

THE VEIL OVER MOSES' FACE IN PATRISTIC INTERPRETATION

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Riemer Roukema

The southern façade of the transept of the Strasbourg cathedral displays the statues of two women. One of them wears a crown, leans on a cross, and has a chalice in her left hand. With a mixture of amazement and pity – and perhaps also a sense of superiority – she looks at the other woman, who bears a broken staff and slightly bows her head, the eyes of which are veiled. Because of the veil the second woman cannot read the tablet that she holds downwards with her left hand.



In the Middle Ages it went without saying that these women represented the Christian church and the Jewish synagogue. The tablet held by the second woman symbolises the stones on which Moses had carved the Ten Commandments that the LORD had given him (Ex. 34:28). In medieval art these portrayals are far from unique. From the ^[p. 238] twelfth century onward a large number of statues, miniatures, and other pictures of the crowned church and the veiled synagogue has been preserved, of which the statues at the Strasbourg cathedral are the most renowned examples.¹

The image of the veiled synagogue derives from Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians, where the apostle says that Moses put a veil (κάλυμμα) over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at it (2 Cor. 3:13). His interpretation of the story narrated in Ex. 34:29-35 reads that the covenant given to the Israelites 'came in glory' on the one hand yet is a 'ministry of death' on the other hand (2 Cor. 3:7). Because of its glory (δόξα) the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face that shone after his encounters with the LORD. In Paul's view however the glory of the old covenant was temporary and is now set aside, since as a 'ministry of death' it is surpassed by the new covenant of the 'ministry of the Spirit', the glory of which endures (2 Cor 3:6-11). Paul then boldly compares Moses, who put a veil over his shining face, with the Israelites whose minds are hardened since the same veil now lies over their reading of the old covenant; he says that this veil is not lifted (μὴ ἀνακαλυπτόμενον) – which seems to mean that the veil no longer needs to be lifted – because it is now removed in Christ. He explicates that to this very day there is a veil over their hearts whenever Moses is read (2 Cor. 3:12-15). Thus we see that in Paul's interpretation the veil over Moses' face is first transposed to the reading of the old covenant and then to the hearts of the Israelites, which implies that they cannot properly read and understand Moses. Paul continues that 'when he turns to the Lord, the veil is removed' (2 Cor. 3:16); this seems an allusion to Moses who took off his veil whenever he entered the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 34:34), but the text is ambiguous, so that it may also be understood that as soon as someone, i.e. an Israelite, turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away so that he sees the glory of the Lord as did Moses. Paul adds that the Lord is the Spirit, who gives freedom (2 Cor. 3:17). As a conclusion, he affirms that 'all of us', i.e., those who share in the Spirit of the new covenant because they believe in Christ, with unveiled faces reflect as in a mirror the glory of the Lord and are ^[p. 239] being transformed into the same image from one (degree of) glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18). Whereas Paul spoke about a veil over the Israelites' hearts in 2 Cor. 3:15, the expression 'with unveiled faces' in the last verse suggests the image of the veiled faces of the Israelites who do not reflect the glory of the Lord, because they do not properly understand Moses.

In this complicated passage Paul probably reacts to opponents who apparently had another view on the relationship between the old and the new covenants, and on the letter of the Mosaic law and the Spirit of Christ (see also 2 Cor. 3:1-6). This chapter has been discussed in many commentaries, articles, and monographs, and it is not our intention to repeat the painstaking analyses of other exegetes.² It may be observed in passing, however, that the

¹ See H. Schreckenberg, *Die Juden in der Kunst Europas. Ein historischer Bildatlas* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht / Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1996), 17-18, 33-70, 253 (esp. 18, 47). The original statues of the Strasbourg cathedral are from ca 1230 and are displayed in the Musée de l'Oeuvre Notre-Dame adjacent to the cathedral; the statues on the façade are copies. The pictures on the preceding page have been taken from <http://www.jmrv.com/France/Strasbourg>. [Images of the veiled Moses and of the veiled synagogue are also discussed by B. Britt, *Rewriting Moses. The Narrative Eclipse of the Text* (JSOT.S 402; London, New York: T & T Clark International, 2004), 91-111.]

