

Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People

Feast of the Transfiguration – Last Sunday of Epiphany – Year C

RCL Readings: Exodus 34:29–35; Psalm 99; 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2; Luke 9:28–43a

ACNA Readings: Exodus 34:29–35; Psalm 99; 1 Corinthians 12:27–13:13; Luke 9:28–36

Introduction. Epiphany now comes to completeness. The seven Sundays (this year) after Epiphany finish with Transfiguration. As with the Baptism of Jesus, there is a unique manifestation of the Spirit and the divine voice.

Common Theme. This week's readings focus our attention on the transforming impact of the Presence of God. Transfiguration is another way of saying metamorphosis! This happens whenever a person turns to the Lord and meets him face-to-face! Moses met with God on the mountain in this way and his face was shining as he came back to the camp. So too Jesus, on the mountain, talked with his Father and was transfigured in front of his disciples.

Exodus 34:29–35 – The Transfiguration of Moses. This reading is at the end of a key literary unit in Exodus that runs from 31:18–34:35.¹ A lot happens in this unit, including the faithlessness of the people persuading Aaron to fashion a golden calf with an *engraving tool* (32:4), in complete conflict with God *engraving* with his finger his word on the stone tablets (31:18; 32:16). The rebellion of the people resulted in Moses shattering the first set of tablets and Moses' going up the mountain again to intercede on their behalf. Observe the way the unit opens with statements about the first set of tablets engraved by Elohim (31:18 and 32:16) and now draws to a close with "The Ten Words" being written on the second set of tablets by YHWH (34:27–29) and both sets of tablets being brought down the mountain by Moses himself. The use of the singular for "hand" (in Hebrew) suggests Moses had both the tablets under one arm.²

The passage repeats that "light shone from Moses' face" in verses 29, 30, and 35. There seems to be a contrast being drawn with the words engraved on tablets of stone and the light shining from the face of Moses whenever he talked with the Lord in the tent of meeting. The idea of the divine being surrounded by holiness and radiant luminosity is common in the Bible (Ezra 1:27–28; Ps 104:2; Isa 6:1–3). Notice it says Moses put a veil on his face first after he had spoken to the people (v. 33), and then always whenever he spoke to the people (vv. 34–35). It seems the presence of the Lord's glory could be borne only by Moses. Moses could bear it unveiled, whereas the people could only receive it indirectly. They could not go into the glory of God's presence nor even bear it in Moses' face (see notes on 2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2 below).

¹ See the literary unit laid out in its "parallel" form in Moshe Kline's *The Structured Torah*, at www.chaver.com, with the Unit structure of Exodus as a whole on p. 5, and the detailed structure of this Unit (Unit XV) on pp. 77–79.

² See the CMJ UK lecture and paper by this author on the "parallel" Ten Commandments here: <https://www.cmj.org.uk/paul-hocking-taking-second-look-torah>.

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Now, there is something historically important to address here. The verb for “shone” is *qaran* in Hebrew, used only in this passage, and comes from the noun *qeren*. The noun means “horn” and usually means the horn of an animal, so, symbolically, denotes strength and power. In Habakkuk 3:4, the dual form is used to refer to “two-horned” rays or bolts of lightning flashing from the Lord’s hand. Tigay says: “In the Latin Vulgate, Jerome in an over-etymological translation, rendered [the verb as] ‘was horned,’ although he knew ... that the meaning was figurative. Nevertheless, his translation led to the image of Moses with horns in medieval and Renaissance art (e.g. Michelangelo’s sculpture *Moses* in Rome), and eventually, coupled with the notion of Satan’s horns, to the antisemitic belief that Jews have horns.”

Verse 30, the fear of Moses’ radiance matches the fear of God’s radiance on Mount Sinai (Exod 20:14–17). Earlier, in 32:1, the people had called Moses (literally) “this one, Moses, the man”. The people thought they had lost Moses (“What has become of him?”), but now they see him as reflecting God’s glory! They asked Aaron to make them “gods that will go before our face” (literally), but the Lord actually provided them with a man whose face shone with the glory of God! The experience had the effect of authenticating the covenant that the Lord was making with them.

