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BEYOND THE THINGS THAT ARE WRITTEN?
ST PAUL'S USE OF SCRIPTURE*

It seemed appropriate that a lecture given to honour a scholar whose concerns have been centred on the Old Testament, by someone whose field is the New Testament, should link together these two topics. I have therefore chosen to consider one aspect of the problem of the way in which the Old Testament is interpreted by New Testament authors: more specifically, the authority ascribed by one of them – St Paul – to the Old Testament in relation to the revelation of God in Christ.

Any New Testament scholar who is in any way interested in the problem of hermeneutics is well aware of the dichotomy between the approach of New Testament authors to 'scripture' and our own. A study of their methods of exegesis must surely make any twentieth-century preacher uncomfortable, for they tear passages out of context, use allegory or typology to give old stories new meanings, contradict the plain meaning of the text, find references to Christ in passages where the original authors certainly never intended any, and adapt or even alter the wording in order to make it yield the meaning they require. Often one is left exclaiming: whatever the passage from the Old Testament originally meant, it certainly was not this! Yet we cannot simply dismiss their interpretation as false, for they were certainly being true to the exegetical methods of their day. Moreover, although the biblical scholar's primary concern will always be with the original meaning of his material, the present tendency in hermeneutics is to emphasize that 'meaning' can never be limited to the intentions of an author. We may consider that the meaning which Paul gave to the prohibition to muzzle an ox in Deuteronomy 25. 4¹ would have seemed as foreign to the original author as it seems far-fetched to us; but it is at least worth asking *why* Paul interprets scripture in this kind of way. What was his underlying hermeneutical principle? – if, indeed, he had one.

The phrase which I have borrowed as the title for this lecture is a well-known *crux interpretum* in Paul.² He tells the Corinthians that he wishes them to learn what this means: 'not beyond what is written'. Alas! If only we *knew* what it meant! The most ingenious theory is, of course, that the phrase is a gloss, so that to ask what Paul meant by it is to chase a red herring. My own hunch is that Paul means 'You Corinthians must learn to

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keep to scripture' – i.e. you must not start trying to add philosophical notions to the basic Christian Gospel.³ If the phrase 'nothing beyond what is written' seems an odd way of putting this, it is worth remembering that for Paul the death and resurrection of Christ were 'in accordance with the scriptures', and that throughout these early chapters of 1 Corinthians, he is concerned to demonstrate – from scripture – the folly of human wisdom, with which the Corinthians want to clothe the gospel. For Paul, to stick to *this* understanding of scripture *is* to stick to the gospel.

But does Paul himself really stick to scripture? Or can he in turn be accused of going beyond what is written? Does he not often use scripture simply as a convenient peg on which to hang his arguments? Although he may frequently quote from scripture, the interpretation he gives it often lies beyond the obvious meaning of the text. His somewhat artificial exegesis leaves one wondering whether there is anything which it would not be possible for him to argue on the basis of scripture. Is there some unifying factor which explains his approach and sets limits to his imagination?

Perhaps the clearest example of Paul's apparent ability to do what he will with scripture is seen in his arguments about the Law. For in thumbing through the pages of a Greek text, one is soon aware of the fact that the greatest concentration of quotations from the Law is to be found in those passages where Paul is arguing *against* the Law. If Paul uses the Law to refute the Law, is he not quite blatantly wishing to have his cake and eat it? Is he really following his own advice to 'keep to what is written', or is he twisting its meaning to make it mean whatever he wants?

One of the key passages for understanding Paul's position on this matter is 2 Corinthians 3, and I would like to take some time in exploring this passage. Needless to say, it is full of problems, ambiguities and pitfalls. Nevertheless, it certainly repays closer examination.

The chapter begins with a brilliant metaphor: brilliant because Paul, in trying to defend his apostleship, describes the Corinthians themselves as his own credentials; since they owe their Christian faith to Paul, they cannot deny his apostleship without denying their own Christian standing. It is not long, however, before Paul's metaphor – typically – becomes a mixed one. 'You are our letter of recommendation,' he says, 'a letter written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not on tablets of stone but on hearts of flesh'. Paul has jumped from one image to another; put them together, and he is clearly in a mess, for while it is possible to speak metaphorically of the Spirit of God writing on men's hearts, it really is not much use trying to write on stone with ink! Nevertheless, we can see how he got there – via a clear echo of Jeremiah 31.

