

Resonanzen

Gerd Theißen
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Herausgegeben von Petra von Gemünden,
Annette Merz und Helmut Schwier



12 »Now the Lord is the Spirit«

A Christological Reading of 2 Cor 3:17

Peter Balla

When I greet Professor Gerd Theissen on his 80th birthday, I choose one section of his magnificent work entitled »Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology« to reflect upon, which inspired me especially when I was working on 2 Cor 3. This book has been very helpful to answer the question which I find very important for myself: How can an approach from the angle of psychology help us understand what might have gone through the mind of Paul when he turned to be a follower of Jesus whose followers he had persecuted with full conviction previously? Theissen's work is full of enriching insight. To name but one example, he uses a fresco from Dura Europos to illuminate a difficult text in 2 Cor 3: the motif of the veil as it is used by Paul in different ways within a few lines. To quote only a few sentences from a longer discussion:

The problem can perhaps be solved with the help of the frescoes from Dura Europos. The reading of the Torah is depicted in them to the right of the Torah niche [...] To the left of the reader stands a covered, caselike object [...] It is striking that the scroll container is covered [...] The cover is missing in almost all the portraits; it is found only in connection with the reading of the Torah. Here there is in fact a veil over the old covenant [...] It is therefore possible that Paul has a concrete practice in view when he speaks of this veil.¹

In this short paper, I should like to deal with one question – again, inspired by the above-mentioned work of Professor Theissen: Who is the »Lord« (κύριος) in 2 Cor 3:17, in the statement of Paul: »Now the Lord is the Spirit« (NRSV)? I will use some arguments of Gerd Theissen (and some further points) for advancing the thesis that the »Lord« in v. 17 is *Christ as God*.

The reason why it is difficult to determine who is referred to as »Lord« in v. 17 is that in the immediate context there is a reference to an Old Testament

¹ Theissen 1993: 126-127, picture at 126; quotation from the Engl. tr. Theissen 1987: 121-122, referred to also by Balla 2007: 761, and Balla 2009: 274.

passage, and it is possible to argue that because the »Lord« in the original OT passage is God, so Paul must have used this term here in 2 Cor 3 also as referring to God. To put the relevant verses in context, I quote the whole passage, 2 Cor 3:12-18 (NRSV):

¹²Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, ¹³not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. ¹⁴But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. ¹⁵Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; ¹⁶but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

In v. 13 Paul refers to the content of Exod 34:33.35, and in v. 16 he quotes Exod 34:34a with some major changes.² Due to the changes, the sense of the OT verse is widened considerably when Paul makes use of it. The commentators go in different directions with regard to the question whether the »Lord« of Exod 34:34a remains »God« also when Paul uses this text in 2 Cor 3:16. Some interpreters think that the OT background (Exod 34:34a) requires that Paul must have used the term »Lord« as referring to God in 2 Cor 3:16 as well.³ However, Theissen has a very helpful list of arguments for the view that the »Lord« in v. 16 is Christ.⁴ I find his arguments convincing. Theissen lists the following arguments:

First, a conversion of Moses to monotheism [...] is meaningless. Second, in informal citations of the Old Testament without citation formula, *kyrios* occasionally means Christ; [...] Third, Paul had previously claimed that the veil was removed in »Christ«; now he brings the scriptural backing for this. Fourth, in the context that follows (v. 18), *kyrios* is rather certainly Christ, since the term »image« in 3:18 and 4:4 is to be related to Christ. Fifth, the term *eleutheria*, »freedom,« refers to the Spirit of the Son (Gal 4:6, 22ff).⁵

I agree with Theissen that Christ is referred to as »Lord« in v. 16; and as we have seen in his fourth argument above, he also argues that the »Lord« is Christ also in v. 18. We have to add that the interpreters do not agree on this point either; some hold that κύριος refers to God in v. 18 (see e.g., Kruse 2015: 137). The main

2 See Balla 2007: 758-760; Schmeller 2010: 219, calls it a »free citation«: »[...] von einem freien Zitat zu sprechen ist.«

3 So, e.g., Kruse 2015: 134 and 135.

4 Theissen 1993: 135, n. 28; Engl. tr. Theissen 1987: 130, n. 5.

5 Ibid., I quote the English translation with some abbreviations.

argument for this latter view is (as in the case of v. 16) that due to the nearness in the context of the reference to Exod 34:34, Paul must have had »God« in mind throughout this passage when referring to the »Lord«.

Theissen argues that the »Lord« is Christ not only in v. 16, but also in v. 18. As we have seen above (in his fifth argument, related to the term »freedom«), Theissen holds that the Spirit and the Son of God are closely related in Gal 4. In 2 Cor 3:18 we have an expression with a genitive construction: *καθάπερ ἀπὸ κυρίου πνεύματος*. Here *πνεύματος* may be taken as a »Genitive in apposition to κυρίου«;⁶ as we have seen in the NRSV translation above: »... for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.«⁷ I agree with Theissen that the »Lord« in this expression is Christ,⁸ but I would like to take his view one step further.

