

**“From glory to glory” –
Paul’s use of the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians 3**

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In this paper I make an attempt to interpret the expression “from glory to glory” in the last verse in 2 Cor. 3 by reading it in the context of the whole chapter. In 2 Cor. 3:18 Paul concludes his thoughts on his own ministry and on the relationship between the two testaments with these words (RSV): “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.” The RSV translation has added a word, “degree,” indicating an exegetical decision on the side of the translators, but the Greek text is shorter at this point: ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν literally means “from glory to glory.” In order to find out what this expression means, we have to look briefly at the whole chapter, and how Paul uses the Old Testament in it.

Although 2 Corinthians was written to a predominantly Gentile Christian congregation, Paul quotes the OT several times in the book.¹

1. The present paper is based on a longer treatment of all OT quotations in 2 Corinthians: Peter Balla, “2 Corinthians”, in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (eds.), *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 2007, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, pp. 753-783. My research for writing that chapter was supported

Paul quotes the OT in order to support what he is saying with an authoritative text. He points to the “glory” of the ministry of Moses, and in this way also to the glory of the OT. He has a high respect for the OT Scriptures, and at the same time he reads them from the viewpoint of the Christ-event. Thus, in the case of this specific verse, Paul’s christological reading of the OT in 2 Cor. 3 may be the key to understanding the two kinds of “glory” he speaks about in v. 18.

1. *The argument of 2 Cor. 3*

In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul refers to several OT motifs. There is an OT quotation –substantially changed by Paul– in 2 Cor. 3, at v. 16, and in this chapter Paul also refers to the OT context of the words quoted in v. 16. The theme of the defense of Paul’s ministry, leading the apostle to discuss the relationship between the two covenants, begins in ch. 2.

In 2 Cor. 2:14 Paul begins a long section (lasting until 7:4) in which he discusses his “present ministry to the Corinthians” (Best, 25). In this long section he defends his apostolic ministry.² It seems that he was attacked by some people in Corinth who claimed that he was no true apostle. Perhaps these people pointed to the inferiority of Paul’s ministry when compared to that of Moses. In his response, Paul argues by referring to motifs in the OT. Thus he acknowledges the high value of

in previous years by the *Alexander von Humboldt Foundation*. I would like to express my gratitude to this Foundation for a renewed scholarship in the Summer of 2007, that enabled me to work on this paper again in Heidelberg. I thank the publisher Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, that they have granted me permission to use here excerpts from my chapter in the above-mentioned book. – I thank Jonathan S. Marshall for improving the English text of the manuscript.

2. For a discussion of the integrity of the letter, see Lang, 12-14; Best, 25; and especially the detailed argumentation in defense of the unity of the letter, by Martin, xxxviii-lij.

the OT (which was Holy Scripture for the Corinthians as well as for himself) and at the same time he points to the higher glory of the New Covenant.

In 2 Cor. 2:16 Paul points to the high honour of his ministry by asking: “Who is sufficient for these things?” (RSV; “sufficient” is *ικανός* in Greek). Chapter 3 was probably written to answer this question by pointing to God who made even Paul competent for his ministry. Here Paul states that his “competence” (*ικανότης*) is from God (3:5-6; cf. Exod. 4:10, LXX, where Moses says that he himself is not *ικανός*).

Chapter 3 can be divided into two main sections. 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 deals with Paul's adequacy for the ministry. 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 compares two kinds of ministries, that under the old covenant and that under the new covenant. In the first main section (vv. 1-6) he refers to the OT motif of “tablets of stone” contrasted to “tablets of human hearts” (v. 3 referring to Exod. 31:18; Ezek. 11:19; 36:26) and to the “new covenant” (v. 6 referring to Jer. 38:31 LXX = 31:31 MT). In verses 7-18, the second main section, the apostle offers an exposition of Exod. 34:29-32 and then of 34:33-35. Paul's primary purpose is “to highlight the glorious character of the ministry with which he has been entrusted and so explain why, despite so many difficulties, he does not lose heart” (Kruse, 93).

The two main sections should not be separated in the exposition, because we not only have a thematic connection in the idea of the ministry, but possibly also a formal link. The verb “to have” (*ἔχειν*) in various forms appears in vv. 4 and 12 (and even in 4:1, 7, 13), and this might be a pointer to how Paul structured his line of thought (so Schröter, 242). Paul wanted to address the issue of his own ministry of the new covenant, and he referred to the old covenant so that by means of a comparison he could highlight aspects of his own ministry. Paul has a certain view of the OT from the outset. We can see that in the very first reference to the ministry of the old covenant he already calls it a “ministry of death” (3:7). He refers to the old covenant from the perspective of the new.

