's methodology and sequence of thought. Linda Belleville says that these "have remained largely a mystery..... to a great extent because Jewish homiletical patterns and exegetical techniques have not been brought to bear on the details of this passage."¹⁰ She maintains it is necessary to "recognize the essentially haggadic character of the verses" and the schema she discerns is this:

opening statement	v 12
text	v 13,14a; Exod 34:33
commentary	v 14b,15
text	v 16; Exod 34:34
commentary	v 17
text and commentary combined	Exodus 34:35/v 18 ¹¹

However, what is presented in this article is simply a way of clarifying the relationship of Exodus 34 to these verses. Whether Belleville's schema accurately understands Paul's methodology or not, and I am not at all capable of assessing her impressive research and scholarship, it remains true that it is necessary to see that the sequence of thought arises from Exodus and that one can only follow these verses by referring back to it.

Secondly, the phrase "their minds were hardened" does not occur in Exodus at all. In explaining this Carol Stockhausen says that it arises from the additional scriptural background of Isaiah 6:9,10 and 29:10-14.¹² Linda Belleville however points out that "the response of Israel to the behaviour of Moses is very much part of the Exodus narrative." She refers to Deut 29:3,4 and comments, "Persistent blindness to the activity of God is a biblical indictment of the Exodus generation."¹³ This is surely correct. After all, Exodus 32 recounts the idolatry of Israel with the golden calf and Moses' prayer to see God's glory and the second giving of the ten commandments are a sequel to that. This phrase, then, is simply Paul's summing up of the spiritual condition of Israel as revealed in the whole Exodus story.

Thirdly it might appear that point 3 is a little forced - when Moses turned to the Lord he took the veil away; when one turns to the Lord the veil is taken away. But the heart of the comparison seems to be that when Moses turned to the Lord, the veil had to go. He was turning to the Lord to hear his voice and to commune with him and no veil could come between him and the Lord. So when anyone truly turns to the Lord the veil has to go and will go. Blindness and unbelief go when a person turns to the Lord. This is so because "the Lord is the Spirit", the Spirit who writes on the heart (v 3), who gives life (v 6) and who is the dynamic of the new covenant ministry (v 8) - "and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty (v 17)."

We now turn to two questions: *how are we to understand Paul's methodology in interpreting the Exodus passage? and how far does this provide us with a precedent for our own handling of the Old Testament?* In answering the first question Paul's methodology will be clarified briefly under five headings.

Paul's Methodology

Christian midrash

Midrash is a term which is constantly used of this passage - for example, Fitzmyer says, "It is one of the few passages in the New Testament which is clearly midrashic in the strict sense"¹⁴ - yet it is also true that most writers feel some hesitation about using it. Midrash "is used to denote early Jewish exegesis of the Bible as characterized by a certain hermeneutical approach."¹⁵ It is classified in

various ways. "(H)aggadic midrash (is) one which comments on the non-legal or narrative portions."¹⁶ There are three hermeneutical approaches which need to be mentioned as all have been thought to be used by Paul in this chapter. The first is *KAL VA-HOMER* which, "asserts that what is true of the inferior member of a similar pair (ie of statements or events) must be true also of the superior, and to a superior degree."¹⁷ See vv 7-9,11. The second is *PESHER* (or interpretation). This involves the application of the biblical text to the present; see for example v 14b. Stockhausen understands much of the passage in this way. The underlying presupposition is perhaps expressed in 1 Cor 10:11. The third is *GEZERAH SHAWA* "which rests on a similarity of verbal expressions in two separate texts."¹⁸ Fitzmyer maintains that Paul's method in this passage is "not far removed" from this principle.¹⁹

Allegory

R V G Tasker writes, "The apostle now allegorizes the account of the giving of the law found in Ex 34:29-35",²⁰ and Margaret Thrall says, "Paul then takes the story of the veil over the face of Moses and develops it allegorically in various ways."²¹ Once again most writers have hesitations about this. Perhaps it partly depends on definition. Sidney Greidanus says, "The allegorical method searches beneath the literal meaning of a passage for the 'real' meaning."²² The issue does not seem to be entirely clear, for Philip Hughes, after quoting Tyndale's "vigorous attack on the four senses of Scripture" goes on to say, "Not that the allegorical use of Scripture . . . is illegitimate, but, insists Tyndale, it must be proved by the literal, and borne by it, as a house is borne by its foundations."²³ Two comments could be made here. First, there is no suggestion in 2 Cor 3 that the Exodus account is unhistorical or unimportant, on the contrary, Paul's reasoning depends upon its historicity and literal meaning. Second, the use Paul makes of the veiling of Moses' face is not simply arbitrary, nor is it contrived. There is a real, if spiritual, veil over the minds of the Jews as they read the old covenant. Paul is drawing out the spiritual implications of the Exodus story for his present purpose.

