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# Paul and Moses in 2 Corinthians 3: Hermeneutics from the Top Down

## David H Thiele

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### Introduction

Paul's argument in his discussion of the new covenant in 2 Corinthians 3 is difficult for any reader. A steady stream of articles and monographs on various features of the chapter bear eloquent testimony to its difficulty.<sup>1</sup> The flow of Paul's argument is not immediately transparent. 'It seems as though the obscurity of this passage is impenetrable and that the commentaries lead us to the conclusion: "so many men, so many minds."<sup>2</sup> Letters written with ink on parchment—letters of recommendation (2 Cor 3:1)—morph into the letters of the law engraved on stone tablets (verse 3). The veil on Moses' face (verse 13) becomes the veil over the minds of Jews in Paul's day (verses 14, 15). The old covenant ministry (verse 14) is glorious (verses 7, 9–10) and yet it is a ministry of death and condemnation (verses 7, 9). The veil is placed over Moses face because the people are not able to gaze on its glory (verse 9) but also because he does not want them to see that the glory is fading (verse 13)<sup>3</sup>.

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1. Charles FD Moule describes the unit of thought in 2 Corinthians 3:1–4:6 as 'one of the most elaborately studied of all New Testament *cruces*, II Cor iii.18b, *kathaper apo; kuriou pneumatou*,' *Essays in New Testament Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 227.
  2. WC van Unnik, "With Unveiled Face,' An Exegesis of II Corinthians iii 12–18,' in *Novum testamentum*, 6 (1963): 153–169. 'Unfortunately, 2 Corinthians 3, though squeezed and prodded by generations of interpreters, has remained one of the more inscrutable reflections of a man who had already gained the reputation among his near-contemporaries for writing letters that were "hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16).' Richard B Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1989), 123.
  3. The exact meaning of *pros to mē atenisai tous huiou Israēl eis to telos tou katargoumenou* ('to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside') is disputed. The dispute revolves around whether *telos* here means 'end' or 'goal/purpose' and *tou katargoumenou* means 'what was/is fading' or 'what was/is being abolished'. The majority of scholars would translate *telos* here as 'end' and *tou katargoumenou* as 'fade' here. These renderings certainly fit with the thesis being argued in this essay but are not essential to it.

## 2 Corinthian 3 as Midrash

The twenty-first century reader's difficulty with the passage is intensified by Paul's exegetical approach, which has much in common with ancient Jewish midrash,<sup>4</sup> and little in common with contemporary methods of exegesis.<sup>5</sup> Describing 2 Corinthians 3 as midrashic emphasises the following characteristics of the passage:

4 Morna D Hooker, 'Beyond the Things which are Written? St Paul's Use of Scripture', in *New Testament Studies*, 27 (1981): 297; Joseph A Fitzmyer, 'Glory Reflected on the Face of Christ (II Cor 3:7 - 4:6) and a Palestinian Jewish Motif', in *Theological Studies*, 42 (1981): 632; Anthony T Hanson, 'The Midrash in II Corinthians 3: A Reconsideration', in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 9 (1980), 22; R Bloch, 'Midrash', in *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: Theory and Practice*, Brown Judaic Studies 1, edited by WS Green (Missoula, MA: Scholars, 1978), 48. The term 'midrash' is notoriously difficult to define, because some scholars understand it in literary terms, and others in terms of content, process, function, or attitude. They have not been 'discussing the same phenomenon in a similar manner', Gary G Porton, 'Defining Midrash', in *The Study of Ancient Judaism, 1: Mishnah, Midrash, Sidduy*, edited by J Neusner (New York: KTAV, 1981), 61. Porton's own definition is 'a type of literature, oral or written, which stands in direct relationship to a fixed canonical text, considered to be the authoritative and the revealed word of God by the midrashist and his audience, and in which this canonical text is explicitly cited or clearly alluded to', *ibid*, 62.