² See, e.g., W.C. van Unnik, "'With Unveiled Face", an Exegesis of 2 Corinthians iii 12-18', in idem, *Sparsa Collecta*, Vol. 1 (NT.S 29; Leiden: Brill, 1973), 194-210 = *NT 6* (1964), 153-169; L.L. Belleville, *Reflections of Glory. Paul's Polemical Use of the Moses-Doxa Tradition in 2 Corinthians 3.1-18* (JSNT.S 52; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991; M.E. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, Vol. 1 (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994),

expression ‘the old covenant’ (ἡ παλαιὰ διαθήκη) occurs for the first time in Christian literature in 2 Cor. 3:14, and that by this term Paul did not yet mean a canonical collection of books in the sense of the Old Testament (which is also a translation of ἡ παλαιὰ διαθήκη), since he only used and perhaps coined it in contradistinction to the expression ‘new covenant’, which he mentioned in 2 Cor. 3:6 and which is inspired by Jer. 31:31 (38:31 LXX).³ Furthermore, we will not go into the precise relationship between Paul’s words and the story in Ex. 34:29-35, nor into the Exodus story itself, which is fairly complicated as well. In this *Festschrift* in honour of Cornelis Houtman, we may simply refer the reader to his own extensive treatment of the passage in his elaborate Commentary on Exodus.⁴

This contribution is devoted to a remarkable aspect of the reception history of Paul’s interpretation of the Exodus narrative of the veil over Moses’ face. From the third century onward the Church Fathers testify to the interpretation that, when the Jews read the Old Testament (for [p. 240] they so understand the term ‘the old covenant’ in 2 Cor. 3:14), there is a veil over their faces since they do not see that spiritually it speaks about Christ.⁵ Of course, this is also the message of the statues of the Strasbourg cathedral and the numerous other portrayals of the veiled synagogue.

The earliest attestations: Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Irenaeus

Origen of Alexandria (ca 185-254 CE) is the first Church Father who often refers to Paul’s text of the veil over the reading of the old covenant as a hermeneutical principle for the interpretation of the Old Testament, but this does not mean that he was the first one to exploit this image. Yet earlier testimonies are scarce.

Clement of Alexandria says in the fourth book of his *Stromateis* (from ca 200 CE) that in the second epistle to the Corinthians the apostle calls the common teaching of faith ‘the savour of knowledge’ (τὴν ὄσμην τῆς γνώσεως, 2 Cor. 2:14).⁶ This means that even the first stage of faith draws a believer to the higher level of *gnosis*.⁷ Without any introduction he then freely quotes 2 Cor. 3:14, ‘For unto this day the same veil remains on many in the reading of the old covenant, not being unveiled by turning to the Lord’.⁸ He adds ‘on many’ (τοῖς πολλοῖς) to the usual text and derives ‘by turning to the Lord’ (κατὰ τὴν πρὸς τὸν κύριον ἐπιστροφήν) from 2 Cor. 3:16 (ἡνίκα δὲ ἐὰν ἐπιστρέψῃ πρὸς κύριον). Clement continues his discourse without any further reference to this passage. We may conclude that he related the image of a veil over the reading of the books of the old covenant to their interpretation according to the two levels of faith and *gnosis*. He seems to mean that even those who have faith, by which he means the first stage of faith in Christ, share in the true *gnosis*, to which apparently belongs the Christian understanding of the Old Testament.

In ca 210 CE Tertullian of Carthage confirms in his discussion of Marcion’s text of the Pauline epistles that our passage is considered a [p. 241] testimony to the Jewish lack of understanding of the books of Moses. He dismisses Marcion’s view that the Jews still expect the Christ of the Creator – in contrast to the other Christ of Marcion’s good God – so that their

237-297; S.J. Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel. The Letter/Spirit Contrast and the Argument from Scripture in 2 Corinthians 3* (WUNT 81; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1995).

³ See W.C. van Unnik, ‘ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη – A Problem in the Early History of the Canon’, in idem, *Sparsa Collecta*, Vol. 2 (NT.S 30; Leiden: Brill, 1980), 157-171 (163-165) = *StPatr* 1 (1961), 212-227.

