

Ulrich Schmidt

Liberating 2 Corinthians 3: The Pauline and Mosaic Ministry as Coherent Paradigms

(Vortrag gehalten auf der Jahreskonferenz der *Society of Biblical Literature* und der *American Academy of Religion*, November 2001, Denver [CO])

Ladies and Gentlemen!

The events since September 11 have definitely changed our lives. And it's only a minor effect that Ulrich Schmidt from the University of Siegen does not read his paper himself but Ken Pomykala instead. The airline I wanted to come with went bankrupt because of the terror attacks in Manhattan. So I have no choice but staying at home and thinking of you while Ken is reading my paper.

At the same time, the impacts of those events reveal the importance of the topic we are dealing with in this session: „Scripture in Early Judaism and Christianity“, or in other words: how do people perceive and use *texts* and religious-cultural *textures*. In the current situation the western world is in danger of mis-reading and mis-understanding the *texture* of Islam like Early Christianity and the latter Christian theology often mis-read, mis-understood and mis-used the Scriptures.

In fact, when we ask for the use Christianity made of the Scriptures we find ourselves immediately in trouble: Early Christianity was unable to share the Scriptures with Early Judaism but tried to wrest it from the people of the covenant. We know the details: the early church read the Scriptures from a post-easter point of view and understood many pronouncements of the Bible as hints at Jesus the Christ. In fact, the Christians understood them as „proofs“, a view which the synagogue couldn't share. And because not accepting „proofs“ appears to be stubbornness, the Jews were perceived as a people which does not even understand its own Scriptures. One early witness for this view is Justin Martyr with his first apology and his dialogue with Tryphon.

An even earlier witness seems to be the apostle Paul. In the third chapter of Second Corinthians, Paul writes about Moses, his ministry, the glory on his face, and the veil that covered his face when he spoke to the people. Obviously, Paul refers to the events during Israel's journey in the

wilderness. At the end of the argument he displaces Moses' veil unto Israel's reading of the Scriptures: Israel is not able to understand – even until today (3:15), Paul says. From the triumphalistic perspective of the later Christian theology, Paul succeeded in demonstrating from Israel in the wilderness that the Jews are unable to understand their own Scriptures from the very beginning.

And even worse! 2Cor 3 provided Christian theologians with additional munition against Judaism. They interpreted the term „ministry of death“ as the fundamental characteristic of Moses' ministry, and the expressions „the letter kills“ and „old covenant“ as a proof for the dispensation of Israel, Moses and the Law. Up to the 20th century this position was held. At the beginning of the century, *A. Plummer* entitled his comments on 2Cor 3,4-11 „The Superiority of the New Ministration to the Old“ and sums up his considerations with the words: „Christianity is superior to Judaism that it has extinguished it. Even in its best days, when it also was a Divine revelation to the human race, Judaism had a glory which was infinitesimal compared with that which was inaugurated by Christ.“ (92) And at the end of the century, a scholar like *O. Hofius* supported this view and interpreted 2Cor 3 in categories of Lutheran Dogmatics.

Of course, concerning some details of this Christian construction, there have been doubts all along. For example, the semantic field of Paul's discussing the law is not complete here. Important terms like *nomos*, *hamartia*, and *sarx* are missing. Moreover, the contrast *gramma* and *pneuma* does not necessarily signify a contrast between law and gospel but was often used in antiquity to express the difference between a literal reading and a true understanding. And finally, the contrasts „tablets of stone“ / „hearts of flesh“ and „old covenant“ / „new covenant“ stem from the Prophets who did not really expect a „new covenant“ but a coming alive of the one covenant, given by God. In recent

times these doubts have been supported by scholars like *Ekkehard W. Stegemann*, *Carol K. Stockhausen*, or *Linda L. Belleville*. Their work has shed new light 2Cor 3 and provided us with new possibilities of understanding.

2Cor 3 in its context

And there are still some more points to make in order to support a re-reading of 2Cor 3. They come in sight when we ask for the function of Paul's reference to Moses and Israel in the given situation. This question has been raised before, I know. But the prominent theories, that Paul's opponents had drawn from Moses and that Paul rewrote a Jewish-Christian midrash, are somewhat speculative. Therefore I suggest to focus strictly on the text, and to look for those elements which relate this particular chapter with the immediate and farther context.

two sides of one coin

The first striking element within 2Cor 3 is Paul's reflection on *diakonia*. He seems to contrast two different ministries: he mentions a „ministry of the Spirit“ (3:8) or „ministry of justification“ (3:9) as well as a „ministry of death“ (3:7) or „ministry of condemnation“ (3:9). The Christian tradition assumed that the first one signifies Paul's ministry and the gospel while the second indicates Moses' and the law.