2. *The OT background*

The main text Paul refers to in 2 Cor. 3 comes from Exod. 34:29-35. This passage is not only referred to, but the only quotation is also from this section (Exod. 34:34 quoted in 2 Cor. 3:16). Exodus 34:29-30 is the first section of the long narrative that is alluded to in 2 Cor. 3. In Exod. 34:29b we read: "Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God." Then in 34:30b we learn that because his face was shining, the people "were afraid to come near him." In 2 Cor. 3:7 Paul begins to summarize these motifs by saying: "Now if the dispensation of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such splendor that the Israelites could not look at Moses' face because of its brightness..." Then in Exod. 34 we read that Moses insisted that the people come to him and "Moses talked with them" (v. 31). Moses told them all the commandments he had heard from the Lord (v. 32). The rest of ch. 34 is the key example for Paul in 2 Cor. 3:13-16, but he uses it in such a way that he adds to it motifs that are not mentioned in the OT passage. In Exod. 34:33-35 we are first told that Moses put a veil on his face only after he had spoken to the people (v. 33), but from the rest of the passage it is clear that later he always put on the veil when he was speaking to his people and took it off when he went in before the Lord (vv. 34-35; see the use of "until" in both verses).³ This passage implies that the presence of the Lord could be borne only by Moses. He could bear it even unveiled, whereas the people could hear the Lord's commandments in an indirect way. They not only could not go before the presence of God, but even Moses had to veil his face from them, because God's "splendor" shone on his face in such

3. Exodus 34:33-35 reads: "And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; [34] but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he took the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, [35] the people of Israel saw the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone; and Moses would put the veil upon his face again, until he went in to speak with him."

a strength of brightness that the people could not have borne it.

The MT of Exod. 34:34a (quoted in 2 Cor. 3:16) appears in a close translation in the LXX, but Paul changes the quotation significantly. Belleville argues for “some form of literary dependence” (250), but she points out that we do not have “an exact citation” here (251). She adds that “selective citation is more the norm than the exception in the NT” (251). The MT and the LXX could be translated: “but whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with him, he took the veil off, until he came out...” Paul says: “but when (a man) turns to the Lord the veil is removed.” The verb of the LXX text (“went in”) is replaced by “turns to” (ἐπιστρέψῃ) in 2 Cor. 3:16.⁴ The verb referring to the “taking off” of the veil appears in a different form: the LXX has a praet. imperf. middle, whereas Paul uses the present tense (περιαιρείται – and he probably uses the passive here, so that a divine activity in the unveiling may be expressed).⁵ This is in accordance with the change he introduced in the application; “is removed” expresses a general truth. Martin argues that the verb “turns to” has a generalized subject: “whenever there is a turning to the Lord” (70).⁶ The LXX narrated in past tense what happened when *Moses* went in before the Lord. Theissen (1987, 122) argues that the subject of the verb in 2 Cor. 3:16 is Moses, who “becomes the prototype of the convert.” Hafemann sees in Moses a “type” (388). According to him, Paul established “a correlation between Moses and the indefinite person from within Israel now in view” (389).⁷ These interpretations have an element of truth. Moses may be in the background as a type of any convert, but not only of converts

4. See Thrall, 1:269-71 for six possibilities offered by scholars as the subject that is not expressed in the Greek text.

5. See Belleville, 253-4; so also Garland, 194.

6. Belleville argues that “the individual Israelite” may be in view here (249), and Paul himself was “a prime example” of the possibility of such an individual conversion of an Israelite (250).

7. Hafemann paraphrases Paul's text as follows: “Whenever ‘he or she’ (like Moses) returns to the Lord, the veil is being removed” (390).

from the Israelites. It is better to see (with Martin, referred to above; see also Matera, 95) an even wider generalization here. As Paul writes to the Corinthians, he probably has in view Gentile Christians as well, who in Corinth probably outnumbered the Jewish Christians. Paul's emphasis here is on the necessity of turning to Christ – this is true for Jews and Gentiles alike. The difference between the OT text and Paul's usage of it has significant theological implications.