This experience of a shining face continued for Moses after coming down from the mountain. So, it says Moses’ habit was to go into the tent of meeting outside the camp (see 33:7–11) as the tabernacle was not yet set up. There is a play on words here in Hebrew. It says, when Moses went in *before* the Lord, which is literally, “to the *face* of the Lord” (v. 34), then the Lord would speak to Moses “*face to face*, as a person speaks with his friend” (v. 11). Now it tells us Moses would come out with his *face* shining (v. 35)! Surely, like Joshua (v. 11), we should copy Moses, and go in before the face of the Lord every day, and then come out and speak what he tells us (vv. 32, 34). What a powerful daily practice!

Psalm 99. This is the final kingship psalm,³ with a focus on God’s holy presence in the temple. Notice the virtues of God referred to in this psalm: He is King, awesome, great, higher than all, praiseworthy, holy, strong, a lover of justice, uprightness/equity, a doer of justice and righteousness, worthy of worship, answerer of prayers, a communicator to his people, and faithful to his word, forgiving and avenging injustice! Observe especially the emphasis on God’s holiness, and see the response of the seraphs in the celestial temple: Holy, holy, holy (Isa 6:3)! This was what made Moses’ face shine in the Exodus reading!

³ The other Royal Psalms are Psalm 29, 47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98. Andy Wrasman says: “These eight psalms reveal and emphasize ten key characteristics of God’s kingship,” and he lists them as: God is Lord over all the waters; over all the earth; over all gods; God is coming in judgment over all; is just and righteous in judgment; God’s enemies will face is wrath in the judgment; God’s people will receive his peace, strength, blessing and protection; God works out the salvation of his people; the proper response is for all to praise him.

<https://andywrasman.com/2019/11/12/10-key-characteristics-of-gods-kingship-from-the-psalms/>

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Verse 1, “He dwells between the cherubim” refers to the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies in the tabernacle and the temple. The ark was covered with the solid gold “atonement cover” out of which were beaten two golden cherubim (Exod 25:18–22; 1 Chron 28:18). The Lord of Hosts or Armies (*YHWH Tse-va-ot*) is said to sit between the cherubim, as this signified the throne of YHWH (1 Sam 4:4; Isa 37:16). The ark is also called his “footstool” in verse 5 as in 1 Chronicles 28:2; Isaiah 66:1; Lamentations 2:1.

Verse 6 says Moses was also a priest, with Aaron. Aaron was called the high priest, but in the narrative, Moses was seen as over Aaron, and so could be called “the great high priest,” and as Moses is a type of Christ/the Messiah in the NT, this may be one reason for the term used of Jesus in Hebrews (Heb 4:14). Though there is a reference in the psalm to priests and a prophet, there is no reference to a human king as YHWH is king. Verse 7 seems to shift to Moses and the nation, referring to God speaking to them in a pillar of cloud (Ex 33:9–10; Num 12:5; Dt 31:15).

Verse 8 may be based on Exodus 34:6–7. The Hebrew here is literally: “YHWH our Elohim, **you** answered them, a God of lifting you are to them, and avenging their deeds.” The term *ēl nōsē*, literally, “God of Lifting/Bearing,” means a God who carries away sin, so a forgiving God! The following verb seems to be in parallel, so meaning “and (a God of) avenging their (sinful) deed.” The vowels were added later in the Middle Ages, and if this verb was given different vowels, it could mean “and purifying them of their (sinful) deeds.” Both meanings are true, of course, purifying and avenging, in different circumstances.

2 Corinthians 3:12–4:2. The theme of God’s glory shining in Moses’ face continues in this NT reading. Paul begins his argument in defence of his ministry back in 2:14, leading him to discuss the relationship between the old and the new covenants and to use a series of quotes and allusions from the Hebrew Scriptures/Tanakh to justify his argument. There were those who were attacking Paul’s ministry and argued for the superiority of Moses’ ministry. In basing his claims on the Tanakh, Paul confirms his (and the Corinthians’) high valuation of the old covenant and the Tanakh generally, but also he is able to show, from the same scriptures, that there is a greater glory in the new covenant “in Christ” (= the Messiah).

