

**EXEGESIS OF SECOND CORINTHIANS 3.5-18**

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A Paper

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By

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## Introduction

The following paper will be an exegetical commentary of Second Corinthians 3.5-18. This will include an examination of the Greek text<sup>1</sup>, a translation of the text, and an overview of important grammar and syntax issues, noted textual variants<sup>2</sup>, and commentary. It will conclude with a summary of the meaning/intent of this passage.

### Exegesis and Commentary on the Text

<sup>5</sup> οὐχ ὅτι ἀφ' ἑαυτῶν ἱκανοί ἐσμεν λογίσασθαι τι ὡς ἐξ ἑαυτῶν, ἀλλ' ἡ ἱκανότης ἡμῶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ,

**Not that we are adequate of ourselves to consider anything as from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,**

The Apostle Paul moves away from his self defense before the Corinthians toward an explanation of his function as a minister of the new covenant. The subordinating conjunction ὅτι indicates that he is shifting the discussion. Now he will speak of the new covenant as the Spirit covenant. The Apostle understands that his success, as well as the success of his coworkers, does not come from an intrinsically internal source. Therefore, it is not “from ourselves” (ἀφ' ἑαυτῶν) but rather it is from God (ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ). This point is made through the contrasting source genitives.

<sup>6</sup> ὃς καὶ ἰκάνωσεν ἡμᾶς διακόνους καινῆς διαθήκης, οὐ γράμματος ἀλλὰ πνεύματος· τὸ γὰρ γράμμα ἀποκτέννει, τὸ δὲ πνεῦμα ζωοποιεῖ.

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1 We will be using the Novum Testamentum Graece, Nestle-Aland 27th Edition. Copyright (c) 1993 Deutsch Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart. If there are significant textual variants it will be noted in the commentary.

2 This passage did not have any *significant* textual variants.

**who also made us adequate ministers of *the* new covenant, not of letter but of Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit makes alive.**

The previous juxtaposition is clarified as being from God. The pronoun **ὃς** has God from v. 5 as the referent. At some point in the past God “made adequate” (**ἰκάνωσεν** = Aorist Active Indicative) those who are called to be ministers “of the new covenant”. This may have been when these ministers received the Holy Spirit or at some point when the Spirit called them into a particular role in the church.

In what sense are they “of the new covenant”? It is vague enough that it is safest to designate it as an aporetic genitive. These ministers are characterized by the new covenant. This will provide a contrast with those ministers who were of the old covenant. This makes sense since the contrast is immediately forthcoming.

This contrast is between letter and Spirit. The coordinating conjunction **ἀλλὰ** portrays two similar yet very distinct approaches. This does not appear to be between “Scripture” and “Spirit” as some have suggested. Rather, it appears to be the law or covenant of God as it stands on its own in contrast with the empowering work of the Holy Spirit. The “letter” alone cannot save; therefore the letter alone is described in negative terminology. It is only through Spirit that the letter can be fulfilled.

In fact, the letter alone is currently killing (**ἀποκτείνει** = Present Active Indicative) while the Spirit has the present action of making alive (**ζωοποιεῖ** = Present Active Indicative). These two actions are put in contrast by the coordinating conjunction **δὲ** which serves like **ἀλλὰ** above to portray two similar yet very distinct approaches.

<sup>7</sup> Εἰ δὲ ἡ διακονία τοῦ θανάτου ἐν γράμμασιν ἐντετυπωμένη λίθοις ἐγενήθη ἐν δόξῃ, ὥστε μὴ δύνασθαι ἀτενίσαι τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραὴλ εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον Μωϋσέως διὰ τὴν δόξαν τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ τὴν καταργουμένην,

**But if the ministry of death, in letters having been engraved in stone, came in glory, to the sons of Israel, who *were* not able to gaze into the face of Moses because of the glory of his face (the one fading),**

The coordinating conjunction δὲ functions here to introduce another aspect of the same subject. It is accompanied by Εἰ which introduces this as a first class conditional sentence. The Apostle is assuming what he is about to say to be true for the sake of argument. He begins by further unfolding the Letter-Spirit contrast.