⁴ C. Houtman, *Exodus* Vol. 3 (HCOT; Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 715-733.

⁵ Houtman, *Exodus* 3, 733, refers to the interpretations of Origen and of Gregory of Nyssa. I was not able, however, to find the reference to Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Mosis* II, 218.

⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* IV,100,1 (SC 463).

⁷ Cf. W. Volker, *Der wahre Gnostiker nach Clemens Alexandrinus* (TU 57 = V,2; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag / Leipzig: J.C. Hinrichs Verlag, 1952), 330.

⁸ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* IV,100,2 (SC 463). Cf. M. Mees, *Die Zitate aus dem Neuen Testament bei Clemens von Alexandrien* (QVetChr 2; Bari: Istituto di Letteratura Cristiana Antica, 1970), 172.

hearts are still veiled when they read Moses.⁹ Tertullian reacts that the veil over Moses' face was a prefiguration (*figura*) of the veil over the heart of the Jewish people, and that the whole dispensation (*ordo*) of Moses was a prefiguration of Christ, who is unknown to the Jews, but known to the Christians. He affirms that when a Jew who is covered by Moses' veil turns to faith in Christ, he understands that Moses spoke about Christ.¹⁰ Next, Tertullian's interpretation of 2 Cor. 4:4, 'The god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelievers', reads that 'God has blinded the minds of the unbelievers of this age', whom he supposes to be the Jewish unbelievers among whom the gospel is still covered by Moses' veil.¹¹ Apparently this interpretation is also inspired by 2 Cor. 4:3, 'And even if our gospel is veiled (κεκαλυμμένον), it is veiled to those who are perishing', but Tertullian does not quote this text.

Although Tertullian is far more explicit than Clement, we may conclude that these two Fathers understand Paul's text on the removal of the veil over Moses' face as a witness to the Christian interpretation of the books of Moses and, consequently, of the Old Testament as a whole. Undoubtedly this appeal to 2 Cor. 3:12-18 did not originate with Clement and Tertullian but far earlier. However, clear testimonies to earlier references to this text with regard to the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament are not extant. Only a slight allusion may be found in Irenaeus of Lyons' work *Against Heresies* (ca 180 CE), in which he refers at length to the teachings of the 'presbyters' of the preceding generations, who taught that the Scriptures of the old covenant should be read as prophecies and prefigurations of the new covenant.¹² Irenaeus says that when a Christian understands the Scriptures in this way, 'the others cannot gaze at the glory of his face' (in the extant Latin translation, *uti reliqui non possint intendere in faciem gloriae eius*, cf. 2 Cor. 3:7). Yet for this element Irenaeus does not refer to Ex. 34 or 2 Cor. 3 but to [p. 242] Dan. 12:3, 'The wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and among the many righteous as the stars for ever and ever'.¹³

Origen

Right at the beginning of his systematic work *On First Principles* (ca 229-230 CE) Origen refers to Paul's words on the veil over Moses' face. He discusses the opinion of Christians who deduced from 'our Scriptures' that God is a body, since he is called 'a consuming fire' (Deut. 4:24) and 'spirit' (Jn 4:24). These Christians adhered to the Stoic view that fire and spirit (or: breath, πνεῦμα) are material, corporal phenomena.¹⁴ With reference to the Old and the New Testaments Origen explains that texts that present God as a light and as a fire should be interpreted spiritually, for which he quotes 2 Cor. 3:6, 'the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life'. Quoting 2 Cor. 3:15-17 he explains that as long as someone has not turned to the spiritual understanding he has a veil over his heart, which implies a crasser understanding (in Latin translation, *intellegentia crassior*) of the Scriptures. Alluding to 2 Cor. 3:16-18 he says that when we turn to Lord, where the holy Spirit reveals spiritual knowledge, we will with unveiled faces see as in a mirror the glory of the Lord in the holy Scriptures.¹⁵

It is noteworthy that in this chapter Origen does not confront the Jews and their understanding of the Old Testament, but Christians of whom he judges that they interpret the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments too literally. To be sure, in his subsequent

⁹ Tertullian, *Contra Marcionem* V,11,6 (SC 483).