The chapter which follows is concerned with this same theme of Paul's ministry. Like other crucial passages in the Pauline epistles, the argument here is based on a comparison and contrast: not between Law and Gospel,

nor between Moses and Christ, but between the ministry of Moses and that of Paul. With amazing audacity, Paul defends his own ministry, and his ability to fulfil that ministry – albeit an ability which is given to him by God – by comparing himself favourably with Moses. Paul is minister of a new covenant, ratified not by letters engraved on stones, but by the Spirit at work in men's hearts. The argument is of course based on Exodus 34, the story of Moses' descent from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the Law, and quickly becomes an exposition of that passage. New Testament scholars at the moment delight in applying the term *midrash pesher* in a multitude of inappropriate places; if anything may properly be described as *midrash pesher*, however, 2 Corinthians 3 certainly qualifies. Paul gives a running commentary on the passage from Exodus, explaining it, not in terms of Moses, but in terms of its fulfilment in Christ.⁴ He begins, however, by contrasting the glory of Moses' ministry, which was concerned with letters engraved on stone – a ministry which, he says, brought only death – with that of the ministry of the life-giving Spirit: if the ministry of Law, which was able only to condemn, was accompanied by glory, how much *more* glorious is the ministry of righteousness – so much so, that the glory of the former pales into insignificance by comparison. It will be noted that Paul does not *deny* glory to Moses; indeed, he reminds us that, according to the Exodus story, the glory which shone from his face when he came down Sinai was such that the children of Israel could not gaze at it.⁵ Nevertheless, says Paul, this glory was *καταργουμένη*, v. 7 – in the process of abolition, transient, temporary. Moreover, if one could measure the strength of glory with the appropriate instrument – a doxameter perhaps? – the glory seen on Moses' face is nothing by comparison with the glory which belongs to the ministry of the Spirit, a ministry which endures. After all, when one is plugged into the mains, candles seem a pretty inefficient form of lighting.

Well then, if the new glory is so much greater than the old, surely this, too, will be too dazzling for human eyes to bear? If Moses was forced to cover his face with a veil, will not the Christian minister also need to cover *his* face – since now the irradiation hazard must be infinitely greater? This would be the logical conclusion of Paul's argument, but in fact Paul makes precisely the opposite point. Unlike Moses, Paul does *not* cover his face; he is in no way ashamed, and makes no concealment, but acts boldly – a sign of the liberty that comes through the Spirit.⁶ Earlier Paul's argument seemed to imply that he accepted the explanation for Moses' veil which is found in Exodus – that is, that it was worn to protect the children of Israel, because they were unable to gaze on the glory reflected from his face. Now, however, he gives a totally different explanation: Moses wore a veil in order to conceal the end of what was being done away with – by which he seems to mean the glory. It is true that some commentators try to

reconcile these two explanations by understanding the second as meaning that Moses deliberately concealed from Israel 'the fulfilment of the Law' – i.e. Christ, whose glory is greater than that of the Law.⁷ If the end of the Law is its fulfilment, this too will be too dangerous for human eyes. But there are great difficulties with this interpretation. Moreover, even if we were to accept it, we still would not have solved the basic inconsistency in Paul's picture. For he has told us that Israel could not gaze on Moses' glory: how, then, does it come about that Christians can now gaze on the overwhelming glory which belongs to Christ?

We need to recognise that Paul has – typically – moved in the course of his argument from one interpretation of the Old Testament image to another. In vv. 7–11 he compares the glory of Moses and of Christian preachers, and maintains that the latter far exceeds the former; if he were to pursue the 'how much more' theme he would be in trouble, for clearly Christian preachers ought to need much thicker veils than Moses ever wore! But in fact if we read Paul carefully we see that, like the narrative in Exodus itself, he does not mention Moses' veil at all at this stage of the argument – he simply refers to the dazzling glory which presumably necessitated the veil which is referred to later in the Exodus story. In this paragraph Paul concentrates on the superiority of the 'new' covenant to the old, and he does not explain how it is that Christians can gaze without danger on the overwhelming glory which is now revealed. In vv. 12 ff., however, he concentrates on the theme of concealment, symbolized by the veil, and explains why it is that he, unlike Moses, does not wear a veil. He seems to have overlooked the fact that his opponents, following on from the logic of vv. 7–11, might well give a very different explanation and retort: the reason why you, Paul, do not wear a veil is quite simply that you do not have any glory to conceal!