This definition would include virtually any bible commentary (ancient or modern) and most sermons. This may be one reason that Richard Hays suggests the term is not helpful when discussing the New Testament's use of the Old. Hays, *Echoes, op cit*, 11-14. He argues that it closes analysis where it should be starting, by precluding detailed study of *how* scripture is actually read by New Testament writers. However, if Hays' criticism were valid, it would surely apply equally to the study of rabbinic and other ancient Jewish literature. Similarly, Wright declares Paul's argument is not midrashic '[b]ut follows the line of thought in Galatians 3:15-22, or even Mark 10:2-9. Difference in style of ministry is occasioned by difference in the spiritual condition of the hearers.' NT Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 180. A more relevant test of whether or not the argument is midrashic may be whether or not it follows the argument of Exodus 34.

Clearly, scholars who apply the term 'midrash' to Paul's use of scripture in 2 Corinthians 3 intend something different to Porton's definition. Porton, 'Defining Midrash', *op cit*, 70-84, himself divides ancient Jewish midrash into four clearly distinguishable groupings: targumim, pious rewritings of biblical narratives, pesher, and rabbinic midrash. All these forms are characterised by an approach to the biblical text that adds detail to the biblical account. Many scholars have noted how easily ancient midrashic exegesis is able to interpret the text in ways that are neither simple nor self-evident, *ibid*, 59.

Some scholars claim that Paul has taken over an existing midrash, developed and/or used originally by his opponents, and used it against them. for examle, Ernst Käsemann, 'The Spirit and the Letter', in *Perspectives on Paul* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1971), 149; Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 264-271. The fact that 2 Corinthians 3 coheres so well with the surroundings chapters is a strong argument against this claim.

5. Two basic approaches to the general question of the use of Old Testament in the New have been identified: historical and intertextual. Richard Hays and Joel Green, 'The Use of the Old Testament by New Testament Writers', in *Hearing the Old Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, edited by JB Green (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 229-230. Although I agree with Hays

1. It is a piece of 'applied exegesis',<sup>6</sup> in which the primary purpose is not to explicate the meaning of the text but to apply the text to the contemporary situation.
2. It comments on an Old Testament passage in a somewhat atomistic way.
3. Other Old Testament passages are imported into the discussion of the primary text on the basis of such phenomena as 'hook words' and principles such as the *gezirah shawah* ('from lesser to greater').
4. The exegetical conclusions do not necessarily harmonise with those of modern historical exegesis.

A related problem is that Paul's interpretation of Exodus 34 in 2 Corinthians 3 appears to be at odds with the original story. Paul makes the following points regarding Moses:

1. Moses' face is glorified in connection with the giving of the law (2 Cor 3:7).
2. His face is too glorious for the people of Israel to look at (2 Cor 3:7).
3. This glory is temporary and fading (2 Cor 3:7, 10, 12).
4. Moses veils his face so the people will not see the fading of the glory on his face (2 Cor 3:12).

A comparison with the original story in Exodus 34 is revealing:

1. Moses face is glorified in connection with the giving of the law (Exod 34:29).<sup>7</sup>
2. The people, led by Aaron, are initially afraid of the glorious appearance of Moses' face (Exod 34:30), but Moses calls the people to himself and spoke to them (verse 31).
3. Moses veiled his face *after* speaking to the congregation (Exod 34:32), presumably to indicate the finish of his 'official' communication of God's revelation.<sup>8</sup>

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and Green that these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, my own sympathies lie primarily with the historical approach.

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7. In Exodus the 'glory' on Moses face is clearly intended to echo the Sinai theophany and to indicate that he is God's messenger. See, John I Durham, *Exodus*, Word Bible Commentary, Volume 3 (Dallas, TX: Word, 1987), 466–467.

8. *Ibid*, 467. This point is explicitly noted by Hays, *Echoes*, 140, even though he regards Exodus 34 as 'generative' of Paul's comments in 2 Corinthians 3, *ibid*, 132. For Hays, 'generative' does not imply a literal, historically accurate exegesis. Rather, Paul only finds Exodus 34 'generative' because he reads it in a radically new way in the light of the Christ event, *ibid*, 124. He points out that Paul uses Exodus 34 as a complex 'parable', *ibid*, 144. 'The only thing that interests Paul about the story is its compelling image of a masked Moses whose veil is removed

4. There is no indication that the glory on Moses' face is temporary. On the contrary, Moses thereafter keeps his face veiled, except when he speaks to Yahweh in the tabernacle. When he then communicates Yahweh's message to the people, they again see his glorified face (Exod 34:34–35).