¹⁰ Tertullian, *Contra Marcionem* V,11,7-8 (SC 483).

¹¹ Tertullian, *Contra Marcionem* V,11,9 (SC 483).

¹² Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* IV,20-32 (SC 100).

¹³ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* IV,26,1 (SC 100). The Valentinian reference to the heavenly aeon Achamoth (Wisdom) wearing a veil like Moses in Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* I,8,2 (SC 264) is not clearly related to the interpretation of the Old Testament but to 1 Cor. 11:10 (where κάλυμμα is read instead of ἐξουσίαν).

¹⁴ Origen, *De Principiis* I,1,1 (ed. H. Görgemanns, H. Karpp, *Origenes Vier Bücher von den Prinzipien* [TzF 24; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1976]); cf. *Homiliae in Lucam* 26,1 (SC 87).

¹⁵ Origen, *De Principiis* I,1,2 (TzF 24).

homilies and biblical commentaries he often applies this hermeneutical principle especially to the Old Testament in that it should usually be interpreted spiritually, i.e., in view of Christ to whom one should convert.¹⁶ A well-known and traditional example of such an [p. 243] interpretation is that spiritually and mystically the exodus from Egypt applies to the conversion from darkness to the light of knowledge. In the silence and rest of the ‘desert’ the convert is trained to keep God’s laws and is acquainted with the heavenly teachings, until he crosses the Jordan and enters the Promised Land, which means that by the grace of baptism he reaches the mode of life prescribed in the gospel. Furthermore, in Origen’s interpretation the exodus from Egypt also applies to the soul who leaves the darkness of this world and the blindness of the physical body and moves to paradise or to another heavenly abode.¹⁷ Origen finds a confirmation for such spiritual interpretations in the prayer of Ps. 118:18 LXX (119:18 MT), ‘Unveil (ἀποκάλυψον) my eyes, and I will behold the wondrous things out of your law’.¹⁸ On some occasions he explicitly rejects the Jewish interpretation,¹⁹ and once he expressly opposes those Christians who do not understand why Old Testament books like Leviticus and Numbers are read in the church.²⁰ Even when Origen does not say so expressly, his emphasis on the spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament is generally directed against those who doubted the value of the Old Testament for Christians, and against the Marcionites and Gnostics who interpreted it as being inspired by a lesser God.²¹

However, Origen emphasizes that there may also be a veil over one’s heart when one reads the Gospels and the Pauline epistles. With reference to this image he explains, e.g., that one should not interpret the message of the nearness of the Kingdom of heaven (Mat. 4:17) literally but spiritually, since it essentially concerns Christ’s mystical [p. 244] indwelling in the soul.²² Furthermore, he maintains that the spiritual gospel is not only about Christ incarnate and crucified (1 Cor. 2:2), but more precisely about Christ as God’s Word, Wisdom, and Spirit, and about the glory that is imparted to the advanced (‘perfect’) believers (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6).²³ He also says that Christians who are slaves of the world, of money and carnal desires, have not yet truly turned to the Lord and still have a veil over their hearts.²⁴

It may be concluded that Origen did not apply Paul’s passage on the veil over Moses’ face primarily to the Jews, even if he did consider them to be blind to the spiritual, Christian

¹⁶ E.g., Origen, *De Principiis* IV,1,6 (TzF 24); *Homiliae in Genesim* 2,3; 6,1; 7,1; 11,3 (SC 7^{bis}); *Homiliae in Exodum* 12,1-3 (SC 321); *Homiliae in Leviticum* 1,4; 8,5; 10,2; 13,2 (SC 286, 287); *Homiliae in Numeros* 4,1,3; 4,2,1; 17,3,2; 17,4,5; 24,1,2; 26,3,4 (SC 415, 442, 461); *Homiliae in Jesu Nave* 2,1; 3,1; 9,8 (SC 71); *Homiliae in Samuelem* 1,3 (SC 328); *Commentarium in Canticum* III,12,4; IV,2,17 (SC 376); *Homiliae in Jeremiam* 5,8 (SC 232); *Homiliae in Ezechielem* 3,1; 14,2 (SC 352); *Contra Celsum* V,60; VII,20 (SC 136, 147, 150), etc. Occasionally he also underlines the importance of the literal sense of an Old Testament text, e.g. that God created the world (*De Principiis* III,5,1 [TzF 24]). Exceptionally Origen says in *Contra Celsum* VI,70 (SC 147) that the Jews and the Samaritans were fulfilling the commands of the law literally and symbolically (σωματικῶς καὶ τυπικῶς), but this recognition is not in line with the context; H. Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum. Translated with Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 384, translates ‘literally and outwardly’.