Eschatological exegesis and Charismatic exegesis

Martin, commenting particularly on vv 16-18, says, "By this method (*GEZERAH SHAWA*) Paul is able to seize on the reference to *kurios* in Exodus 34 and apply it to the Spirit by a conviction that E E Ellis has dubbed "eschatological exegesis", ie, the writer views the OT promises and prophecies as having fulfilment in his own time and experience; or alternatively, as "charismatic exegesis", ie, the new age of the Spirit gives fresh meaning to an ancient text and makes it relevant to the (Christian) writer's needs."²⁴

That Paul does view the "OT promises and prophecies as having fulfilment in his own time and experience" is incontrovertible. It might be better, however, to use the word "christological" rather than "eschatological". The new covenant and the end time have come with the Christ, and it is supremely in him that the promises and prophecies find their fulfilment (2 Cor 1:20).²⁵

Ellis himself speaks of "charismatic exegesis" in this way; the early Christian prophets and teachers, he says, "proceed from the conviction that the meaning of the Old Testament is a 'mystery' whose 'interpretation' can be given not by human reason but only by the Holy Spirit."²⁶ There is considerable evidence in Acts for the Holy Spirit interpreting the Old Testament²⁷, but the whole concept

of charismatic exegesis needs further study to determine whether what is being claimed is a type of exegesis which is simply given by the Spirit and has no other rationale at all.

Illustrational use

It is possible to see Paul using the story of Moses veiling his face for its illustrational value. Linda Belleville says, "Lenski, for example, is probably more on target in saying that Paul uses the action of Moses veiling his face for its full illustrative possibilities."²⁸ However, it is surely clear that the comparison between Moses and the ministry of the old covenant, and Paul and his associates in their ministry of the new covenant, is central to the whole argument of the chapter. The reference to Moses veiling his face arises out of this and the connections Paul establishes - for example, "until this day the same veil remains unlifted" - go deeper than would be the case with illustration.

Associational use

Fitzmyer emphasizes the way Paul uses association of ideas in this passage, "What is operative here, and what is perhaps not often enough noted is the free association of ideas which runs through the entire passage. The association is caused by catchword bonding, in which one sense of a term suggests another, and so the argument proceeds."²⁹ Carol Stockhausen in discussing *GEZERA SHAWA* says, "Linking through hookwords is basic to the mnemonics of most folk literature and to the educational system of many ancient cultures . . ."³⁰ Some modern writers maintain that the human mind operates much more by associational thinking than by linear thinking. This is the basis for the mind-map devised by Tony Buzan.³¹ The veiling of Moses face triggers off a series of associational ideas which form applications of the story for Paul's situation and for answering those who were criticising his ministry.

In considering these methodologies there is obviously a fair degree of overlap and most writers see a combination of them used by Paul. So Linda Belleville speaks of "Scripture and tradition filtered first through the lens of salvation history; that is, Scripture that has been, so to speak, 'allegorized' in the light of God's salvific work in Christ."³² Paul clearly uses methods akin to Jewish exegesis, including those which, according to Morna Hooker, "must surely make any twentieth-century preacher feel uncomfortable",³³ but which nevertheless have been congenial to the mind-set of very many people and still appeal today to those who do not feel it necessary always to think in a linear manner.

A Precedent for Us?

The final question is whether Paul's use of the OT here establishes any precedent for us in exegesis and preaching. Perhaps we should begin with a caveat. Carol Stockhausen says, "Paul shares much of (the rabbis) point of view on scripture, as well as some of their methodology. But he does not share their genre because he is writing a letter. The question for Paul is, therefore, 'How do you handle scripture when you are writing a letter, trying to convince someone else of your point of view?'"³⁴

Bearing in mind, then, different circumstances, motivation and genre, it nevertheless appears difficult to argue that we should not follow Paul's methodology, unless we are to hold to a form of charismatic exegesis that is

restricted to the first century, or to unique apostolic insight. Comparing Scripture with Scripture would appear to involve seeing how the NT interprets the OT. The pattern presented by Paul here is not one which finds much favour in these days, but we may be missing some of the richness of the OT in our haste to avoid anything that looks like allegory or undue spiritualizing. By all means let us seek to understand more clearly how Paul uses the OT in passages like this, and why he does so, but we can also learn from him the crucial importance of reading the OT in the light of the coming of Christ and the replacing of the old covenant by the new.