In v. 6 the Spirit is understood to be “life-making” (ζωοποιεῖ is a portmanteau between ζωὴ and ποιέω). This is contrasted with the “ministry defined by death” (an aporetic genitive). This “ministry of death” is “letters having been engraved in stone”. This is an obvious allusion to the Law given to Moses on Sinai. The Law came (Aorist Passive Indicative indicates that it was sent or given) “in glory”. It is difficult to designate the dative here because we must first grasp what is meant by “glory”. It seems to have to do with the visible effects of the presence of God.

Those who received the Law were the “sons of Israel”. The nationalistic identity of those who received the Law is important to the Apostle. It was not to the Gentiles or the whole world that the Law was given, but to Israel only.

Even though the sons of Israel received the Law even these ones were not able to gaze at Moses when he returned. This is in reference to the narrative found in Ex. 34.29-35. For the Apostle the reason that the Israelites could not look upon Moses was because “the glory” was too bright on his face. In Ex. 34.29 the reason for the radiance of Moses’ face is because he spoke to

YHWH. In this passage the preposition **διὰ** provides the same connotation: the *reason* why Moses' face was so unbearably bright is because of the glory.

It is interesting that the Apostle clarifies the nature of the glory. He writes that it is the one (the type of glory) that is currently fading. The Present Passive Participle indicates that this glory is *currently fading*, not that it faded at the time of Moses. Therefore, there is something *currently happening* that is causing the glory associated with Moses to fade.

<sup>8</sup> πῶς οὐχὶ μᾶλλον ἢ διακονία τοῦ πνεύματος ἔσται ἐν δόξῃ;

**will not the ministry of the Spirit be more with glory?**

The interrogative participle **πῶς** together with the negative adverb **οὐχὶ** introduces a rhetorical question. If the ministry of death came in glory will not the ministry of the Spirit (which is life-making) have even more glory. If something that brings death can have the visible presence of God associated with it how much more should that which brings life, which is not only effected by the presence of God but as he will later unfold *is the very presence* of God (see vv. 17-18). **μᾶλλον** introduces the ministry of the Spirit as being in the superlative. It has more glory.

<sup>9</sup> εἰ γὰρ τῇ διακονίᾳ τῆς κατακρίσεως δόξα, πολλῶ μᾶλλον περισσεύει ἡ διακονία τῆς δικαιοσύνης δόξῃ.

**For if *there was* glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness *is* much more abundant in glory.**

The coordinating conjunction **γὰρ** introduces another concept of equal importance. It is another way of saying what he has just said. He seems to be reiterating the point.

The **εἰ** introduces another first class conditional sentence. Again, the Apostle presupposes what is about to write as being true. Again he reminds his readers that the ministry of the Letter/Death/Condemnation has glory. Again, he emphasizes that the ministry of the Spirit/Live-

Making/Righteousness has much more (πολλῷ μᾶλλον seems to intensify μᾶλλον in v. 8) glory. At this point we can see the in the mind of the Apostle the old covenant is characterized as letter that results in death and condemnation while the new covenant is characterized by Spirit that results in life and righteousness.

<sup>10</sup> καὶ γὰρ οὐ δεδόξασται τὸ δεδοξασμένον ἐν τούτῳ τῷ μέρει εἵνεκεν τῆς ὑπερβαλλούσης δόξης.

**For even the glorified thing *is not glorified in this because of the surpassing glory.***

The coordinating conjunction γὰρ presents yet another reason for the superiority of the new covenant. This time the glorified thing (τὸ δεδοξασμένον) is “not glorified” (οὐ δεδόξασται). The reason given is because something else has “surpassing glory”. We can further unfold the Pauline understanding of the old and new covenant by understanding that here the Apostle understands the old covenant to have glory but the detractor is simply that the new covenant has surpassing glory. Since the new covenant is even more glorious as Spirit covenant it functions in essence to make the old covenant lack glory.

<sup>11</sup> εἰ γὰρ τὸ καταργούμενον διὰ δόξης, πολλῷ μᾶλλον τὸ μένον ἐν δόξῃ.