It is remarkable that none of the commentaries I have consulted acknowledges that there is a *non sequitur* in Paul's thought at this point – though several of them struggle to reconcile the conflicting motives which he attributes to Moses. But they cannot be reconciled – and they ought not to be. Paul is using the idea of glory in two different ways in the two paragraphs, and we shall misunderstand him completely if we try to combine the two arguments. And why *should* anyone expect Paul to apply the image consistently, after beginning the whole section with a glorious mixed metaphor? It is typical of Paul to explore an idea in this confusing but very rich way.⁸

In vv. 6–11, then, Paul makes four basic contrasts between the ministry of the new covenant and the ministry of the old. The old one functions through letter, *γράμμα*, the new through spirit, *πνεῦμα*; the former kills, the latter gives life; the former brings condemnation, the latter justification or righteousness; the former is temporary and the latter permanent. If even

the former is accompanied by glory, then of course the latter will possess much greater glory.

In vv. 12 ff., on the other hand, Paul explores the significance of the veil. Whereas Paul is bold (as indeed his opponents complain), Moses hid his face in order to conceal the end of what was being abrogated. But what was being abrogated? Is it the glory, as in v. 7? Now the logical answer to this question must be 'yes', since what Moses hid was his shining face; it is therefore the end of the glory which Moses concealed. But the word meaning 'glory', *δόξα*, is feminine, and the participle used here for 'abrogated' is either masculine or neuter; so it seems that Paul must be thinking also of what that glory represented – namely the ministry of Moses and the old covenant. But the words for both covenant, *διαθήκη*, and ministry, *διακονία*, are also feminine! The answer to this grammatical puzzle may be that Paul has used the phrases *τὸ καταργούμενον* and *τὸ μένον* in v. 11 of 'what is temporary' and 'what is permanent', and he repeats one of those phrases here to sum up everything which belongs to the old covenant. Moses concealed everything that was on the way out. Or perhaps Paul is referring back to *τὸ γράμμα*, for that is certainly being abrogated.

So Moses hid his face. 'But,' says Paul, 'the minds of Israel were hardened'. Once again, we seem to have a strange *non sequitur* in Paul's exposition. Why the 'but' at this point? And what is the logical connection between Moses' veil and the hardening of Israel's minds? The solution, I suggest, is found if we look back at the story of Moses' shining face in Exodus, and see how it is expounded by Paul in 2 Corinthians 3. 14 and 15. According to the account in Ex. 34. 29 ff., Moses came down from Mount Sinai carrying the two tablets of the Law, unaware of the fact that his face still shone as a result of his encounter with God. The people were naturally afraid to approach him, but Moses summoned them to him, and gave them all the commandments which the Lord had given to him. It is only at this stage, when the Law has been delivered to Israel, that Moses is said to have covered his face. After that, we are told, Moses always wore a veil – except when he went in to speak with the Lord. Then he would take off the veil, and keep it off until he had come out – with shining face – to tell Israel whatever the Lord commanded him; only when that was done would he cover his face again. Now it is immediately obvious that there is something rather odd about this narrative in Exodus: the reason which it offers for Moses' veil – namely the splendour of his face – does not fit what actually happens, since he fails to wear it when he addresses Israel.⁹ The picture given by the Exodus narrative seems to be of Moses wearing a veil *except* when he is receiving or passing on the commands of Yahweh – that is, when he is acting as the mediator of the Law; at such times, the veil must be removed, presumably in order that nothing may impede the revelation of God to his people. It is perhaps not surprising to find Paul giving two

contradictory interpretations of this story. The first, which seems to be assumed by Paul in his first paragraph, starts from the statement in Exodus 34. 30 that Israel was afraid to come close to the glorified Moses; the veil conceals from them this terrifying symbol of the presence of God. This is probably the way in which the passage was understood by Paul's contemporaries, since there is a Jewish tradition which speaks of the glory of Moses as remaining until his death.¹⁰ The other explanation is that which Paul offers in his second paragraph: when Moses is the 'conductor' of divine revelation, then he cannot wear a veil; but the glory which shines from his face is the reflection of God's glory – a glory which is presumably renewed when he speaks with God, and which could therefore well be understood – though Exodus does not say so – to fade at other times. Since, according to the Exodus story, Moses veiled his face at those times when he was not being 'charged' or passing the 'charge' on, Paul's interpretation is at least logical, even if the notion of Moses concealing what did not exist is a little quaint. Paul's whole argument in both sections is in fact based on the assumption that the glory on Moses' face did not last, an assumption which he does not bother to prove, perhaps because he is not arguing with Jews in 2 Corinthians; it seems unlikely that Jews would have accepted his bald statement that the glory of Moses was in any way temporary.¹¹