¹⁷ Origen, *Homiliae in Numeros* 26,4,1 (SC 461).

¹⁸ Origen, *Homiliae in Genesim* 12,1 (SC 7^{bis}); *Homiliae in Leviticum* 1,1; 6,1 (SC 286); *Catena in Psalmos* 118,18 (SC 189); *Contra Celsum* IV,50 (SC 136).

¹⁹ E.g., Origen, *Homiliae in Genesim* 7,6 (SC 7^{bis}); *Homiliae in Leviticum* 4,7 (SC 286); *Homiliae in Jesu Nave* 9,4 (SC 71); *Catena in Psalmos* 118,18; 118,98 (SC 189); *Commentarium in Canticum* II,4,37; II,8,21 (SC 375).

²⁰ Origen, *Homiliae in Numeros* 7,2,4 (SC 415).

²¹ See, e.g., Ptolemy, *Epistula ad Floram* (SC 24^{bis}).

²² Origen, *Commentarium in Matthaeum* X,14 (SC 162).

²³ Origen, *Homiliae in Exodum* 12,4 (SC 321); *Commentarium in Joannem* XXXII, 336-343, 357 (SC 385). See R. Roukema, ‘La prédication du Christ crucifié (1 Corinthiens 2,2) selon Origène’, in G. Dorival, A. Le Boulluec (eds), *Origeniana Sexta* (BETHL 118; Louvain: University Press / Peeters, 1995), 523-529.

²⁴ Origen, *Homiliae in Exodum* 12,4 (SC 321); cf. *Homiliae in Jeremiam* 5,8 (SC 232).

sense of their Scriptures, but to Christians, namely, those who did not value the spiritual sense of both Old and New Testaments, and those whose lifestyle he considered blameworthy. Twice in his extant works he relates his view of a veil over the gospel to 2 Cor. 4:3, where Paul speaks about the ‘gospel that is veiled to those who are perishing’.²⁵ Although this passage does not deal with Christians but with ‘those who are perishing’ and with ‘unbelievers’ (2 Cor. 4:4), it evidently inspired Origen to say that there can also be a veil over the hearts of Christians when they read the books of the new covenant.²⁶

Church Fathers after Origen

In the period after Origen many Church Fathers refer to Moses’ veil as an image of the literal understanding of the Mosaic law and of the Old Testament as a whole, and to the unveiled faces of those who understand its spiritual sense. Usually these Fathers preach or write to Christians, but often enough they explicitly mention the Jews as those who do not properly understand their own Scriptures since their faces are veiled, which means that they do not see that spiritually their Scriptures speak about Christ. A witness from the third century is ^[p. 245] Methodius of Olympus,²⁷ and from the fourth and early fifth centuries we might refer, as examples, to works by Basil of Caesarea,²⁸ Gregory of Nyssa,²⁹ Didymus of Alexandria,³⁰ Cyril of Alexandria,³¹ Ambrose of Milan,³² Jerome,³³ and Augustine of Hippo.³⁴ Of course, Paul’s passage is also explained in the commentaries on the second epistle to the Corinthians by the unknown person who is now called Ambrosiaster (ca 375 CE)³⁵ and by Theodoret of Cyrus (ca 445 CE).³⁶