This assumption, however, becomes questionable from the immediate context of 2Cor 3. In the preceding verses 2:14f., Paul reflects on the fact that his own ministry brings some people life and others death: „For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.“ (NRSV) In the face of Paul's proclamation people are divided into those who are being saved and those who are perishing.

The same point can be made from the subsequent section 4:1-6. Paul writes: „by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing“ (4:2b.3). He then continues in insisting on the very same fact: he doesn't preach himself, Paul says, but Jesus Christ; and still, some „can-

not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ“ (4:4). Again, Paul's ministry is not only one of life but also one of death!

This destructive part of Paul's ministry is not only an indirect side-effect but the apostle even exercises it actively. Although Paul's assignment is „to build up“ (10:8; 12:19; 13:10) he is ready „to tear down“ (12:4; 13:10), „to demolish“ (10:5), „to punish“ (10:6). And with regard to the Corinthian community this also includes the decision to punish single persons by excluding them from the church and „handing a person over to Satan“ (1Cor 5:5; cf. 2Cor 2). And by calling his opponents „deceitful workers“ who are only „masquerading as apostles of Christ“ (11:13f.) he judges them to death.

According to these observations, Paul understands his own ministry to have two sides whereas the negative part not only operates indirectly. This should be taken into consideration when we interpret 2Cor 3. Paul's comments on ministry in this particular chapter ought not to be divided on two different ministries. They are two different effects of being a minister of God.

writing, reading, understanding

In a similar way, the reference to Israel in the wilderness is related to the immediate context.

In the latter verses of chapter three (3:12-18) the veil is a major issue: Paul mentions the veil on Moses' face and deals with the veil on Israel's reading the Scriptures which hinders their understanding. He repeats this issue twice: „when the old covenant is read“ (3:14) they do not understand as well as „when Moses is read“ (3:15). It's the writing of God's messenger which suffers from the misunderstanding of its readers. And it's exactly this problem which is related to the current circumstances: the Corinthian community doesn't understand Paul's writings either!

Already in the preceding context there are several references to writing, reading, and misunderstanding. For example 1:13: „We are not writing to you anything different from what you read and indeed recognize“ (*Barrett*). Obviously, the Corinthians suspect the apostle of deceiving them, meaning something else than he has written. Their misunderstanding becomes also explicit from the following sentence: „And I hope that, as you have under-

stood us in part, you will come to understand fully“ (1:13b.14). Like Israel, the Corinthians do not understand the writings of God’s messenger!

At the beginning of chapter 2, Paul struggles with the misunderstanding which his last letter to the Corinthinas suffered. His writing caused grieve although he didn’t intend to do so (2:3f.[9]). He „wrote ... out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears“ (2:4a); he wanted „to let (them) know the depth of (his) love for (them)“ (2:4b). But the Corinthians couldn’t understand the letter that way. Later in the text Paul asks frustrated „If I love you more, will you love me less?“ (12:15). And he characterizes the effect of his writing with the words „sorrow“ (7:8), „idignation, alarm, (and) zeal“ (7:11). Therefore, some of the Corinthians have begun to accuse him for his „weighty and forceful letters“ (10:10).

Obviously, the Corinthians are constantly reminded of their lack of understanding. In this regard they are similar to the people of Israel.

veil, reputation, do/ca and outer weakness

Besides the veil on Israel’s reading of the Scriptures there is also the veil that covers Moses’ face. We know the details from the book of Exodus: Moses, coming from the presence of God, had a tremendous glory on his face. Israel was frightened, afraid to meet Moses, and even afraid to listen to him. Therefore he put a veil on his face. In Paul’s version, in 2Cor 3, Christian theology read the suspicion that Moses wanted to hide something else: not the glory as such but the fact that his glory was a fading one! Consequently, Moses was accused of being a swindler!

A different frame for understanding appears when the comparison between Moses and Paul is not restricted to chapter 3 only but also correlates what Paul says about himself in the larger context with what is said about Moses.

Regarding his own person Paul sees himself to be someone without any outward glory. On the contrary, his outer apperance is constantly declining: „outwardly we are waisting away“ (4:16), he says. His glory – at least his outward one – is fading. But that doesn’t matter for Paul because „inwardly we are being renewed day by day“ – and even more important: „What is seen is (anyway) temporary (only) but what is unseen is eternal“

(4:18). „Therefore“, Pauls says, „we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen“. It’s exactly this attitude which Paul also expects from the adresees of the gospel: only an attention which is not attracted by the outer appearance but able to fix „on what is unseen“ will really understand and believe. Therefore it’s not a shame when the messenger of God has a weak appearance. On the contrary: it even is useful!