It is, then, this account of Moses removing and replacing his veil which Paul expounds in vv. 14–15. The clue to Paul's statement 'But their minds were hardened' is found in the words which follow: 'for until this very day the same veil remains unlifted at the reading of the old covenant – for it is in Christ that it is done away with'. What Paul is doing, I suggest, is to explain how it comes about that – contrary to the pattern set out in Exodus – the veil now obscures the old covenant when it is read. The reason, he says, is that the minds of Israel were hardened. *That* is why the veil could not be removed when the old covenant was read. Once again, we see how Paul makes a statement about Judaism which certainly would not have been accepted by his Jewish contemporaries – namely, that the true meaning of the old covenant is hidden from them. In talking about a veil which is not lifted at the reading of the old covenant, Paul would no doubt have in mind not only the veil on Moses' face in the Exodus story but the curtain which hid the Torah in the synagogue and which was of course removed whenever it was read.

What Paul describes is a two-way process – or rather non-process: the veil – the barrier which prevents something being seen – goes hand-in-hand with a refusal to see the truth. This same argument is used elsewhere in the New Testament of men's refusal to respond to the gospel, most notably in Mark 4 and Romans 11. So here: if Moses wore a veil, and if the veil remains unlifted from scripture to this day, it is because Israel's minds were hardened. Paul repeats his argument in v. 16, but now the veil seems to

have moved to Israel's heart; it is still the barrier which conceals the truth, however: 'until this day, whenever Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. But whenever he turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away'. At this point Paul returns to the Exodus story, and actually quotes from it, but he does not explain whether it is Moses who turns to the Lord – as in the original story – or Israel or Christian believers or perhaps all three; nor does he explain whether 'the Lord' means Yahweh (as in Exodus) or refers to Christ (as is normal in Paul). However, the close parallelism between vv. 14 and 16 gives us a clue to this problem. The veil, says Paul, is done away with in Christ (v. 14); it is removed when someone turns to the Lord (v. 16). His statement is an exposition of Ex. 34. 34: Moses removed the veil when he went in to the Lord. Insofar as the words refer to Moses, 'The Lord' must refer to Yahweh. But Paul is also applying the passage to the present situation. And since the veil is now on the heart of Israel, he must be thinking also of Israel turning to the Lord – that is to Christ, with whom the veil is abolished. The text from Exodus is given a new meaning, as it is applied to the time of fulfilment: Israel turns away from the letter to the Spirit.

But just as it seems as if the veil is being lifted from our minds, too, and we think that we begin to grasp Paul's meaning, he confounds us all by declaring: 'Now the Lord is the Spirit'. Paul is not, of course, concerned here with the niceties of trinitarian theology. Rather, he is returning to the contrast with which he began – the contrast between letter and Spirit. The Lord is the Spirit who writes directly on men's hearts. In turning to the Lord, Israel not only experiences the removal of the veil, but moves from a relationship with God which is based on letter to one which is based on Spirit.

So the chapter concludes with a clear contrast between Moses and Israel on the one hand and Christian apostles and believers on the other; the latter gaze with unveiled face at the glory of the Lord, and are changed from glory to glory. At this point, we perhaps see at last what Paul is doing; returning to the theme of the contrast between the two kinds of glory, he now demonstrates that the first was derivative, the second direct. Moses caught a glimpse of God's glory, and it was this which was reflected from his face, and which was seen by Israel – until even that was hidden from them; but Christians gaze directly at the glory of the Lord – a glory which, as Paul goes on to explain in chapter 4, is seen in Christ, who is the image of God. Moses plays a mediating role; this is why he is compared with Christian apostles and not with Christ, who is the source of glory. Whereas Moses concealed the glory which was reflected from his face with a veil, Christians wear no veil, but reflect the glory of the Lord constantly, as though in a mirror,¹² as they become like him in character; nor does their glory fade, for they are made progressively more glorious, as they are transformed into Christ's image.