**For if the fading away *was through glory, much more the thing remaining in glory.***

This sentence begins with another γὰρ introducing another part of the argument and another εἰ presenting it as an assumed-to-be-true-actual-hypothetical statement. It is hypothetical because he is begging the question; it is true because the Apostle expects the readers to accept his premise. The argument made here is simple: if something that is currently passing away has glory *how much more* that which will remain. In other words, if the old covenant had glory *how much more* glory can be found in the new covenant which is going to remain.

<sup>12</sup> Ἔχοντες οὖν τοιαύτην ἐλπίδα πολλῇ παρρησίᾳ χρώμεθα

**Therefore, having such great hope we use boldness**

The coordinating conjunction οὖν presents his concluding thought in this string of related points. Since we have the new covenant we *currently have* (ἔχοντες =Present Active Participle). The new covenant is given an additional designation. It is a covenant of hope (or that provides hope). Since this is so it provides so that are part of this new covenant with “boldness”.<sup>13</sup> καὶ οὐ καθάπερ Μωϋσῆς ἐτίθει κάλυμμα ἐπὶ τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ πρὸς τὸ μὴ ἀτενίσαι τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραὴλ εἰς τὸ τέλος τοῦ καταργουμένου.

**and not like Moses, who placed a veil on his face, in order that the sons of Israel would not gaze unto the end of the fading.**

It appears that the Apostle is juxtaposing those of the new covenant with Moses. The reason given is because Moses knew the glory was fading. Whereas the Exodus narrative seems to indicate that the veil was because Moses' face was too bright the Apostle concludes that the real reason is because the glory was going to fade and for some reason Moses did not want the Israelites to see it fading.

In context Moses not only represents himself but also all those who adhere to the old covenant. There is a desire to retain the fading thing rather than exchange it for the emerging, glorious covenant. This is made more evident in vv. 14-15.

<sup>14</sup> ἀλλὰ ἐπωρώθη τὰ νοήματα αὐτῶν. ἄχρι γὰρ τῆς σήμερον ἡμέρας τὸ αὐτὸ κάλυμμα ἐπὶ τῇ ἀναγνώσει τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης μένει, μὴ ἀνακαλυπτόμενον ὅτι ἐν Χριστῷ καταργεῖται·

**But their minds were made dull, until this very day the same veil remains during the reading of the old covenant; it is not unveiled because in Christ it is canceled.**

The Apostle connects those who first saw Moses and did not know that the glory was fading with those who currently are still ignorant of the fact that the glory is fading. The coordinating conjunction ἀλλὰ proceeds to the next part of the argument. As it was with those

whose minds were made dull in the time of Moses (ἐπωρώθη = Aorist Passive Indicative likely referring to the time of Moses in this context) to this very day (τῆς σήμερον ἡμέρας).

It is suggested here that this is a Pneumatological hermeneutical problem. Those who are part of the old, letter covenant have a veil over Moses, per se, in that they cannot understand or really “see” Moses. Moses’ glory has faded, but the veil prevents them from noticing the change. Therefore, Moses is adored with the same admiration as when the glory shown on his face.

The only means by which someone can move from letter covenant to Spirit covenant is Christ. The veil remains *because* only Christ can remove the veil. What is being suggested here is that those who are part of the old covenant do not have Christ and therefore they are not able to understand the old covenant either.

<sup>15</sup> ἀλλ’ ἕως σήμερον ἡνίκα ἂν ἀναγινώσκηται Μωϋσῆς, κάλυμμα ἐπὶ τὴν καρδίαν αὐτῶν κείται·

**But until today when Moses is read a veils lies on their heart,**

The coordinating conjunction ἀλλ’ once again leads to a reiteration of a previous point which the Apostle does frequently throughout this passage. The phrase ἕως σήμερον is not intending to suggest that what the Apostle is speaking of has concluded as of “today” but rather it should be read as “even up to this very day”. Since the days of Moses even until now “when Moses is read” the veil continues to lie on their heart (κείται = Present Active Indicative).

<sup>16</sup> ἡνίκα δὲ ἂν ἐπιστρέψῃ πρὸς κύριον, περιαιρεῖται τὸ κάλυμμα.