Notice, starting in chapter 3, Paul does not criticise the *content* of the old covenant, represented on the two tablets, but argues for the change now in the Messiah—from one degree of glory to another. He uses a characteristic rabbinic method of exegesis, by arguing *from the lesser to the greater* (*qal vachomer*, meaning *simple and complex*).⁴ The argument is: If the minor case has this or that property, then the major case must undoubtedly have it, and *vice versa*. Paul makes it clear that the old covenant (the one mediated by Moses) was glorious, but with this argument from the lesser to the greater, he claims that the new covenant is even more glorious. The glory of the words “carved in

⁴ In the Talmud, it was the first of seven interpretive principles set out by Hillel (y. *Sanh.* 7.11).

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letters on stones” (3:7) are compared with the internalised message written on the hearts of people by the Spirit.⁵ The one glory has been replaced by a “surpassing glory” (3:10).

There is a challenge with the correct translation in verse 7b regarding what was happening to the glory on Moses' face (and in 11 and 13, see NET translation and note 14). It is often translated as “that which was fading,” giving the impression that Moses veiled his face *so that* Israel did not see the fading nature of the glory. But this verb can also be translated as “which was becoming ineffective or inoperative.” So, the likely reason for Moses' veiling of the glory on his face was *so that* he would protect Israel from the censure of God, for gazing on the Glory/the Shekinah. Notice the fear the people had in Exodus 34:30 when they saw Moses' face shining was like the fear when they saw the glory of God on the mountain.

If this translation is correct, then Paul is saying in verse 13 that Moses protected Israel from the result or outcome of the glory, by veiling his face. But, if, like Moses, anyone turns to the Lord in the sanctuary, then the veil is removed and the glory shines into their hearts, giving freedom—and transformation into the image of God, from one degree of glory to another (vv. 15–18). Paul, therefore, seems to be using a rabbinic method (*midrash*), making the specific statement about Moses into a general truth or parable (*marshal*), that Moses is a type of anyone whose heart has been changed by the Spirit under the ministry of the new covenant! Moses here may be a prototype of the convert. “Whenever a person (like Moses) returns to the Lord, the veil is removed (by divine activity).” An encounter with the divine transforms us into his image! Paul's generalisation here is not only referring to Israel, of course, but also to all in Corinth, Jew and Gentile alike.

Paul uses the occasion of defending his ministry to highlight his christological stance based on the Tanakh. It is only in Christ that people are given eyes to see, minds and hearts to understand not only what is going on in God's plan but also to understand that Moses and all of the Scriptures still disclose God's purpose and still provide guidance to all God's people.⁶ Paul insists Christ-Messiah is the key to understanding the OT.

So, Paul explains (3:8–12), his confidence (and ours) is based on a new dispensation of the Spirit, having permanent glory. The reading of the “old covenant” (v. 14) or “Moses” (v. 15 = the Torah, also: 2 Chron 25:4; Mark 12:26; Acts 15:21) without the revelation of God's presence in the Spirit is like looking at something through a veil. However, when a person turns to the Lord who is the Spirit (v. 18), then the veil is removed (vv. 14–17), as with Moses when he entered into the meeting tent before the Lord.

⁵ New covenant Jer 31:31-33 (in MT; LXX 38:31) includes putting God's law in the mind, and writing it on the heart. Ez 11:19 and 36:26–27 says God will put a new spirit in his people, removing their heart of stone and giving them a heart of flesh. Notice that the context of Ez 11:19 also includes reference to the God's Glory and the Spirit (vv. 22–24).

⁶ Paul J. Sampley, J. Paul, “The Second Letter to the Corinthians: Introduction, Commentary and Reflections,” *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 11 (Nashville, 2000) 1-180.

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The veil is used in three ways in this passage:⁷

1. The veil on Moses' face (3:13).
2. The veil at the reading of the OT that remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away (3:14).
3. The veil on the hearts of the Israelites (3:15), a lack of enlightenment regarding the Messiah.

Today, in synagogues, there is a practice of having a veil on the Torah ark in the synagogue and also a “mantle” over the Torah scroll itself. However, this passage is arguing that the veil is now on people's hearts but it is removed “in Messiah,” when a person turns to the Lord. So we see here a Messianic-Christological reading of the OT—all Messiah-followers are in covenant relation with God—they belong to God's chosen people in the light of the new covenant.

The use of “new covenant” only occurs once in the Tanakh in Jeremiah 31:31, and in verses 32–33 it says this covenant is different from the one made with the Fathers—being about the law of God written *within* people, on tablets of flesh. The Talmud (*b. Ber.* 17a) later hints at this vision: “Study with all your heart and with all your soul to know my ways ... Keep my Torah in your heart and have awe of me before your eyes.”