Those who are entrusted with this ministry, then, have renounced underhand ways and cunning; they do not tamper with God's word, but declare God's truth openly. One is somewhat surprised by Paul's vigorous language here; it seems more likely that he is defending himself against attack than bringing an accusation against Moses. Certainly he is defending himself when he goes on to say 'even if our gospel *is* veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing'. But if *his* gospel is veiled, is he not in the same situation as Moses? The answer seems to be that, as Paul puts it, 'in their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ'. In the case of the Jews it was Moses – presumably acting under divine instructions – who veiled his face; but now it is Satan who tries to hide the light of the gospel from men and women. Once again, Paul states his case, rather than arguing it. The gospel is nothing less than Christ himself, and the glory which we see in him is the glory of God himself, who at the creation said 'Let light shine out of darkness'. Paul here links the light of Genesis 1. 3 with the glory revealed in Christ, which eclipses that of Moses. Interestingly enough, he is not the only New Testament author to do so. It is well known that the Fourth Gospel begins with a clear echo of Genesis 1; the opening verses explore the themes of creation, of life and light. But the author then goes on to link this with the figure of Moses, and to explore the account of the theophany in Exodus 33 and 34;¹³ he contrasts the giving of the Law through Moses with God's self-disclosure in Christ. No-one – not even Moses – has ever seen God, but the only Son has declared him to men, and we have seen his glory – a glory which makes known the character of God himself. The theme set out here is one which underlies the whole of John's gospel: Moses was the mediator of the Law, the one through whom God made his glory known, but the Son has not only seen God's glory – he is himself the *source* of divine glory. Christ is a much greater figure than Moses – the real contrast is therefore between Christians and Moses, since both are the recipients of revelation. The glory of Christ is greater than that of Moses, but it is nevertheless continuous with it, and Moses therefore bears witness to Christ, the lesser to the greater.¹⁴

In John 1, then, we find ideas very similar to those which Paul is handling in 2 Corinthians 3–4. But whereas John begins with the light of creation in Genesis 1 and moves from that to the story of Moses on Sinai in Exodus, Paul begins with Moses and uses Genesis 1. 3 as the climax of his argument. It seems likely that both authors are making use of a common tradition here, and it may well be that both of them are using the idea of wisdom, which has come to be associated in Jewish thought with the Law. The divine plan was with God from the beginning, and was revealed to Israel on Sinai, just as the divine glory was reflected by Adam in the Garden, and then glimpsed again when the Law was given. Later

rabbinic writings describe the Torah as having been hidden with God since before the creation.¹⁵ It is clear that for Paul the secret wisdom of God, hidden from creation and now revealed, is not the Law but Christ; he is the divine plan for mankind, the image to which we are being conformed, and the glory of God – and John expresses the same belief in his own terms. Over against the Jewish claim that God's eternal purpose was finally revealed at Sinai, we have the Christian claim that the Torah only pointed forward to the revelation made in Christ. As the result of a gigantic take-over bid, we find all the functions of the Law attributed to Christ.¹⁶

2 Corinthians 3–4 is an important passage, not simply because it is an interesting example of Pauline exegesis, but because in its central section it raises the question of the role of scripture. Now we must be careful at this point not to make too much out of what Paul says. His primary concern is not, after all, with scripture, but with the ministry of Moses. When he refers to the old covenant in v. 14 he of course means the account of the covenant made between God and Israel, not our Old Testament – though commentators sometimes fall into the trap of interpreting the phrase in this anachronistic way; nevertheless, Paul refers to the reading of the old covenant, and to Moses being read – so he is certainly thinking of the recital of scripture. The covenant is, after all, based on obedience to the demands of Torah, which are written in 'the book of the covenant'; in Paul's writings, 'Moses' and 'Law' are almost synonymous. Yet it is clear that Paul – however inconsistent he may sometimes be – could hardly have referred to scripture itself as 'abolished', when scripture provides him with his primary witness to Christ.

But if Paul's primary concern here is not the role of scripture, neither is it the role of that part of scripture which is more specifically known as the Law – though part of the confusion in this passage arises, I believe, from Paul's ambivalent attitude to the Law. Attempts have been made to find in rabbinic writings indications of an expectation that the Law would be abolished by the Messiah, or replaced by a new Law;¹⁷ but the whole idea runs counter to Jewish belief in the Torah as the revelation of God. If the Torah expresses God's eternal plan, set out in heaven before creation, it is scarcely likely that it will be subject to second thoughts! Paul himself, asked if he is abrogating the Law, replies with a characteristic *μη γένοιτο!*¹⁸ Closer to Paul's attitude is the idea that the age of the Law will be succeeded by the age of the Messiah, an idea which suggests fulfilment rather than cancellation. What is it, then, that is done away with in 2 Corinthians 3? What is it that possesses this characteristic of built-in obsolescence? It is not the Law itself, but what Paul terms the ministry of Moses. Now it is undoubtedly true that if we were to unpack what Paul meant by this, we should find ourselves talking about a relationship with God which is based

on works of the Law, and of obedience to the letter of that Law. But Paul is not concerned with that issue here, and there is no indication that his opponents in Corinth were demanding obedience to the Jewish Law. His principal concern here is the nature of his ministry – which, like the gospel itself, is a matter of *πνεῦμα*, not *γράμμα*.