Interpreters commenting on 2 Cor 3:16-18 usually see this as a unified passage in which the term »Lord« is used by Paul referring to the same referent, either to God,⁹ or to Christ,¹⁰ in a consistent way. We may note that Guthrie offers a third option: the reader learns only in v. 17 that the expression »Lord« in v. 16 referred to the Holy Spirit.¹¹ It is significant, however, that Guthrie, too, holds that Paul's usage of the term is consistent in vv. 16-18, i.e. in Guthrie's opinion the »Lord« in v. 18 is the Spirit, too.¹²

I think that the OT reference is significant in this passage, but I would use this argument in a way different from those who see a reference to God in Paul's use of the term κύριος in 2 Cor 3:16-18. Accepting the view of Theissen that the »Lord« in v. 16 and also in v. 18 is Christ, and acknowledging the significance of the phenomenon that in the Septuagint the word κύριος is used as the translation of the term Yahweh,¹³ I put forward the thesis that in 2 Cor 3:17 Paul referred to Christ as God when he stated: »Now the Lord is the Spirit«.

Bultmann rightly emphasizes the strong connection between verses 16, 17, and 18 in 2 Cor 3. On the one hand, he argues that v. 17a presents the »exegetical justification for drawing the conclusion from Exod 34:34; turning to the κύριος (Χριστός) means turning to the πνεῦμα: the κύριος of the text means πνεῦμα [...]«.¹⁴ On the other hand, he argues that v. 17b draws the conclusion for the whole context: »with the πνεῦμα is given the ἐλευθερία.«¹⁵ This ἐλευθερία is the same as

6 So Long 2015: 74.

7 Schmeller 2010: 193 and 229, also opts for this possibility.

8 See Theissen 1993: 144.

9 So e.g., Matera 2003: 95-97; Thrall 2004: 272-274, 282-283, with an excursus on v. 17a on pp. 278-282.

10 So e.g., Bultmann 1976: 92-93, 98-100; Gräber 2002: 140-144.

11 Guthrie 2015: 225.

12 Loc. cit., 226.

13 Sampley 2000: 68.

14 Bultmann 1976: 92, my translation.

15 Bultmann 1976: 93, my translation.

the *παρρησία* of v. 12.¹⁶ Bultmann adds that »in v. 17 Paul does not think especially of the apostle and his *παρρησία*, but of Christians in general, and he wants to enlarge positively the thoughts of v. 16; v. 16 connects itself to v. 18 through v. 17«. ¹⁷ Barnett offers further arguments to see a reference to Christ in v. 16: »Although ›Lord‹ is here frequently taken to mean Yahweh, as in the OT passage referred to, Paul's words in v. 14, ›because in Christ [the veil] is abolished‹ give a Christological identification of the ›Lord‹ of this verse.«¹⁸ Barnett – like Bultmann – holds that in v. 17 »Paul says who is the ›Lord‹ of the previous verse to whom one ›turns«.¹⁹ In relation to v. 18 (and 4:4.6), Barnett affirms: »Through the gospel the One whom we see as in a mirror is the glorified human, the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the glorified, reflected image of God.«²⁰ In agreement with these arguments, I use the significance of the presence of the Exod 34:34 reference in Paul's line of thought to make one further step: Jesus Christ is referred to by the apostle in 2 Cor 3:16-18 – and thus also in v. 17 – as a divine being.

To conclude, on the basis of the immediate context, vv. 16 and 18, and on the basis of the presence of an allusion to an OT text where the term *κύριος* is used, I propose to answer our initial question – who is the »Lord« in 2 Cor 3:17? – in this way: when Paul writes »Now the Lord is the Spirit«, he refers to *Christ as God* – as if he meant: »Now Christ – who is God – is the Spirit«. Thus 2 Cor 3:17 may be understood as belonging to the significant circle of Pauline Christological texts. It would go beyond the scope of this short paper to discuss the relevance of this verse for the doctrine of the Holy Trinity (cf. also 2 Cor 1:18-22; 13:13).

Gerd Theissen has been and remains an inspiring teacher – may he also continue to teach us in diverse fields, for example, in how theology in relation with other disciplines (including psychology) can enrich our understanding of the New Testament, in how our knowledge of ancient sources (e.g., a fresco in Dura Europos) can illuminate our understanding of NT texts, and especially in how exegetical details of difficult texts can help us to know more about God, even about *Christ as God*.

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16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Barnett 1997: 198-199, italics and parentheses his.

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