3. Paul's use of the OT in 2 Cor. 3

We have seen that the main aim of Paul in this section is to defend his ministry. He achieves this by a comparison between the ministries carried out in the Old Covenant, and that in the New Covenant. While addressing this issue, he nevertheless grants us an insight into his view on the relationship between the two covenants. As Belleville has put it (297): "Paul is not concerned with Moses and the Exodus generation for their own sakes. They are, instead, tools for developing his opening statement: 'We are very open in our ministerial behavior.'" Paul uses the OT for the support of his argument, and while doing so, he also interprets it from the perspective of the Christ-event (3:14): "...for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away." This verse should be seen as a key to the whole chapter, since for "taken away" it uses the same term (*καταργεῖται*) that appears repeatedly concerning the ministry of the old covenant and of its glory (in the form of a passive participle in vv. 7, 11, 13).

The way Paul refers to the story of Moses' veiling himself when going in before God is of high significance as regards his view on the old covenant. On the one hand, we can see that he has a high regard for the old covenant: he uses words praising that covenant (e.g. "glory/splendor," and "ministry"). On the other hand, he points out the way in which the new covenant is "more glorious." Both aspects are important and have to be given due weight in the interpretation.

The old covenant was “carved in letters on stone” (2 Cor. 3:7). Paul does not say explicitly, but we can expect that even former “pagan” Corinthian Christians would know that according to the OT text it was God who carved those letters on two tablets of stone. That dispensation “came with such splendor (ἐν δόξῃ) that the Israelites could not look at Moses’ face because of its brightness” (διὰ τὴν δόξαν, v. 7). The term “splendor/brightness/glory” (δόξα) is used repeatedly by Paul in the subsequent verses (vv. 8-11) about the old covenant (more precisely: about that “dispensation,” or ministry, διακονία, vv. 7, 9). Thus Paul had a high respect for the old covenant (and for the OT).

Paul emphasizes the glory of the old covenant for a second reason, as a point of comparison. By elevating the new covenant above the old he may show the surpassing greatness of the new. In the process of elevating the new, Paul describes the old in negative terms. He utilizes negative descriptions not to pronounce an absolute condemnation of the old, but rather to say that *in comparison* the old is passing away. This is precisely because the new is so much “more glorious” than the old.

Paul probably uses a rabbinic method of exegesis when he argues from the lesser to the greater.⁸ Paul shows that the new covenant is superior by the way of three comparisons: 1. The old dispensation was a “dispensation of death” (v. 7); the new is that of the “Spirit” (v. 8). 2. The old dispensation was a “dispensation of condemnation” (v. 9); the new is that of “righteousness” (v. 9). 3. The old dispensation “faded away” (v. 11); the new “is permanent” (v. 11). In all these comparisons it can be seen that the new covenant (dispensation, or, ministry) has a “greater splendor” (see the comparative “more,” μᾶλλον, in three verses: vv. 8, 9, 11). The comparison is brought to a summary by Paul in v. 11: “For if what faded away (τὸ καταργούμενον) came with splendor, what is permanent (τὸ μένον) must have much more splendor.” It can be seen, then,

8. See e.g. Kruse, 94; Sampley, 66; so also Martin, 59 – cf. further Martin’s criticism (p. 58) of Windisch’s thesis that 2 Cor. 3:7-18 would be a Christian midrash on Exod. 34:29-35; for further literature, see Sampley, 63.

that Paul can say positive things about the old covenant. However, he refers to it in order to highlight *how much more splendid is the new covenant*, in which ministry he himself stands. As Martin, 64, asserts: “the good is now replaced by the better.”⁹ This idea is also expressed in v. 10: “Indeed, in this case, what once had splendor has come to have no splendor at all, because of the splendor that surpasses it.”¹⁰ God has qualified Paul to be a minister of a glorious new covenant (see also v. 6a).

This is to say that, from Paul’s perspective, the old covenant and Moses, its minister, were a prophetic foreshadowing respectively of the new covenant and of Paul, a minister of the new covenant. The glory of the old that was fading suggested, from Paul’s vantage point, that another covenant must come to replace it, the glory of which would be permanently unfading and, thus, greater. Furthermore, Paul has established a correlation between Moses and those turning “to the Lord” from among both Jews and Gentiles: “Whenever a man (on analogy with Moses) returns to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Cor. 3:16). Moses appears to be in the background as a type, not only earlier for Paul, but now of any convert (see also, in this respect, 3:18). As Hafemann suggested earlier, Paul refers to Moses’ experience in the tabernacle as a *type* of the person whose heart has been transformed by the power of God’s Spirit under the new covenant ministry.