Paul's argument seems to centre on the glory and the veil, and it is precisely here that he is furthest away from the meaning of Exodus. It is difficult not to sympathise with Morna D Hooker's observation: 'Often one is left exclaiming: whatever the passage from the Old Testament originally meant, it certainly was not this.'<sup>9</sup>

### Two other Seemingly Intractable Problems

Resolution of the difficulties inherent in 2 Corinthians 3 is compounded by two other seemingly intractable problems in the book. First is the question of the literary integrity of the epistle. 'There are almost as many partition theories as there are commentaries on 2 Corinthians.'<sup>10</sup> Scholars have seen this letter as a collection of up to six fragments from originally independent letters.<sup>11</sup> However, several recent works have affirmed the essential unity of at least chapters 1–7,<sup>12</sup> if not of the entire letter.<sup>13</sup> This study accepts the unity of 2 Corinthians as a working hypoth-

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when he enters the presence of the Lord. That image becomes for Paul the center and substance of an *imaginative interpretation* that is—despite [Phillip] Hughes' conscientious efforts to cover it up—*mystical and eschatological*, *ibid*, 140 (emphasis added)..

9. Hooker, 'Beyond the Things', *op cit*, 295.
10. Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 328.
11. Hans D Betz understands the letter to be a compilation of the following fragments from originally independent letters: (a) 2:14–6:13, 7:2–4; (b) 10:1–13:10; (c) 1:2–13, 7:5–16, 13:11–13; (d) 8; (e) 9; (f) 6:14 – 7:1. See his 'Corinthians, Second Epistle to the', in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by DN Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1149–1150. The same schema is followed by many others, for example, Günther Bornkamm, 'The History of the Origin of the So-called Second Letter to the Corinthians', in *New Testament Studies* 8 (1961 – 62):258–264; S Maclean Gilmour, 'Corinthians, Second', in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by GA Buttrick (Nashville, TN.: Abingdon, 1962), 693–695.
12. Linda L Belleville, 'Reflections of Glory: Paul's Polemical Use of the Moses-Doxa Tradition in 2 Corinthians 3:1–18', in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 52 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1991), 84–104; David A deSilva, *The Credentials of an Apostle: Paul's Gospel in II Corinthians 1 – 7*, Biblical Monograph Series 4 (North Richland Hills, TX: Bibal, 1998), 1–29; Victor P Furnish, *II Corinthians*, Anchor Bible 32A (Doubleday, New York, 1984), 30–41.
13. Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, *op cit*, 327–339; Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 15–25; Werner G Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1975), 287–293; DA Carson, *From Triumphalism to Maturity: An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 10 – 13* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 1–16.

esis, although the difficulties inherent in this position, particularly with regard to the relationship of chapters 1 – 9 to chapters 10 – 13, are recognised.<sup>14</sup>

The second problem concerns the identity of Paul's opponents Paul in 2 Corinthians. Scholarly identifications fall into four basic groups: Judaisers, Gnostics, 'divine men' akin to those supposedly found in Hellenistic Judaism, or pneumatists.<sup>15</sup> Each of these suggestions is problematic. There is a paucity of data from the Greco-Roman environment.<sup>16</sup> The data concerning the opponents must therefore largely be drawn from a 'mirror-reading' of Paul's comments. However, this procedure is fraught with difficulties and can easily be overdone.<sup>17</sup> The evidence is so ambiguous that a definitive answer is impossible.

The second problem is clearly intertwined with the first. Are the opponents 2 Corinthians 3 the same as the opponents in chapters 10 – 13? Numerous parallels can be drawn between the pictures of the opposition in each of these sections.<sup>18</sup> Nothing in the description of the opponents unsettles the hypothesis of the original unity of the letter.

The precise identity of Paul's opponents is not an issue that has to be definitively answered before 2 Corinthians 3 can be discussed. However, it will remain near the surface in any discussion of that chapter. Paul's defense of his apostleship against the claims and charges of his opponents provides a key for understanding it.<sup>19</sup> Linda Belleville sees the nature of apostleship as the theme of the letter represented in the fragment 2 Corinthians 1–7.<sup>20</sup> In fact, it seems to provide the theme for the entire epistle, as we now have it.<sup>21</sup>

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14. Carson, *Triumphalism*, 16, correctly observes that no solution to this problem is without difficulties.