Particular attention should be paid to John Chrysostom’s sermon on 2 Cor. 3:7-18 that he held in Antioch (391-397 CE).³⁷ It is striking how severely he criticizes the Jews for their unbelief. He calls them senseless (ἀγνώμονες), emphasizes that the fault of the hardness of their minds lies with themselves, and speaks about their crassitude and carnal mind.³⁸ The background of John’s anti-Jewish remarks was that in Antioch part of the Christians were attracted by the Jewish ceremonies and participated in synagogue services, so that he wanted to fight the Jewish influence on his flock.³⁹

Another sermon on the veil over Moses’ face has been delivered by the Syrian Jacob of Sarug (ca 451-521 CE). Although he does not explicitly quote 2 Cor. 3, he deals with the

²⁵ Origen, *Homiliae in Jeremiam* 5,8 (SC 232); *Commentarium in Joannem* XXXII, 337 (SC 385).

²⁶ This is confirmed by his allusions to 2 Cor. 4:3 in *Commentarium in Matthaem* XVI,9 (GCS 40); *Commentariorum Series in Matthaem* 56; 139 (GCS 38), and by his quotations of this text in *Catena in Johannem* 92 (GCS 10); *Commentarium in Epistulam ad Romanos* I,5 (3) (AGLB 16).

²⁷ Methodius, *Convivium* 5,7 (SC 95); *De Cibis* 8,5; *De Sanguisuga* 9,5 (GCS 27).

²⁸ Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 21,52 (SC 17^{bis}).

²⁹ Gregory, *Commentarium in Canticum Canticorum* prologus (GNO 6, 6).

³⁰ Didymus, *Commentarium in Zachariam* II, 300 (SC 84).

³¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate* I (PG 68, 141BC); *Glaphyra in Exodum* III (PG 69, 533B-536D).

³² Ambrose, *Expositio Psalmi CXVIII*, 3,22-23; 17,27-28 (CSEL 62).

³³ Jerome, *Commentarium in Ezechielem* III,12,10-16, l. 1327-1329 (CCSL 75); *Commentarium in Ecclesiasten* 2,9 (CCSL 72).

³⁴ Augustine, *De utilitate credendi* 3,9 (OSA 8); *Confessiones* VI,4,6 (OSA 13); *Sermones* 74,5 (PL 38); *De Spiritu et Littera* 17,30 (CSEL 60); *De Civitate Dei* XVI,26,2; XVII,7 (OSA 36).

³⁵ Ambrosiaster, *Ad Corinthios secunda* 3,10-18 (CSEL 81,2).

³⁶ Theodoret, *Interpretatio Epistulae secundae ad Corinthios* 3,10-18 (PG 82).

³⁷ John Chrysostom, *In Epistulam secundam ad Corinthios Commentarium* 7 (PG 61). Cf. K. Prümm, ‘Der Abschnitt über die Doxa des Apostolats 2 Kor 3,1-4,6 in der Deutung des hl. Johannes Chrysostomus. Eine Untersuchung zur Auslegungsgeschichte des paulinischen Pneuma’, *Bib.* 30 (1949), 161-196, 377-400 (esp. 176-196).

³⁸ John Chrysostom, *In Epistulam secundam ad Corinthios Commentarium* 7,2-3 (PG 61, 445-446).

³⁹ H. Schreckenberg, *Die christlichen Adversus-Judaeos-Texte und ihr literarisches und historisches Umfeld (I.-II. Jh.)* (EHS.T 172; Frankfurt a.M. etc.: Peter Lang, 1999⁴), 320-321.

veil over the spiritual interpretation of numerous Old Testament ceremonies and passages [p.246] that, in his opinion, the Jews did not understand correctly. In the end he says rhetorically, ‘Oh Jew, remove the veil from your mind, and look upon Moses, on whose face Christ is depicted’⁴⁰