However, it is precisely because the question at issue is the nature of Christian ministry that the role of scripture is fundamental: for Moses and Paul are both ministers of God's word. But whereas in the Mosaic dispensation the word is enshrined in the written page, in the Christian dispensation it is embodied in Christ. What the veil hides from Jewish eyes is the temporary character – not of scripture, but of the Mosaic covenant; when the veil is removed, then at one and the same time the temporary aspect of the Law and its abiding character are revealed – temporary, in so far as it is understood in terms of commands which claim to offer life to those who obey them, abiding in so far as it is seen as a witness to Christ. Christ has replaced the Law in Paul's thinking as the expression of God's purpose, character and glory; but Paul cannot simply ditch the Law. He transfers to Christ his former beliefs about the Law without denying the Law itself a role. If he seems to denigrate the Law, it is because he is concerned to emphasize the superiority of Christ. 'What once had splendour has come to have no splendour at all, because of the splendour that surpasses it.' Moses was a minister of the Law, Paul is a minister of Christ; Moses' ministry was temporary, not because the *Law* was temporary, but because the Law's *true* role is to be a witness to Christ – this is why, when Christ comes, the Mosaic ministry is superseded. At that stage it is abrogated, because the Law takes on its true role.

In looking at this passage in 2 Corinthians, we have noted several times that there are blatant contradictions and *non sequiturs* in Paul's argument. From our point of view, his exposition is inconsistent. His arguments do not stand up logically, and he juxtaposes conflicting images and interpretations of the biblical text. Yet I have no doubt whatever that from his point of view, Paul's argument seemed proper and acceptable. He is, after all, using a well-known method of biblical exegesis; and in this particular case the apparent contradictions in what he says are in part due to the peculiarities of the text which he is expounding, peculiarities which do not worry him in the way that they would worry us – and no doubt, were we expounding the passage, we would feel bound to deal with them. In our terms, Paul's own arguments about glory do not hold together; in his terms, both are valid interpretations of the text of Ex. 34. New Testament scholars perhaps need to take warning from this example of one of the dangers into which we easily fall when interpreting Paul – the danger of presupposing that all his exegesis will be consistent, and furthermore, that

his form of consistency will be similar to our own. In spite of warnings against the *Wörterbuch* approach, writers of monographs often tend to assume that Paul will always use words in the same way, always take a consistent line in handling a topic, always fight the same battles on the same basis. In fact, of course, there are plenty of examples of cases where Paul does nothing of the kind. The fact that in a single passage he can develop a clear line of argument and at the same time apparently tie himself in knots, can combine several images into a mixed metaphor, and apply one image in several different ways, is a salutary reminder that one should not try to force Paul into the straitjacket of a systematic theologian.

There is something else which we can observe in this passage, and that is Paul's way of approaching scripture. Paul starts from Christian experience and expounds scripture in the light of that experience, quarrying the Old Testament where he will. It is perhaps not accidental that, though Paul writes a *midrash* on this particular Exodus text, he does *not* write a commentary on the book of Exodus. In this respect, his approach is somewhat different from that of the sectarians of Qumran, even though both employ the so-called *midrash pesher* method, and both understand the text as fulfilled in their community. Once again, Paul's method is radically different from that of a modern biblical scholar, who will think it proper to try to discard all his presuppositions when he approaches the text. The difference in our approach is, of course, the result of our own conditioning, for we are trained in the historical method; we are quite confident that the Deuteronomic command to leave an ox unmuzzled was *not* intended as a hidden command about Christian ministers, that the story of Moses' veil has nothing to do with the refusal of Jews to recognize the truth of the gospel, that it is improper to read back Chalcedonian definitions into New Testament terminology. Paul's exposition of Ex. 34 illustrates clearly the difference between his approach and ours. For him it is axiomatic that the true meaning of scripture has been hidden, and is only now made plain in Christ; for the modern biblical scholar it is axiomatic that the biblical writings must be interpreted in relation to their contemporary setting, not treated as secret texts which make sense only to later generations. What seemed to Paul to be the true interpretation often seems to us to be a bizarre reinterpretation.