15. Jerry L Sumney, 'Servants of Satan', *False Brothers' and Other Opponents of Paul*, JSNT Supplement 188 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 79.

16. For example, Georgi, *passim*, suggests that the opposition should be understood as being in the category of 'divine man' (*theios anēr*). However, other scholars dispute whether *theios anēr* represents a clearly defined category in the ancient world, seeing the phrase instead as 'a fluid expression . . . [which] could vary dramatically in meaning.' Jack D Kingsbury, 'The 'Divine Man' as the Key to Mark's Christology – The End of an Era?', in *Interpretation*, 35 (1981): 249. Cf. Carl H Holladay, *Theios Aner in Hellenistic-Judaism*, SBLDS 40 (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1977).

17. John MG Barclay, 'Mirror-Reading A Polemical Letter: Galatians as a Test Case', in *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 (1987): 73–93.

18. Sumney, *Opponents of Paul*, 130–133; Hays, *Echoes*, 126.

19. Hays, *Echoes*, 125, notes that 2 Corinthians 3 forms part of Paul's defence of his apostolic ministry, but finds the key to understanding the chapter elsewhere.

20. Belleville, *Reflections, op cit*, 165–166.

21. Sumney, *Opponents of Paul, op cit*, 130–133.

## Paul's Defense of His Apostolic Ministry

The importance of Paul's defense of his apostleship for understanding of 2 Corinthians 3 is clear even at a casual reading. Paul opens his epistle with stereotypical greetings and then launches immediately into an explanation of his hardships and sufferings (2 Cor 1:3–11). His opponents understand apostleship in terms of glory, power, and majesty.<sup>22</sup> For them, Paul's sufferings discredit him as an apostle. However, Paul boasts of his share in the suffering of Christ (2 Cor 4:7–12; 11:21b–30; 12:8–10).

Paul defends his integrity in the light of his changing travel plans (2 Cor 1:12–2:4). His opponents accuse him of being a different person at a distance than he is when actually in Corinth (2 Cor 10:10). He makes it clear that his change in plans is neither the result of a lack of consistency nor of a failure of integrity. Rather, he is motivated by his concern for the Corinthians (2 Cor 1:23), especially in the light of their strained relationship during his last visit (2 Cor 2:1). The root of the problem concerns a church member in Corinth who has now been disciplined by the church (2 Cor 2:5–11).

Paul stresses the concern he feels for the Corinthians (2 Cor 3:12–13). He declares the authenticity of his ministry:

Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not peddlers of God's word like so many; but in Christ we speak as persons of sincerity, as persons sent from God and standing in his presence. Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need as some do, letter of recommendation to you or from you, do we? (2 Cor 2:16b–3:1)<sup>23</sup>

Paul's opponents are again clearly in view. It is they who are 'peddlers of God's word'. In contrast to Paul, who cares for the church community, they abuse it (2 Cor 11:20). And in contrast to him, they have letters of recommendation.

It is instructive to notice how the issues introduced in the opening two chapters of the epistle run throughout chapters 3–5. Paul rhetorically asks, 'Who is sufficient for these things?' (2 Cor 2:16). His answer is that his competence and confidence come from Christ (2 Cor 3:4–6), and that the 'extraordinary power' in-

22. A word frequency study in 2 Corinthians is revealing: *doxa* (glory) occurs sixteen times; *dunamis* (power) occurs nine times; *kauchaomai* (to boast) is used sixteen times—more often than in the rest of the Pauline corpus combined—and *kauchēma* (boast) occurs three times. That there is an issue between Paul and his opponents over these matters is clear.

23. Carol K Stockhausen argues that 2 Corinthians 3:1–6 is a distinct unit separated from what precedes it by the introduction of the new topic of 'letters.' *Moses' Veil and the Glory of the New Covenant*, Anchor Bible 116 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1989), 34. Her point is well taken. However, the new topic arises directly from the concerns expressed in the introductory chapters.

volved belongs to God not himself (2 Cor 4:7). He therefore ministers with boldness (2 Cor 3:12).