Although most of these authors might surely have been acquainted with Origen’s interpretation of the Pauline pericope, his view that Christians may also have a veil over their faces when they read the books of the new covenant can be found only rarely in this period. However, it comes back in a catenae fragment of Didymus of Alexandria’s interpretation of 2 Cor. 3:7-16. Didymus, also called ‘the Blind’ (ca 313-398 CE), is careful not to disparage the Mosaic law and points at its ‘glory’. He admits that even the knowledge of the Christians (‘the saints’) is partial and will pass away at the coming of the knowledge of the truth (cf. 1 Cor. 13:8-12). He explains that the veil over Moses’ face also has a symbolical meaning and that without the veil Moses points at the allegorical and spiritual sense of his law. Without mentioning the Jews he says that even now Moses is veiled to some people (τισιν), and that this is also true of Jesus who does not reveal his mysteries to all, since to those outside he speaks in parables (Mk 4:11). Didymus maintains that the gospel is veiled for those who are outside and speaks without veil to those who are inside and understand its mystical meaning.⁴¹ We may conclude that in his interpretation – at least as far as it has been preserved – Didymus did not blame the Jews for their ‘literal’ understanding of the Mosaic law, but responded to Christians and perhaps also unbelievers who did not accept or were unaware of the spiritual meaning both the Old and the New Testaments.

An isolated reminder of Origen’s view of a veil over the gospel occurs in Jerome’s *Treatises on the Gospel of Mark* (ca 400 CE). Commenting on Mk 1:14, ‘But after John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee’, Jerome says that the historical meaning of this text is clear, but that it also has a secret meaning, just as Jesus spoke in parables to the crowds. He explains, [p. 247]

that there is not only a veil over the law, but for the ignorant there is also a veil over the gospel. The Jew listens, and he does not understand; for him a veil is laid over the gospel. The Gentiles listen, the heretics listen, and they have a veil. Therefore let us leave the letter [or: literal meaning] with the Jews, and follow the Spirit [or: spiritual meaning] with Jesus; not because we condemn the letter of the gospel – for all that is written actually happened – but because we ascend some steps to greater things.⁴²

Yet it is remarkable that Jerome does not say explicitly that Christians may have a veil over their faces when they read the gospel, but that this is true for Jews, Gentiles, and heretics. His spiritual interpretation of Mk 1:14 – an interpretation that is undoubtedly inspired by Origen⁴³ – reads that John the Baptist stands for the law, and Jesus for the gospel. That John was put into prison, means that the law has come to an end over and that ‘we go from the law to the

⁴⁰ Ed. P. Bedjan, *Homiliae selectae mar-Jacobi Sarugensis*, Vol. 3 (Paris, Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1907); translation S.P. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Spirituality* (The Syrian Churches Series 13; Poona: Anita Printers, 1988), 86 (l. 407-408); originally in *Sobornost* 3 (1981), 70-85. See also Jacob of Sarug, *Homiliae adversus Judaeos* 3,27-44 (PO 38,1), where he alludes to 2 Cor. 3:13-18.

⁴¹ K. Staab, *Pauluskommentare aus der Griechischen Kirche aus Katenenhandschriften gesammelt und herausgegeben* (Münster i.W.: Aschendorff, 1984²), 22-23.

⁴² Jerome, *Tractatus in Marci Evangelium* 2, 20-39 (translation l. 32-39) (CCSL 78). Cf. D. Brown, *Vir Trilinguis. A Study in the Biblical Exegesis of Saint Jerome* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1992), 137-138.

⁴³ Apart from its content, this also comes to light in his remark ‘Galilaea in lingua nostra interpretatur κατακυλιστή’ (‘In our language Galilee means “circular”’; *Tractatus in Marci Evangelium* 2, 54); the Greek term originated from Origen’s text that Jerome had before him. Cf. Origen, *Commentariorum Series in Matthaëum* 141 (GCS 38, 293).

gospel'. He also considers it significant that Jesus came into Galilee; he did not go to Judea or to Jerusalem, but to Galilee of the Gentiles (cf. Mat. 4:15).⁴⁴

In general such allegorical interpretations of the Gospels are well known from those Church Fathers who stood in the Alexandrian exegetical tradition, but it appears that in the extant literature after Origen the image of the veil over one's face is rarely applied to the New Testament writings. This means that, in line with Paul, the veil was generally considered to lie over the hearts of the Jews and over the hearts of those Christians who had to be instructed on the Christian meaning of the Old Testament.