References

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- 2 W C van Unnik, *With Unveiled Face, An Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 3:12-18*, *NOVUM TESTAMENTUM* 6 (1963), 153-69; p 154
- 3 Linda L Belleville, *Reflections of Glory. Paul's Polemical Use of the Moses-Doxa Tradition in 2 Corinthians 3:1-18* (taken from the title; this appears to be a misprint for 12-18), *JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT Supplement Series* 52, 1991; p 16/7
- 4 A T Hanson, *The Midrash in II Corinthians 3: a Reconsideration*, *JOURNAL FOR THE STUDY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT* 9 (1980) 2-28; p 19. Carol Kern Stockhausen says about Hanson's remark, 'I feel justified in extending it to include the whole passage.' *Moses' Veil and the Glory of the New Covenant - The Exegetical Substructure of II Cor 3:1-4:6*, *ANALECTA BIBLICA* 116, Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico - Roma 1989; p 32
- 5 Colin G Kruse, *2 CORINTHIANS*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1987
- 6 op cit, p 79
- 7 Paul has so extensively appropriated facets of the Exodus story that his own text cannot be explained without constant reference to its Old Testament counterpart.' Stockhausen, op cit, p 100/1
- 8 Belleville says, 'Several think that Paul has in mind the tallith that the Jew wore over his head when the Law was read, . . .' op cit, p 230. A Plummer, *THE SECOND EPISTLE OF ST PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS*, ICC, T & T Clark, Edinburgh, 1915, and C K Barrett, *THE SECOND EPISTLE TO THE CORINTHIANS*, Black's New Testament Commentaries, London, 1973, both mention the tallith, though Barrett also suggests that Paul may be referring to the custom of veiling the Torah scrolls, a suggestion endorsed by Morna Hooker, *Beyond the Things that are Written? St Paul's Use of Scripture*, *NEW TESTAMENT STUDIES*, Vol 27, 1981, pp 295-309; p 300
- 9 R P Martin, *2 CORINTHIANS*, Word, Dallas, UK edition, 1991 p 59
- 10 op cit, p 173/4
- 11 op cit, p 177
- 12 op cit, p 93
- 13 op cit, p 218 and 221
- 14 J A Fitzmyer, *Glory Reflected on the Face of Christ (2 Cor 3:7-4:6) and a*

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- 15 Philip S Alexander, art *Midrash*, in A DICTIONARY OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION, R J Coggins & J L Houlden, SCM, London, 1990, p 452
 - 16 *ibid*, p 453
 - 17 Stockhausen, *op cit*, p 28
 - 18 *ibid*, p 26
 - 19 *op cit*, p 634
 - 20 R V G Tasker, THE SECOND EPISTLE OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, Tyndale Press, London, 1958; p 62
 - 21 Margaret E Thrall, THE FIRST AND SECOND LETTERS OF PAUL TO THE CORINTHIANS, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1965, p 135
 - 22 Sidney Greidanus, THE MODERN PREACHER AND THE ANCIENT TEXT, IVP/Eerdmans, Leicester, 1988, p 159
 - 23 *op cit*, p 98
 - 24 *op cit*, p 60
 - 25 Morna Hooker says, 'Another (way) was to see Christ as the blueprint, and regard the Law as a witness to him . . . this . . . means that Christ is seen as the key to the whole Old Testament; all scripture can be used because it is all christological . . . his (Paul's) interpretation of the text accords with his experience of Christ, and therefore does not stray beyond what is written.' *op cit*, p 307
 - 26 E Earle Ellis, *How the New Testament Uses the Old*, in NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION, I Howard Marshall, Paternoster, Exeter, 1985, p 214
 - 27 'But it would be a mistake to limit the role of the Spirit, where the understanding of Scripture is concerned, merely to that of Christ's "remembrancer". If the Fourth Gospel claimed that the Spirit would call to mind all that Christ had said (14:21), it also claimed that the Spirit would guide into all the truth (16:13). And in Acts we see this second promise being fulfilled as the Spirit leads the Church into all the truth, of which understanding of Scripture formed a vital part.' J H E Hull, THE HOLY SPIRIT IN ACTS OF THE APOSTLES, Lutterworth Press, London, 1967, p 132/3
 - 28 *op cit*, p 173 (footnote)
 - 29 *op cit*, p 634
 - 30 *op cit*, p 26
 - 31 Tony Buzan, USE YOUR HEAD, BBC Books, London, 1991 ed, esp pp 77ff
 - 32 *op cit*, p 299/300
 - 33 *op cit*, p 295
 - 34 *op cit*, p 92

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