Is Paul recommending himself again (2 Cor 3:1)? No, he is giving the Corinthians an opportunity to boast about him (2 Cor 5:12a), so that they can answer 'those who boast in outward appearance and not in the heart' (2 Cor 5:12b), that is, his opponents.

Does Paul suffer hardships? Yes, his experience is that of 'clay jars' containing hidden treasure (2 Cor 4:7). He is afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, struck down, 'always carrying in the body the death of Jesus . . . always being given up to death for Christ's sake' (2 Cor 4:8–12). His 'outer nature' is being destroyed (2 Cor 4:16), as is his earthly tent (2 Cor 5:1). There is no shining glory on his face as there is on Moses' (2 Cor 3:7). People can look at Paul and see nothing extraordinary.

Is Paul lacking in integrity and consistency? No, his conscience is clear. Nothing is hidden behind a veil (2 Cor 4:2–3 *cf* 3:12–13). He is confident that he will not be found naked (and ashamed) on the day of judgment (2 Cor 5:2).<sup>24</sup>

Paul's basic approach is to use a set of parallel polarities: the visible and the hidden; the present and the future; the earthly and the heavenly. He is certainly responding to positions taken by his opponents, as he makes clear in 2 Corinthians 2:5–12b. His visible experience is that of the abused clay jar, but there is treasure hidden within (2 Cor 4:7). The visible outer nature is wasting away, but the hidden inner experience grows stronger and stronger (2 Cor 4:16). The visible earthly tent is in the throes of destruction, but the heavenly house, now visible only by faith, remains eternal in heaven (2 Cor 5:1), ready to be occupied at the *parousia* (2 Cor 5:4).<sup>25</sup> Paul's suffering, evident to any observer, is dismissed as 'this slight momentary affliction', when it is compared to 'the eternal weight of glory beyond all measure' (2 Cor 4:17). How can this be? 'Because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary but what cannot be seen is eternal.' (2 Cor 4:18). It is faith that counts, not sight (2 Cor 5:7). To take any other perspective is to judge from a human point of view that fails to recognise the decisively new thing God has accomplished in Christ (2 Cor 5:16–21).

The same polarities are clearly seen in chapter 3. The following contrasts are either explicitly or implicitly made:

24. On the connection between 'naked' and 'ashamed' in this verse, see E Earle Ellis, 'The Structure of Pauline Eschatology (II Corinthians 5:1–10)', in *Paul and his Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1961), 35–48 [= *New Testament Studies*, 6 (1959–60) 211–24].

25. 2 Corinthians 5:1–11 is often read as if it focused on the moment of death. However, its correct orientation is to the *parousia*. So Ellis, *op cit*, *passim*.



Letters of commendation – visible (2 Cor 3:1)	Letters on the heart – hidden (2 Cor 3:2)
Letter written with ink – visible (verse 3)	Letters written by the Spirit – hidden (verse 3)
Law written on stone – visible (verse 3)	Gospel engraved on the heart – hidden (verse 3)
Letter – visible (verse 6)	Spirit – hidden (verse 6)
Ministry of condemnation/death – visible (verses 7, 9)	Ministry of Spirit/justification/life – hidden (verse 9) <sup>1</sup>
Glory of the ministry of death/ Moses – visible (verse 7)	Glory of the ministry of the Gospel/ Paul – hidden (verse 8)
Temporary visible glory (verse 7)	Permanent (although currently hidden) glory (verse 11)
Outward appearance – visible (verse 12) <sup>2</sup>	Heart – hidden (verse 12) <sup>3</sup>

The conclusion is clear. Paul's primary purpose in 2 Corinthians 3 is not to develop a theology of covenants, to expound on the role of the law in the Christian life, or to exegete Exodus 34. It is to defend his apostolic ministry against opponents who denigrate it.<sup>26</sup>

### Paul's Starting Point

Paul's starting point is not the Old Testament story of Moses. He is not asking, 'How can I get these people to understand Exod 34?' Rather, his starting point is his certainty regarding the gospel he preaches and his apostolic calling. His question is, 'How can I explain the validity of my apostleship to these people?' With this starting point,

