

The following exegetical Note is in answer to a question that was put to me sometime ago. Since it might hold an interest also for my Web site readers, I let it appear here.

The Veil on Moses' Face

The Crux of 2 Cor 3:12-18

Your question with regard to 2 Cor 3:16 is very interesting.

Admittedly the passage of 2 Cor 3:12-18 is the result of a complex thought process. Paul is comparing the ministration of Moses with his own ministry, as the preacher of the new Covenant, while seizing on the OT story of the covering of Moses' face with a veil. From this circumstance it is easy for Paul to jump to the larger conclusion or thesis, if you like, that the OT (ministration/covenant) hides rather than reveals. By a *tour de force*, in which type of argumentation he is a master, Paul applies the veil to the Israelites. Since the veil hides, and the Israelites have it on their heart, they cannot perceive the truth of the OT Word whenever they read it. This veil is taken away when one comes to be "in Christ", i.e. becomes a believer and follower of Christ. This situation with the Israelites/Jews is still going on: vs. 15. ἀλλ' ἕως σήμερον ἡνίκα ἂν ἀναγινώσκειται Μωϋσῆς, κάλυμμα ἐπὶ τὴν καρδίαν αὐτῶν κεῖται.

The whole thought process is dependent on Ex 34:27-35. When Moses came down from the Mount his face shone. This frightened Aaron and the elders (LXX Ex 34:30: εἶδεν Ααρων καὶ πάντες οἱ πρεσβύτεροι Ἰσραηλ ... καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν) or Aaron and the Israelites (Heb. text וַיִּרְא אַהֲרֹן וְכָל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל). Having reassured Aaron and the elders (LXX) or Aaron and the Israelites (Heb. text), they approached him and he spoke to them (29-33). Then the Israelites were gathered and heard the message

Moses had for them (LXX and Heb text). But when Moses finished speaking to them, he put a veil on his face, which he took off when he went to speak to the Lord. The reason for the putting on of the veil is not very obvious in Exodus. But Paul interprets it as owing to Moses' unwillingness for the Israelites to watch how the glory on Moses' face faded away (2 Cor 3:13b). The words *πρὸς τὸ μὴ ἀτενίσαι τοὺς υἱοὺς Ἰσραὴλ εἰς τὸ τέλος τοῦ καταργουμένου*, a final clause of purpose, then, would refer to the end (i.e. the fading away) of that which was to be made away with (i.e. the temporary glory that would soon cease to be = *καταργούμενον*). This seems to be the most natural meaning of the clause, which some interpreters have understood differently and variously, but to my mind, not correctly. Although *δόξα* is fem. in Greek, the whole complex idea of the glory and the shining face being of temporary character, etc., is correctly expressed by the neuter in Greek: that is why we get *τὸ καταργούμενον*. The neuter in Greek is often used of a situation that entails a complex idea rather than just one particular thing (i.e. a noun)). Paul's understanding, of course, implies that Moses did not wish the Israelites to see his face without the glory, the aura, the radiance, since this gave him an air of authority and was conducive to getting the stiff-necked Israelites be more amenable to treat Moses' word (= God's Word) with respect. Margaret E. Thrall (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, [ICC], Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1994, Vol. I, 258) even speaks of a certain deception on Moses' part! Even Paul sometimes indulged to what according to the letter might be thought of as reprehensible, but which he did only for a higher purpose (Machiavelian principle? or the purpose sanctifies the means? Well, perhaps not quite). Cf. 2 Cor 12:16: *ἀλλὰ ὑπάρχον πανοῦργος δόλω ὑμᾶς ἔλαβον*, "but being crafty, I took you by a stratagem/guile" (NB. *πανοῦργος* is very strong

with usually negative significance (cf. the substantive in 2 Cor 4:2; 11:3 and Eph 4:14) or in neutral sense, but at all events of one who is capable of anything).

Paul does not separate the time of Moses' speaking to the Israelites as God's mouthpiece (which acc. to Exodus was done without the veil) from the rest of Moses' commerce with the Israelites, when he had put on the veil, but treats it all as one idea. He thus chooses to dwell on the necessity of the veil, and this to him implies, on a metaphorical level, that the Israelites/Jews' understanding has been hardened (ἐπωρώθη τὰ νοήματα αὐτῶν). As Moses had to have a veil on his face, so, too, whenever the Israelites read (or rather hear read) the Word of God (= the OT), a veil lies on their hearts (Again, we must recall that 'heart' in Heb thought is not the organ pumping blood, but the faculty of reason, of thinking, which would correspond to the Greek νοῦς). But whenever Moses returned to the Lord, the veil was removed (i.e. he took it away), vs 16: ἤνικα δὲ ἐὰν ἐπιστρέψῃ πρὸς Κύριον, περιαιρεῖται τὸ κάλυμμα. This verse (16) is a free quote from Ex 34:34: ἤνικα δ' ἂν εἰσεπορεύετο Μωϋσῆς ἔναντι Κυρίου λαλεῖν αὐτῷ, περιηρεῖτο τὸ κάλυμμα ἕως τοῦ ἐκπορεύεσθαι. It is interesting that Paul does not quote exactly the Ex passage, evidently because it would tie the words too closely to the historical events of Moses' personal life and would not encourage a new application. Since his purpose in discussing the veil motif is to make it applicable to his contemporary Jews, Paul changes the original εἰσεπορεύετο to ἐπιστρέψῃ as well as the original περιηρεῖτο (Impf Middle of περιαιρ(έ)ω to περιαιρεῖται (Present Middle of the same verb. NB. the present often assumes a future meaning [this, of course, depends on the verbal idea and the context], so here, in its reference to the Jews' present conversion): "But when he (any Jew) returns to the Lord, the veil

will be removed” — an echo of “But when Moses went before the Lord to speak with Him, the veil/cover was removed until he came out [again]”. In this way the quote becomes a free quote (more than a mere allusion) which serves two purposes at the same time: Paul refers these words in the first place to Moses’ return to the Lord, when he removed the veil from his face, thus reminding the reader of the basis of his argument, but in a secondary and derived sense (as a new application of the OT meaning) he intends it to refer to the return of an Israelite/Jew to the Lord, i.e to his conversion (ἐπιστροφή, cf. ἐπιστρέψη) to Christ. The verb ἐπιστρέψη is in the singular because it is meant to recall the Ex 34:34 wording (ἡνίκα only here in the NT; περιαιρεῖται only 4 times in the NT), that is, to refer to Moses’ return to the Lord. Thus, just as Moses’ return to the Lord meant that the veil was removed from his face, so, too, whenever an Israelite/Jew returns to the Lord through faith in Christ, the veil is removed from his heart (and he can understand the true meaning of God’s message). Verse 16, then, has a double reference: first to Moses’ going before the Lord, and second, in a typical way, to the coming to faith of any Israelite/Jew.

My answer to your question, then, is that the sing ἐπιστρέψη refers to Moses as described in Ex 34:34. Vs 16 is a conscious quote of Ex 34:34 (to be sure, somewhat free, but nevertheless, a quote) with a new application on the believing Jew. Thus, it is not a case of reference to the nearest antecedent. The context and the tenor of the whole passage need to be taken into account.