From this point of view Moses must have had a severe problem. His tremendous outward glory must have endangered a true understanding of the message that he had to convey. Indeed, Paul mentions that Israel either was frightened (3:7) or attracted (3:12) by Moses’ glory. But in either case they were unable to receive adequately what Moses had to say. The outward glory turned out to be a hindrance for understanding God’s messenger. In order to solve this problem Moses took the veil. He covered his outward glory intentionally. He wanted to be perceived as somebody without any impressive appearance. And in doing so he became somewhat similar to Paul. His glory became a more inward one, comparable to what Paul says about himself: „God made his light shine in our hearts“ (4:6) And imagine Moses with that veil! Doesn’t he look somewhat ridiculous and thereby causing offence?

From this point of view, even the meaning of the expression „fading glory“ must change. It is a fading one because everything „what is seen is temporary“ (4:18) only and as such it doesn’t help the spectator to understand the true meaning of what God has to say. Therefore Moses’ covering of his face is not a tricky manoeuvre but the behavior of a responsible minister who knows that any outward glory is fading in the first place and hinders the people from a true understanding.

Moses and Israel as a response to the Corinthian’s demand

From the so far presented considerations it now becomes clear why Paul refers to Moses and Israel: what happened in the wilderness at that time serves in the current situation as a perfect example in the rhetorical sense.

First of all, it addresses the Corinthians demand for a leader with an impressive appearance, with glory, with visions from God! „Well,“ Paul could have concluded, „Moses would have been the type

the Corinthians demanded!“ He had all they want: direct conversations with God, a tremendous glory, he produced signs and wonders – and he had the most impressive letters of recommendation a person could ever have: tablets of stone, written by God!

Being the perfect model for the Corinthians idea of a powerful leader the events around Moses gave Paul also the chance to work on the problems he had with the Corinthians.

- (*appearance*) The Corinthian’s assumption that the messenger of God must have an impressive appearance becomes falsified from Moses’ behavior. He intentionally covered his face. He not only hid his glory but also became somewhat ridiculous. Thereby he supported Paul’s view that an attractive appearance does not necessarily contribute to a true understanding of God’s message. On the contrary, God’s power is made perfect in weakness, as Paul says in chapter 12.
- (*obedience*) Moreover, the Corinthians assumption that a powerful messenger of God would be an undisputed leader becomes falsified from the Israel of those days. Although Moses had everything the Corinthians assumed to be necessary for a leader he was unable to convince his people. On the contrary, they opposed him constantly and did not really understand him. The same is true with the Corinthians and Paul as we can see from the entire letter!
- (*understanding*) Therefore, even Paul’s comment on an Israel which does not understand until today is related to the Corinthians. They are an Israel of today that does not understand. And the comment that the veil is taken away whenever anyone turns to the Lord (3:16) is an indirect appeal! Later on Paul makes it explicit. For example in 5:20 he urges the Corinthians „Be reconciled to God“, which means a turning towards the Lord. And in 13:5 he appeals to them „Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves!“ (13:5 [NIV]). Paul doubts whether the veil is already taken away from the Corinthians’ hearts.
- (*covenant*) Accordingly, the contrast „old covenant“ / „new covenant“ should be understood

in the original sense of the Prophets. The terms signify the covenant given by God which suffers from misunderstanding on the one hand and the coming alive by a true understanding of the people on the other side. – It’s exactly this hope which Paul had regarding the Corinthians. According to 1:13 he hopes that they „will understand until the end“ (1:13b). And in 5:16f. he reminds them that „in Christ“ a „new creation“ occurs – an idea which is not completed within the Corinthians because they are still stuck to „what is seen“.

- (*tablets*) Even the term „tablets“ has to be understood in this context. Paul uses the term the first time after he has opposed the Corinthian’s demand for letters of recommendation. He disputes this common antique practice: not even tablets of stone are a sufficient recommendation for an apostle but only the response of the people. At this point the term most likely does not refer to Moses in particular but to the most impressive recommendatory letters in antiquity: the royal letters! They often became carved into stone by the recipients and presented to the public at exposed places. Having evoked these connotations the second usage of “tablets” makes clear what Moses’ tablets have really been: royal letters! And not even these have been capable of convincing the people. – The Corinthians could not have missed this point.
- (*judgment*) Consequently, even the fact that Israel was punished up and then because of its disobedience fits the setting of 2Cor. Paul was accused of writing “bold letters” and threatening the community. Paul does not deny this part of his ministry. On the contrary, he explicitly announces that he will punish some of the Corinthians during his next visit. Remember only 13:2 “I warned those who sinned previously and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again, I will not be lenient!” This is comparable for example to what had happened to those who did not repent of the Golden Calf.

result

Let me summarize. 2Cor 3 is closely related to the entire letter as well as to the letter setting. Every

single element of those events at the Mount Sinai has its meaning in the current situation in which Paul is addressing the Corinthians. Therefore, this chapter has to be understood contextual and not as a piece of Christian dogmatics. 2000 years of misunderstanding has been enough! Hopefully, it does not take as much time for the western world to learn an adequate understanding of the Islamic world.

I thank you very much for your attention.