26. Wright comments, 'If the main thrust of the argument is thus a defence of Paul's ministry, both in that he does not need "Letters of recommendation" and in his paradoxical apostolic boldness and confidence, the main weapon with which he begins this thrust is the concept of the new covenant.' Wright, *Covenant, op cit*, 176. This may be an overstatement. Wright himself acknowledges that 'covenant' is only explicitly mentioned in vs. 6. Paul nowhere describes the old covenant as abolished. His focus is on models of ministry, not on the old and new covenants *per se*. In his discussion of 2 Corinthians 3, Wright allows Paul's urgent concerns about the nature of Christian ministry to fall too much into the background.

Paul's argument becomes clearer. He may appear to be dealing with Moses and the Old Testament story, but his focus is actually on his opponents and their false theology of ministry.<sup>27</sup>

Moses is the obvious example of a biblical character with outward glory.<sup>28</sup> Since Paul's opponents stress outward glory, it is only a small step to make Moses a symbol of the opponents and their theology.<sup>29</sup> Paul describes the ministry of Moses as a ministry of condemnation and death (2 Cor 3:7, 9), but it is the ministry of his opponents that is his true target. It is universally recognised that Paul only defends his apostleship because his gospel is also at stake.<sup>30</sup> He may seem to portray Moses as dishonest and deceptive in covering his face to hide the fading glory, but it is the ethics of his opponents that Paul really has in mind. He makes this point with particular clarity. He stresses his 'sincerity' in contrast to those who are 'peddlers of God's word' (2 Cor 2:17). This is neatly parallel to his stress on his own 'boldness' in contrast to Moses self-veiling.<sup>31</sup> He declares that his gospel is utterly unveiled, except to those who have been blinded by the devil, because 'we have renounced the shameful things that one hides; we refuse to practice cunning or to falsify God's word' (2 Cor 4:2).<sup>32</sup> Clearly Paul is here either defending himself against the attacks of his opponents or launching an attack on them.<sup>33</sup>

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27. Ralph P Martin's comments on 2 Corinthians 3:7 are revealing in this regard: 'The entrée to Paul's thought may well be as simple as Jervell (*Imago Dei*, 178f) surmises: the gramma refers primarily to the "letters of recommendation" (3:1-3), and points to the controversy with the "false brethren" who carried them. By contrast, Paul's ministry is authenticated by the "power" (*Vollmacht*) of the Spirit who has produced a different kind of letter—one that is "spiritual" (*geistig*).'<sup>2</sup> *Corinthians*, Word Bible Commentary 40 (Waco, TX: Word, 1986), 60.

It is interesting to note that in his apologetic treatment of 2 Corinthians 3, Nichol does not refer to Paul's opponents at all. Nichol, *Answers*, *op cit*, 72-76.

28. Adam is really the only other contender. However, the story of Adam stresses his rebellion and consequent loss of glory. In some Jewish traditions, Moses is seen as receiving the glory Adam lost. In this sense he become a 'new Adam'. See Belleville, *Reflections*, *op cit*, 63-75.

29. The opponents themselves probably hold Moses in high regard. Their exact position is open to dispute, hinging, as it does, on their identity. Regardless of the *precise* position which they take, they certainly argue that God's messengers ought to be glorious, powerful and majestic, as, in fact, Moses is. It is therefore unnecessary to insist that Paul's opponent are already using Moses as a model of ministry and contrasting him with Paul. So Hays, *Echoes*, *op cit*, 126; Wright, *Covenant*, *op cit*, 177. This position need not imply acceptance of Wright's overall approach to the text.

30. Carson, *Triumphalism*, 20; K Kertelge, 'Letter and Spirit in II Corinthians 3', in *Paul and the Mosaic Law*, edited by James DG Dunn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 119; FF Bruce, *I and II Corinthians*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 173.

31. Van Unnik, 'With Unveiled Face', *op cit*, 153-169.

32. Hays, *Echoes*, *op cit*, 126, also notes the close connection between 2 Corinthians 2:17 and 4:2 as part of Paul's counter-attack on his opponents.