**But if when one turns to *the* Lord the veil is removed.**

The coordinating conjunction δε introduces an equal but opposite reality. This time we have a third class conditional sentence (the ἂν + a subjunctive [ἐπιστρέψῃ]). If someone happens to turn to the Lord at that point the veil is removed (περαιρεῖται = Present Active

Indicative). It is not supposed that someone will turn to the Lord; it is only true if this occurs. The implication is that the veil cannot be removed if one does not turn to the Lord.

<sup>17</sup> ὁ δὲ κύριος τὸ πνεῦμά ἐστιν· οὐδὲ τὸ πνεῦμα κυρίου, ἐλευθερία.

**Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there is liberty.***

Again, we have an additional thought added by the coordinating conjunction. This sentence is intended to clarify the identity of the Lord in v. 16. The Lord is appositional to the Spirit (both nominatives). Hence the translation “the Lord *is* the Spirit”.

Some have presupposed that “the Lord” in v. 16-17 is Christ from v. 14. At first glance this seems possible which would introduce a modalistic aspect to the text. Nevertheless, as Fee rightly concludes<sup>3</sup> (in my opinion) “the Lord” is a reference to God in Ex. 34.34. There Moses removed the veil to speak to God. The Apostle is concluding that when one turns to the Spirit, as Moses did God in Ex. 34.34, the Spirit removes “the veil” that prevents the readers from seeing the truth of Christ. Therefore, “the Lord” is not Christ from v. 14 but rather God in Ex. 34.34.

The Apostle concludes from his application that by turning to the Spirit, who is the Lord, that there is liberty. This is true because the presence of the Spirit, who is the Lord (appositional?), brings sight to those who have been blinded by the veil. Although the one’s blinded go from the sons of Israel staring at Moses to Moses having his veil removed the analogy still stands, but the reader must follow the shift in the Apostle’s argument or the thought is lost.

<sup>18</sup> ἡμεῖς δὲ πάντες ἀνακεκαλυμμένῳ προσώπῳ τὴν δόξαν κυρίου κατοπτριζόμενοι τὴν αὐτὴν εἰκόνα μεταμορφούμεθα ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν καθάπερ ἀπὸ κυρίου πνεύματος.

**But we all having an unveiled face, reflecting the glory of the Lord, being transformed *into* the same image, from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.**

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3 Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence*, 311-312.

Another coordinating conjunction introduces the next phase of the argument and the last part we will examine here. In contrast to those who still read Torah with a veil “we” are “having an unveiled face” (*ἀνακεκαλυμμένω* = Present Middle Participle). This is a contrast between those of the old covenant who cannot see because of the veil and those of the new covenant who have turned to the Spirit and therefore can truly understand the “letter” that only brings death to those who don’t have the Spirit.

The Apostle says that we are currently reflecting the “glory of the Lord” (*κατοπτριζόμενοι* = Present Middle Participle). This is in contrast to Moses whose glory faded. This echoes vv. 10-11 where the Apostle’s great contention with the old covenant is not that it did not have glory but simply that it is the old covenant. The glory is fading. The lasting glory is upon those of the new covenant who have the Spirit.

The phrase “being transformed into the same image” is the work of the Spirit (*μεταμορφούμεθα* = Present Passive Indicative). The image is likely the image of God. This means to hint at a concept of restored *imago dei*.

The fact that this is a progressive change is exemplified by the phrase “from glory to glory” (*ἀπὸ δόξης εἰς δόξαν*).<sup>4</sup> The one who brings this change is (again) “the Lord” who is called “the Spirit (again in apposition with two genitives).

### **Conclusion**

The argument of this text is that the new covenant is better than the old covenant because the new covenant is the Spirit covenant. The old covenant is depicted by “letter” and it brings death and condemnation. It is personified by Moses whose veil symbolizes the fact that just as those who viewed him could not see his face nor the reality that the glory of God in his face was

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4 This seems to parallel the concept in Romans 1.17: from faith to faith (*ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν*).

fading likewise those who read Moses, away from Christ and the work of the Spirit, cannot actually understand Moses (= Torah) but are blinded to the fact that the old covenant is fading.

While the old covenant is glorious it is also temporal. The new covenant is permanent. It is a Spirit-covenant. Those who turn to the Spirit over and against the letter receive the new covenant which results in a progressive return to the image that we were made in.