In the following section of 2 Cor. 3 (vv. 12-18) Paul quotes the OT and changes it substantially (at v. 16). The aim of the change is to apply it to his own situation. He claims that he has understood the message of the OT properly, because he reads it “in Christ” (see v. 14). In Paul’s view the OT points *typologically* to Jesus. If Jesus is not understood on the basis of the OT to be the promised Messiah, then the reader of the OT

9. So also Witherington (376): “one good thing is simply eclipsed by something better”; we note that in Witherington’s “socio-rhetorical” analysis this passage belongs to the *probatio*, as the first division of the first argument (see p. 375).

10. Grindheim sees the Law/Gospel dualism in this verse, and indeed, in the whole passage of 3:5-18, on which see the title of his article, and esp. p. 102.

has read it as if with a veil on his or her face. In the OT text (Exod. 34) the Israelites were afraid to come near Moses. Paul says that the Israelites could not “fix their eyes on Moses.” Most commentators say that Paul clearly changes the OT narrative when he adds: Moses “put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see *the end of the fading splendor*” (2 Cor. 3:13).¹¹ Some would argue that Paul thought Moses had done this deliberately, in order to hide the fading of the glory (“splendor,” δόξα), or that Paul thought that Moses had done it to the effect of hiding the fading character of the splendor, although Moses himself might not have been aware of it.¹² In either case, Paul contrasted the fading splendor of the old dispensation with the “permanent” one of the new covenant. In our interpretation, it is not necessary to see in Paul’s words a reference to Moses actually hiding the fading of the glory, because it is *Paul’s view* of the character of the old dispensation that it is fading away. Thus Paul does not necessarily add to the OT text any content which was not there (i.e. the motif of fading), but he refers to the OT and at the same time he says that *from the viewpoint of the permanent new covenant*, the old covenant is transitory (a thought that is in line with his view on the law in Galatians 3-4). If Paul “adds” to the OT, then he adds *his interpretation*, as if he would say: “Moses put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see a glory that has its end, that is fading away in my (Paul’s) view, because I already know of the unfading glory of the new covenant.” This is a possible inference from the Greek text, because already in v. 7, τὴν καταργουμένην is added to the end in the manner of the Greek adjectival structure: “glory on his face, (a glory that is) a fading one (in my, Paul’s, opinion).” Paul has in mind this view concerning the old covenant from the beginning of v. 7, because he started it by saying that it is a “ministry of death”.¹³ The aim of Paul’s adding his interpretation to the OT text is *to highlight the ministry*

11. As Theissen puts it (1987, 121): “Paul imputes a brand-new motive.”

12. See the views summarized by Thrall, 1:255-61.

13. See also Wendland, 156.

he stands in: the glory of the new covenant is a permanent one (see v. 11).

Concerning the Israelites, he goes on to say (vv. 14-15): "But their minds (τὰ νοήματα αὐτῶν) were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. [15] Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds (ἐπὶ τὴν καρδίαν αὐτῶν)." In this way Paul applies the changed OT text to his contemporary fellow Jews who did not believe in Jesus as the Messiah. It is in accordance with this new meaning, expressed by Paul, that the quotation of the OT text is also changed in 2 Cor. 3:16: "but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed." By now Paul is far away from the OT narrative: the veil is not the veil on Moses' face that he put on when he came out from the presence of God, but it is a veil that prevents some Israelites from seeing in Jesus the Messiah whom the OT had prophesied about.¹⁴ It is interesting to note with Theissen (who writes in great detail about the threefold use of the veil, 1987, 121-2) that there is a fresco at Dura Europos in which "either the Torah shrine itself or a *capsa*, in which the scroll or several scrolls were transported from the Torah shrine to the synagogue room," is covered by a veil while a scroll is being read out by a man in the synagogue (p. 122; sources where the picture can be seen are given in fn. 11, p. 121).¹⁵ Theissen suggests (122): "It is therefore possible that Paul has a concrete practice in view when he speaks of this veil."

The veil is removed "through Christ" (ἐν Χριστῷ, v. 14), when a man (someone) turns to the Lord (v. 16).¹⁶ Paul's aim in referring to the OT

14. The expression "old covenant" in v. 14 appears only here in the NT.

15. In the previous generation Vielhauer pointed to the three ways in which the veil is referred to by Paul in this passage (1979, 211): first, it is the veil on the face of Moses, as in the OT narrative of Exod. 34 (2 Cor. 3:13); secondly, it is a veil at the reading of the OT that remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away (v. 14); thirdly, it is on the hearts of the Israelites (v. 15).