33. In other words, Paul speaks in terms of the contrast between Moses and himself, but is actually focused on the contrast between his ministry and his opponents.' Wright, *Covenant*, *op cit*, 180, seems to reduce the tension between the speech and the focus, by suggesting that Paul's primary

A number of puzzling features of the chapter can now be seen in a clearer light. What are the implications of Paul's comments on the 'covenant' and the 'letter' (gramma) of the law? He is certainly developing neither a theology of covenant or law, nor a philosophy of hermeneutics.<sup>34</sup> Rather, his point is correct his opponents' misapprehension of the role of the law in Christian life. Paul's target does not seem to be the law as such, but its misuse: 'legalism', to use a contemporary word.<sup>35</sup>

The 'glory' and the 'veil' can now also be understood more clearly. Paul does not deny that his opponents' ministry is marked by a certain impressiveness, but suggests that it is only so 'from a human point of view' (2 Cor 5:16). The various uses of 'veil' in 2 Corinthians 3 – 4 cohere at exactly this point. The face of Moses was truly glorified through his encounter with the same God who now transforms Christians 'from one degree of glory to another' (2 Cor 3:18). The ancient Israelites responded 'from a human point a view,' and a veil separates them from this glory.<sup>36</sup>

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contrast is not between Paul and Moses or between Christians and Moses, but rather between Christians and the Israelites, both in Moses' day and his own day. Paul does contrast the Jews of his own day and Christians (2 Cor 3:14–16). However, he *never* explicitly contrasts the Israelites of Moses with day with Christians. On the other hand, he does draw an explicit contrast between himself and Moses (verses 12, 13). This fact, combined with the repeated contrasts between the ministries of the old and new covenants (verses 7–11), suggest that the primary contrast is indeed between Paul and Moses. See Georgi, *Opponents of Paul*, 254–264; cf Martin, *2 Corinthians*, *op cit*, 61. Wright's argues that the Old Covenant ministry requires the veil because the people are unable to look upon the glory. This argument, of course, fails to take into account the fact that according to the Old Testament, Moses removed the veil when he conveyed messages from God to the people.

The significance of Wright's overstatement is perhaps reduced by his acknowledgment that 'The contrast, then, is between the necessary style of Moses's ministry to Israel and the proper and appropriate style of Paul's ministry to Christian who, as in verses 1–3, are themselves the "letter" written by the Spirit' Wright, *Covenant*, *op cit*, 80.

34. Peter Richardson, 'Spirit and Letter: A Foundation for Hermeneutics', in *Evangelical Quarterly*, 45 (1973): 208–21; Hays, *Echoes*, *op cit*, 149: '2 Corinthians 3 is neither a practical discussion of how to do exegesis nor a theoretical treatise on the problems of continuity and discontinuity between the testaments.'
35. Thomas E Provence "Who is Sufficient for these Things?": An Exegesis of II Corinthians 2:15–3:18; in *Novum Testamentum*, 24 (1982): 65–68; cf Martin, *op cit*, 61. The term 'legalism' is fraught with difficulties, not least of which is the fact that it is often used to describe the heresy being combated in Galatians. However, Paul's opponents in Galatia and Corinth appear to be significantly different. At least, Paul polemicises against them in significantly different terms. See E Earle Ellis, 'Paul and his Opponents', in *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978; reprint 1995), 80–115.
36. Paul does not use the words *kata sarka* in 2 Corinthians 3 – 4, but he does say 'their hearts were hardened' (2 Cor 3:14), a statement with similar connotations to *kata sarka* in 2 Corinthians 5:1. For Paul, *sarx* does not specifically denote the physical aspects of reality, but rather expresses human existence in its concrete reality. The fact that this concrete reality is typified by sin and rebellion against God means that *sarx* is readily used for humanity in a state of rebellion and alienation. See E Schweizer, 'sarx, sarkina, sarkinos', *TDNT*, 7:98–151, and particularly 125–135.