Paul argues the new covenant is superior because the old dispensation was:

1. A “dispensation leading to death,” but the new one is that of the “Spirit” (3:7–8).
2. A “dispensation of condemnation,” but the new one is that of “righteousness” (3:9).
3. “Veiled” and “curtailed,” while the new one “is remaining” (3:11).

So, the new covenant (dispensation or ministry) has a “greater splendour” (note “more” in 3:8, 9, 11). In paraphrase: “For if what was curtailed (by Moses veiling his face) came with splendour, what is remaining (in the new covenant) must have much more splendour.”

It is interesting that the Essene community at Qumran saw itself as entering the new covenant (according to the Damascus Document, ca. 100 BCE), but now, Paul is using the term to describe the Christian community.⁸

⁷ Philipp Veilhauer, *Oikodome: Aufsätze zum Neuen Testament*, Vol. 2 (Kaiser, 1979), esp. 196–228.

⁸ For references to new covenant, see: Lk 22:30; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24—using a different word for “new”; also “better covenant” Heb 7:22; 8:6; “eternal covenant” Heb 13:20.

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Luke 9:28–43a – The Transfiguration of Jesus. Today is Transfiguration Sunday, and this reading sets out one Gospel's description. The incident reflects our theme of the transforming impact of the presence of God and is loaded with allusions to the Tanakh, for example:

- The mountain as a place of revelation parallels Sinai (Exod 24).
- The taking of lead figures up the mountain (Exod 24:1–2).
- The appearance of Jesus' face-change may echo Exodus 24:17. The dazzling also reflects the mystical experience in Daniel 12:3.
- Moses and Elijah appeared in glory with Jesus, and they spoke about his "departure." This word in Greek is *exodus* and obviously refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus (also 2 Pet 1:15 and other Jewish writings: Philo, *Virtues* 77; Josephus, *Antiquities* 4.189; Wisdom 3:1–3).
- Moses and Elijah may be related to Jesus in a number of ways:
 1. Their unusual departure (Deut 34:6; 2 Kgs 2:11).
 2. Their experience of God's glory (Exod 25-31; 1 Kgs 19.8-18.)
 3. Their pivotal prophetic status and their representation of the Law and the Prophets.
- The presence of the cloud recalls God's guidance of his people by the cloud (Exod 13:21–22; 14:19–20, 24; 16:10; 19:9, 16).
- The Greek word for "overshadow" appears three times in regard to God's cloud:
 1. In Exodus 40:35 (in the Gk LXX), the cloud had overshadowed the new tabernacle and the glory of the Lord was filling it.
 2. In Luke 1:35, it is used of the overshadowing Spirit on Mary, so conceiving the Holy One, the Son of God.
 3. Here in Luke 9:34, it is used of the cloud overshadowing Jesus. Whenever the cloud overshadows, God is indwelling!
- The voice coming from the cloud also finds parallel in the passages where Moses enters the cloud to meet with God (Exod 24:15–18).
- The voice instructs the disciples to "listen to him" (9:35). In Deut 18:15, Moses says God will raise up "a prophet like me" and says: "You must listen to him."
- The use of "My Son" resonates with Psalm 2:7, where YHWH installs his King on Zion, his holy hill. And note the use previously at Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:22).
- The use of "the Chosen" (literally, in 9:35) resonates with Isaiah 42:1, used of Israel as the Lord's chosen servant, but clearly only fulfilled perfectly in his Messiah.
- The reference to building booths resonates with the Feast of Tabernacles (*Sukkot*, Lev 23:33–43), which reflects themes of Jubilee and the coming Kingdom.
- This scene all took place "about 8 days after" (v. 27). The Eighth Day or Closing Assembly (*Atseret*) is a term used for a special Sabbath at the end of the week-long Festival of Tabernacles (Lev 23:36, 39). Is this also hinting at the close of the old covenant and the commencing of the new? Certainly, Jesus also rose from the dead on the eighth day, on the first day of a new week, so inaugurating the new kingdom.