In treating scripture as holding a hidden meaning Paul was not, of course, alone. Indeed, to some extent, much of Christendom took the same view for centuries to come. Rabbinic exegesis presupposed meanings which had to be uncovered. Among Paul's contemporaries, Philo expounded the allegorical meaning of scripture, and the sect at Qumran adopted the technique of *midrash pesher* on the assumption that scripture contained a hidden eschatological meaning. The principle on which they worked is

summed up in this passage from the Habbakuk commentary:¹⁹

God commanded Habakkuk to write the things that were coming upon the last generation, but the fulfilment of the epoch He did not make known to him. And as for the words, *so he may run who reads it*, their interpretation (*peshet*) concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries (*razim*) of the words of His servants the prophets.

A similar idea is reflected in apocalyptic writing, for the basis of apocalyptic is that what is written contains a hidden meaning; the fact that apocalyptic writers wrote in the name of Old Testament characters, using Old Testament material and deliberately concealing their message in symbolic language, suggests that they understood the prophets also to have been writing material which contained secret meanings which needed to be unlocked. We find the book of Daniel, the one example of apocalyptic writing in the Old Testament, using the same terms as those found in the Qumran writings. When Daniel interprets the dream of King Nebuchadnezzar he says:²⁰ 'this mystery (*raz*) has been revealed to me in order that the interpretation (*p^eshar*) may be made known to the king'. Again, the king says to Daniel:²¹ 'I know that the spirit of the holy gods is in you and that no mystery (*raz/μυστήριον* LXX and Theodotion) is too difficult for you; here is the dream which I saw; tell me its interpretation (*p^eshar*).' Daniel is full of riddles; my guess is that the famous Son of man passages in 1 Enoch are attempts to unlock the meaning of one of them – namely the vision in Daniel 7.²²

The significant difference between Paul and his contemporaries is not, then, a question of method, since he uses techniques which would have been familiar to them, even though they are strange to us. Rather it is seen in his underlying assumption that Christ himself is the key to the meaning of scripture. It is not that Christ expounds the scriptures – as did the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran, and as was perhaps expected of the Messiah – but that he is himself the one about whom all scripture spoke. He is himself the *μυστήριον*, hidden by God through all ages and now revealed to men;²³ he is the 'Amen' to all God's promises.²⁴ In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul has moved beyond the idea of Christ as the passive *content* of scripture, to seeing him as the active *agent*; he is the Lord, whose glory is reflected in scripture; he is *τὸ πνεῦμα*, the life-giving spirit, the one who writes in men's hearts the truth to which scripture bears witness. The writers of the New Testament were convinced that God had acted in Christ; but they were convinced, too, that God had revealed himself in the Hebrew scriptures. It was necessary for them to hold together the divine origin, both of what they had received from the past, and of what they were experiencing in the present. One way was to speak of Christ as the fulfilment of scripture. Another was to see Christ as the blueprint, and regard the Law as the witness to him; the roles of the Law and the Messiah

are then in effect reversed, for though Christ followed the Law in time he is understood to have preceded it and ordered it. When this second approach is adopted, it means that Christ is seen as the key to the whole Old Testament; all scripture can be used, because it is all Christological. This is why one does not need to go beyond the things that are written. And it is why Paul himself, however fanciful his interpretation may appear to us, would not consider his exegesis to be eisegesis, for his interpretation of the text accords with his experience of Christ, and therefore does not stray beyond what is written.

I promised to look at Paul's use of scripture, and I have looked at only one passage: time has been too short for more than one exploratory dig. But, one may ask, does this particular academic exercise have any relevance to our own situation, and our own problems in interpreting the Bible? The two tasks must not, of course, be confused. I cannot use Paul's first-century methods of exegesis, and I therefore inevitably read and use the Old Testament in a different way. Yet the way in which New Testament authors tackled the problem of hermeneutics will necessarily be of concern to Christians.

In Brevard Childs' commentary on Exodus, I came across this comment on Paul's use of Exodus 34:²⁵

'Paul's interpretation of II Corinthians 3 is a classic example of genuine theological dialectic. He brings to the text the perspective of faith which had learned to hope in Christ . . . but he brings from the text a witness which conversely forms his understanding of God and shapes the Christian life through his Spirit.'

When I read these words I found myself saying 'Snap!', for in a lecture given last year I had written these words:²⁶

'We judge the Bible – but we ourselves are judged *by* it; our Christian experience and attitudes are themselves shaped by the Bible, so that though we interpret the Bible from our own standpoint, that standpoint is itself a response to the Bible. The Bible and the believer are engaged in a continuing dialogue.'