The Israel of Paul's day also judges his gospel from a human perspective. The veil remains.<sup>37</sup> However, Paul's message is unveiled, except to those Satan has blinded (2 Cor 4:2–3), that is, to those whose hearts are hardened, who judge from a human point of view. Paul proclaims that in contrast to them, he and his fellow Christians enjoy the privilege of Moses: viewing the glory of God and being changed into his likeness (2 Cor 3:18).<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusion

What conclusions may be drawn from all of this? The insight that 2 Corinthians 3 focuses on the conflict between two competing ministries is scarcely new.<sup>39</sup> However, it has not always been taken seriously enough. There has been an evident anxiety to get to the hot issues for the interpreter: covenant, or hermeneutics. However, to understand Paul on his own terms, we must take his own emphasis as seriously as he himself does.

A further implication may be drawn from Paul's use of the Old Testament. He operates from a base of certainty: the gospel of Christ. The glory of God that he sees on the Damascus road is now far more important to him than the glory of God on the face of Moses.<sup>40</sup> For Christians the Old Testament remains Scripture, but its use in the formation of doctrine and standards of practice is mediated through the great certainties revealed with clarity in the New Testament (*cf.* Heb

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In the Bible hardening of the heart similarly signifies an action of rebellion and the rejection of God's grace. See J Behm, 'kardia(i), kardiognvsth~, sklhrokardiva', *TDNT*, 3:605–614.

37. Paul says the veil remains when the Israel of his day reads the Old Testament. The Old Testament is at this time the only Scripture the Church possesses. It preaches the gospel from the Old Testament. However, the majority of Jews reject it, ostensibly because they find a glorious rather than a humiliated Messiah in the Old Testament. They proclaim a different Christ even as Paul's opponents proclaim 'a different Jesus' (2 Cor 11:4), although the exact import of that phrase is hotly disputed. See, Furnish, *II Corinthians*, *op cit*, 500–502.
38. Both Charles FD Moule, 227–234, and James DG Dunn argue that the Lord who is Spirit here is not Christ, but God the Father. See Dunn's '1 Corinthians 3:17–“The Lord is the Spirit”', in *The Christ and the Spirit*, Volume 1, *Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 115–125. They admittedly hold a minority position, but it certainly harmonises well with the understanding of 2 Corinthians 3 presented here.
39. For example, Bornkamm, 'The History', *op cit*, 259, refers to 2 Corinthians 2:14 – 7:4 as 'the great apology for the apostolic office'.
40. Barnett, *Second Epistle*, 38. Paul's own experience certainly lies behind many of his comments in 2 Corinthians 3. He himself has in many ways played the role now filled by his opponents. He elsewhere delineates the 'glory' of his pre-Christian experience (2 Cor 11:22–23a; Phil 3:4b–6) which has involved him in a ministry of condemnation and death (Acts 9:1–2; 22:4–5; 26:10–11). He has seen the glory of God but been unable to gaze upon it (Acts 9:3, 8–9; 22:6,11; 26:13). See Martin, *2 Corinthians*, *op cit*, 61.

1:1–2).<sup>41</sup> To seek ‘light in the shadows,’<sup>42</sup> however noteworthy the shadows may be, reflects a non-pauline approach. More pauline is the endeavor to shed the light of the New Testament on the teachings of the Old.<sup>43</sup>

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41. Hays, *Echoes, op cit*, 148, quotes Klaus Koch approvingly when he states ‘Paul moves in a hermeneutical circles with the citation of Exodus 34:34a: it is possible for Paul to adduce this citation in favor of the thesis that he proposes here—that Scripture can be understood appropriately only in Christ—only because he, for his part *has already interpreted the citation “in Christ”*’ (emphasis added). This statement suggests Paul would not find this meaning in the text (even if it is there!) if he starts with the text. Rather, the meaning becomes plain when the text is read in the light of the clarifying light of the revelation of God given in Christ.
  42. This phrase comes from the title of an article from Frank B. Holbrook, ‘Light in the Shadows: An Overview of the Doctrine of the Sanctuary’, in *Journal of Adventist Education*, Volume 46, No. 1 (October–November, 1983): 17–35.
  43. Norman H Young has recently made a similar point with regard to the use of the Old Testament in Hebrews. See ‘The Day of Dedication or the Day of Atonement? The Old Testament Background to Hebrews 6:19–20’, in *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, 40 (2002): 68.