16. Martin even adds: "the Christian ministry is meant, by divine intention, to supersede the old Judaic ceremonial order" (p. 73).

has thus gained a further aspect: apart from pointing typologically to his ministry of the new covenant (by the way of a comparison with Moses' ministry of the old covenant), he also claims *the necessity of a christological reading of the OT*. In order to achieve this aim, Paul has not only quoted the OT, but also changed ("interpreted," or, "applied") an original narrative concerning the "veil" and how the veil is "removed."

4. 2 Corinthians 3:18 in the light of the whole chapter

We have seen that Paul makes it clear that the old covenant (the one mediated by "Moses") was glorious, but he also uses an argument *a minori ad maius* (Theissen, 1983, 124; so also in the ET of his work, 1987, 120: "from the lesser to the greater"). Paul claims that the new covenant is even more glorious. It is against this background that Paul can formulate his view even more sharply: *the old ministry is transitory when compared to the permanent character of the new*. "The old ministry is critiqued by comparison with the ministry of the Spirit" (Sampley, 66, italics his).

Paul uses the occasion of defending his ministry to highlight his christological stand. It is only "in Christ" that people "are given eyes to see and minds and hearts to understand not only what is going on in God's plan, but also that Moses and all of Scripture still disclose God's purpose and God's will and provide guidance to all God's people" (Sampley, 68). In other words, *the true meaning of the Old Testament can be understood only when looking back at it from the perspective of the New Testament*. Christ is the key to Paul's understanding of the Old Testament. Christians have to hold on to this hermeneutical insight.

As some commentators argue, 2 Corinthians 3:18 may be read as an expression of Paul's view concerning the "believer's conformation to Christ" (Thrall, 1:288). I agree with Thrall that in this verse Paul may want to emphasize that, "[t]he divine nature as expressed in Christ as God's image is progressively expressed also in those who are transformed into the same image" (1:286). However, I would argue that it

may be also a summary of the whole chapter when Christians are depicted here as growing "from glory to glory." *The Old Testament was glorious, but when one reads the Old Testament through Christ one is transformed into even greater glory.* This can only happen through the Spirit (see also 2 Cor. 3:6 – the "written code," the OT "letter," does not kill if it is read through the Spirit who leads us to Christ, and to a christological reading of the OT). Thus, in the context of the whole chapter the concluding phrase most likely refers to the two "dispensations," that is, the two covenants. *Those who believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, move from one "glory," the glory of the Old Covenant, on to another – even greater – "glory," that of the New Covenant.*

I suggest, then, that this is what Paul means when he formulates the concluding verse of ch. 3: "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness *from glory to glory*; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."¹⁷

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17. For the idea of "progression from one state of glory to a further state," see also Thrall, 1:286, who holds that this "progressive transformation" is an "aspect of life in the sphere of the new covenant" (p. 282).

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Summary

In this paper an attempt is made to interpret the expression "from glory to glory" in 2 Cor. 3:18 by reading it in the context of the whole chapter. First, the argument of 2 Cor. 3 is summarized. Chapter 3 can

be divided into two main sections. 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 deals with Paul's adequacy for the ministry. 2 Corinthians 3:7-18 compares two kinds of ministries, that under the old covenant and that under the new covenant. Paul wanted to address the issue of his own ministry of the new covenant, and he referred to the old covenant so that by means of a comparison he could highlight aspects of his own ministry. Secondly, the OT background is briefly discussed. Exodus 34:29-35 is the main text Paul refers to in 2 Cor. 3. Paul not only refers to Exod. 34:29-35 in this section, but he also quotes from the passage (Exod. 34:34; 2 Cor. 3:16). Thirdly, concerning Paul's use of the OT in 2 Cor. 3, it is argued that the way Paul refers to the story of Moses' veiling himself before God is of high significance as regards his view of the old covenant. On the one hand, we can see that he has a high regard for the old covenant: he uses words praising that covenant (e.g. "glory," and "ministry"). On the other hand, he points out the way in which the new covenant is "more glorious." Both aspects are important for the interpretation. Finally, as a summary of the thesis presented in this paper, 2 Corinthians 3:18 is interpreted in the light of the whole chapter. It is argued that the true meaning of the Old Testament can be understood only when looking back at it from the perspective of the New Testament. Christ is the key to Paul's understanding of the Old Testament. 2 Corinthians 3:18 is seen as a summary of the whole chapter when Christians are depicted here as growing "from glory to glory." The Old Testament was glorious, but when one reads the Old Testament through Christ one is transformed into even greater glory.