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- In later scriptures, the cloud imagery signifies God's eschatological presence (Isa 4:5, 14:14, 19:1; Ezra 10:3–4; Dan 7:13–14)
- The end of this Gospel reading (37–43a) refers to Jesus coming down the mountain, not like Moses with two stone tablets in his hand, but with the power to heal a demon-possessed boy. It says after the healing: "They were all amazed at the majesty of God." Jesus' majesty is to be seen, not just in the glory of transfiguration, but also in the transformation of broken lives! In this incident, the disciples were powerless to heal the boy, and Jesus calls them "a faithless generation," and this is the same description Moses uses in his final speech regarding those in Israel who refuse to follow the Lord (Duet 32:5).

All these links show that the Tanakh talks of a Mosaic figure, who is also the Suffering Servant and the Davidic royal figure, appearing at the end of times.

ACNA Reading

1 Corinthians 12:27–13:13. Paul is talking here about the local church, the church in any town or city, and says it is like a body—it has many members, but it is one body—and then he says something surprising—just as the Messiah is! What a dramatic message—the local church is the body of the Messiah in each place where it exists! All differences amongst the members, whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, are now homeostatically integrated, as a body is! This body metaphor has hints in Israel (Isa 1:5–6; Philo, *Spec. Laws* 3.131).

The "most-excellent way" is the way of love, set out in chapter 13. The word translated "most excellent" is the origin of our English word "hyperbole"! Love is the topic that has drawn out the most hyperbolic language in literature, poetry and songs! Although this chapter is often read at weddings, notice that the actual context here is about living in Christian community as the body of the Messiah! The God of Love reflects his glory in the love of his people!

Paul uses typical Hebrew poetic parallelism here. It is worth meditating on the parallelism in verses 1–3, as set out below. Verse 1 is about *speaking*, verse 2 about *knowing* and verse 3 about acting—a comprehensive coverage regarding the importance of *agape*-love in our lives!

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1. If	I	speak in	the tongues	of men
			&	of angels,
	but I	have not love		
	I	have become	a noisy gong	
		or	a clanging cymbal	
2. & if	I	have	prophecy	
&		know	all mysteries	
&			all knowledge,	
& if	I	have	all faith	so as to remove mountains,
	but I	have not love		
	I	am	a nobody	
3. & if	I	dole out	all my goods,	
& if	I	deliver	my body	in order that I shall be burned,
	but I	have not love		
	I	profit/gain	nothing	

Jesus also makes it clear that the most excellent way is the greatest commandment! (Matt 22:36–40; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:25–28). Jesus knows that it is love that sustains community and it is at the centre of God's instruction/torah (Lev 19.18).⁹

The book of Psalms associates *agape* (when read in the Gk LXX) with true worship and faithfulness (English text: Ps 31:24, 40:16; 69:36; 97:10; 145:20).

Paul may have had Isaiah 56:6–8 in his mind here, about those who love the Lord. Note the context there includes Jerusalem being restored and the blessing of non-Jews.

Verse 1, “Tongues of men and of angels.” There was an extensive move in Second Temple Judaism (and particularly after the loss of the Second Temple in A.D. 70) towards mysticism, built on passages like Isaiah 6, Ezra 1 and 10, and Daniel 7:9–10. At Qumran, for instance, the discovery of the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* shows active aspiration to participate with the angels, worshipping God in his celestial temple. Paul is obviously aware of these desires to go “out of this world,” and to speak with angelic languages, but he insists on the practical importance of love.

Verse 12, “Face to face.” See Moses' encounter with God in Exodus and 2 Corinthians notes above, and Numbers 12:8; Deuteronomy 34:10.

Further Reading

- The Jewish Study Bible
- The Jewish Annotated New Testament: Ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi

⁹ See the CMJ UK lecture and notes by this author on Leviticus: <https://www.cmj.org.uk/youtube>.

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- *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary* (3 vols.): Robert Alter
- *NET Bible: Translation and Notes*
- *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* by Beale and Carson

About the Author. Dr Paul Hocking has had a varied career in education, leadership and management development, planting and pastoring of a social-enterprise church, supporting the leadership of many churches and Christian charities under the auspices of Evangelical Alliance Wales, and directing the Cymru Institute for Contemporary Christianity (2010–2019). He has qualifications in Microbiology, Public Health and Action Research, and a PhD on the Hebrew Bible focusing on the composition of the book of Leviticus. He has publications in health services management and the Hebrew Bible, including two papers for CMJ on the Decalogue and Leviticus. Paul is married with two adult children.