The Glory and Veil of Moses in 2 Cor 3:7-14: An Example of Paul’s Contextual Exegesis of the OT - A Proposal1

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As Morna Hooker expressed it almost a decade ago, when modern readers of the NT encounter its adoption and adaptation of OT texts, “often one is left exclaiming: whatever the passage from the OT originally meant, it certainly was not this!” Ever since the work of Hans Windisch (1924) and Siegfried Schulz (1958), nowhere has this reaction been more universal than to Paul’s interpretation of the glory and veil of Moses from Exod 34:29-35 in 2 Cor 3:7-14. The reason for this is readily apparent. According to the virtually unanimous opinion of biblical and post-biblical Jewish tradition, the glory on Moses’ face as he descended from Mt. Sinai after the second giving of the Law was not only brilliant, but permanent. The only possible divergence from this opinion is found in Pseudo-Philo’s Antiquities 19:16, though even this text probably supports the overwhelming consensus. Opinions in early Jewish literature vary concerning exactly why Moses consequently veiled himself, but both the MT and later tradition agree that it was to protect the people in some way, not to cover up some deficiency in Moses or the glory he reflected. In contrast, Paul is seen to assert both that the glory on Moses’ face was “fading” (katargeo; cf. 3:7, 13) and that Moses thus veiled himself to hide this fact and/or its implications from Israel (cf. pros to... eis to telos tou katargomenon; 3:13). Paul’s argument has therefore been construed not only to be internally inconsistent (cf: 3:13 with 3:7), but also inherently anti-Jewish in its apparent attribution to Moses of duplicitous motives and deceptive activity, while Paul portrays himself as both forthright and honest.

The recent responses to this common conclusion by P. von der Osten-Sacken (1989), Stockhausen (1989), Hays (1989), and Hofius (1989) vary greatly in their approaches and conclusions. Nevertheless, all of these studies share the conviction that Paul’s argument,
though perhaps not an expression of a willful misreading of the OT, can nevertheless be justified only on the basis of his own distinctively Christian presuppositions. Moreover, it has become common in recent discussions to suggest that, although Paul’s interpretation of Exod 34:29ff. is not acceptable by modern historical-critical standards, it can be justified on the basis of the exegetical practices and presuppositions of his day. Such an assumption has led Brevard Childs to posit, against the lack of evidence, that since Paul read Exodus 34 in this way, there must have been some prior Jewish tradition which also did so; and more recently Belleville has tried to rediscover such a trail of thought in order to provide a necessary backdrop to Paul’s thinking conceptually or methodologically.6

Against this backdrop, the thesis of this paper is that Paul’s argument in 2 Cor 3:7-14 takes Exod 34:29ff. seriously within its original context (Exodus 32-34) and that it is precisely this context, not Paul’s apostolic experience or Christian convictions per se, that provides the background and key for Paul’s “exegesis” of the glory and veil of Moses. In the past, however, the vast majority of students of Paul have been content to look merely at the one verse that Paul quotes from Exod 34:29-35 (cf. Exod 34:34 in 2 Cor 3:16) or to the allusions to Exod 34:30, 33, 35 in 2 Cor 3:7, 13, rather than taking Exodus 34 seriously as part of the larger biblical narrative in which it is anchored.7 The implications of a critical reading of biblical narratives have thus inadvertently carried over into the interpretation of Paul’s own reading of the biblical tradition.

The Theological Meaning of Exodus 32-34

Unfortunately, we do not have the space here to consider the entire narrative of Exodus 32-34, but will have to jump in at the climax to the story, which is found in the text Paul cites in 2 Corinthians 3, namely Exod 34:29-35. At this juncture in the account the turning point of the narrative, which was reached with the granting of Moses’ petition in 33:19-23, now finds its fulfillment in Moses’ descent from the mountain. For as 34:29 makes clear, Moses does in fact return as the “answer to his own prayers” in that he not only brings the