It is no accident that for Paul, as for us, scripture exercises this function of standing over against us, representing the givenness of the past, the otherness of God. What has often happened in the course of history, however, is that there has been no genuine dialectic between the text and experience. Sometimes enthusiastic eisegesis has run riot without any check – and as I typed these words, my front-door bell was rung, with a splendid sense of timing, by a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses! But let us not imagine that it is only the fringe sects that misuse scripture in this way: it is all too easy for Christians to misrepresent scripture by reading back into it the beliefs of a later age. Sometimes, again, the text has been interpreted in a rigid way which has left no room for ongoing Christian

experience: it has been understood, not as a witness to the truth, but as the embodiment of truth. One of the ironies of history is that Paul's own writings have often been fossilised – turned to stone and treated as *τὸ γράμμα*. Paul's own exposition of scripture demonstrates the absurdity of using him in this way. For him, God's word is living, not static, and scripture is the witness to that word, not its embodiment. As for his own words, they were addressed to particular Christian communities; he certainly did not imagine that he was writing universal principles which would be treated as valid in all ages and in every circumstance.

Like Paul, we need to learn *from* the text all that it can teach us, but we need to bring *to* the text our own experience of the ongoing activity of God. Only in this way can the dialogue continue.

NOTES

[1] 1 Cor. 9. 9.

[2] 1 Cor. 4. 6.

[3] M. D. Hooker, "Beyond the Things which are Written": an Examination of I Cor. iv. 6', *New Testament Studies* 10 (1963), 127–32.

[4] It has been argued that Paul is here adapting an earlier Jewish-Christian *midrash* on Ex. 34, which extolled the figure of Moses and the Mosaic Law. See S. Schulz, 'Die Decke des Moses', *Z.N.T.W.* 49 (1958), 1–30, D. Georgi, *Die Gegner des Paulus im 2 Korintherbrief* (Neukirchen 1964), pp. 274–82. But Paul's own Jewish background, together with his opposition to those who still gave a central role to the Law, is sufficient to explain his argument here.

[5] A similar interpretation is given in Philo, *De Vita Mosis*, II, 70. Both Paul and Philo in fact go beyond what is said in Exodus, which is that the people were afraid to come near Moses.

[6] For the link between boldness and the absence of a veil, see W. C. van Unnik, "With Unveiled Face", an exegesis of 2 Corinthians III 12–18', *Novum Testamentum* 6 (1963), 153–69. Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus* (London: S.C.M. Old Testament Library, 1974), p. 623, suggests that meekness might have been associated with Moses via Num. 12. 3, which is also an account of a theophany.

[7] E.g. J. Héring, *The Second Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians* (London: E.T., 1967), *in loc.*; R. P. C. Hanson, II Corinthians, London 1954, *in loc.*; A. T. Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (London, 1965), pp. 28 f.

[8] These inconsistencies do not in themselves provide evidence for the view that Paul has taken over an earlier *midrash* and failed to adapt it sufficiently for his purpose. Indeed, if he were doing this, one might perhaps expect him to produce a more consistent interpretation than he would if he were composing the *midrash* himself and incorporating traditional Jewish interpretations of the Sinai story.

[9] Cf. Childs, *op. cit.*, pp. 618 f.

[10] Targum of Onkelos, Deut. 34. 7.

[11] Childs, *op. cit.* pp. 621 f., suggests that Paul does not argue the point because his exegesis reflects a well-known Jewish tradition. However, there is no evidence for this.

[12] Many commentators understand *κατοπτρίζεσθαι* here to mean 'behold', but the parallel with Moses suggests that it is used with its alternative meaning 'reflect'. The difference in meaning is not great. It is only as they gaze at Christ that Christians are able to reflect his glory. If they are said to be changed from glory to glory through looking at the glory of Christ, then they are clearly understood to be reflecting that glory.

[13] See M. D. Hooker, 'The Johannine Prologue and the Messianic Secret', *New Testament Studies* 21 (1974), 40–58.

[14] John 5. 39.

[15] E.g. T. Bab. Shabbath 88b.

[16] Cf. Rom. 8. 3 f.; 10. 5 ff.

- [17] A full discussion can be found in W. D. Davies, *Torah in the Messianic Age* (Philadelphia, 1952).
- [18] Rom. 3. 31. [19] 1 Qp Hab. vii. 1-5.
- [20] Dan. 2. 30. [21] Dan. 4. 9.
- [22] Cf. M. D. Hooker, *The Son of Man in Mark* (London, 1967), pp. 43-7.
- [23] 1 Cor. 2. 7; Col. 1. 26.
- [24] 2 Cor. 1.20. [25] Op. cit., p. 624.
- [26] 'The Bible and the Believer', Peake Memorial Lecture 1978, *Epworth Review* 6 (1979), 88.