Appeals to Jews to take off the veil

In catechesis and in sermons Christians often heard that the Old Testament had to be interpreted spiritually with regard to Christ and that those who did not understand this had a veil over their hearts or faces, which they supposed to be true especially of the Jews, although it could also be true of Christians themselves. It is not surprising, therefore, that there were Christian preachers who wanted to make this [p. 248] hermeneutical stance known not only to Christians, but also to Jews. As we saw with Jacob of Sarug, Jews could even be addressed rhetorically in a sermon for Christians. Three examples of appeals to Jews to take off the veil will be presented.

The least prominent one stems from the kingdom of the Himyarites in Southern Arabia (nowadays Yemen), where Gregentius, the bishop of Taphar (or Zafar), and the Jew Herban had a four-day dialogue in ca 535 CE.⁴⁵ This took place in a turbulent period in which the Christians had been persecuted by Yusuf, a Himyarite king who had converted to Judaism or rather to a Judaizing kind of monotheism, and the Ethiopians had come to conquer the Himyarite kingdom.⁴⁶ The Greek minutes of the dispute deal with the interpretation of numerous Old Testament texts. Gregentius does not quote from the Pauline epistles (although there is a reference to Jesus' appearance to Paul on the way to Damascus, Acts 9:3-6),⁴⁷ but he does allude to Paul's interpretation of the veil, when he says to Herban that one should not be a Jew, hindered by the veil over one's heart.⁴⁸ Gregory concludes the dialogue with a prayer, after which an earthquake is said to take place and Jesus appears on a cloud, whereupon the Jews (or perhaps: the Judaizing monotheists) convert and are baptized.⁴⁹

For the second and third examples we turn from the east to the west. Evagrius, a person who apparently originated from Gaul and is otherwise unknown, wrote a Christian-Jewish dialogue in Latin ca 423 CE.⁵⁰ In this dialogue the Christian Theophilus tries to convince the Jew Simon that Christ is divine, for which he quotes many Old Testament texts. When Simon is not convinced, Theophilus says,

You are erring, Jew, and your mind (*sensus*) is covered with the veil of ignorance. Not without reason the most holy Moses veiled his face with the cover of a veil, for a veil has covered your hearts. So draw near to the [p. 249] Lord and believe that Christ is God and the Son of God, and the cover of ignorance will be taken away from your senses (*de sensibus tuis*).⁵¹

⁴⁴ Jerome, *Tractatus in Marci Evangelium* 2,40-57 (CCSL 78).

⁴⁵ *Disputatio cum Herbario Iudaeo* (PG 86,1, 621-784). See Schreckenberg, *Adversus-Judaeos-Texte*, 397-399.

⁴⁶ W.W. Müller, 'Himyar', *RAC* 15 (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1991), 303-331 (312-319); I. Gajda, 'Monotheïsme en Arabie du Sud préislamique', *Chroniques Yéménites* 2002, <http://cy.revues.org/document132.html>.

⁴⁷ *Disputatio cum Herbario Iudaeo* (PG 86,1, 777C).

⁴⁸ ... καὶ τὸ κάλυμμα χαλεπῶς ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ. *Disputatio cum Herbario Iudaeo* (PG 86,1, 749D-752A).

⁴⁹ *Disputatio cum Herbario Iudaeo* (PG 86,1, 776B-781A).

⁵⁰ Evagrius, *Altercatio legis inter Simonem Iudaeum et Theophilum Christianum* (CCSL 64, 233-302).

⁵¹ Evagrius, *Altercatio* 3, 59-64 (CCSL 64, 265).

Although it is clear that this dialogue is fictitious and must serve the edification of Christians against Judaizing tendencies, it is quite imaginable that the appeal to the Jew to take off the veil also occurred in real life.⁵²

This surmise is confirmed by the third example, which can be found in Gregory of Tours' *Histories* (575-594 CE).⁵³ He narrates that in 576 CE Avitus, the bishop of Avernum in Gaul (nowadays Clermont-Ferrand), had exhorted the Jews to dispose of the veil over the Mosaic law and to understand that spiritually it deals with Christ. After Avitus had prayed that the veil of the letter might be torn from them, one of the Jews requests to be baptized at Easter; from this calendar reference it may be deduced that Avitus's prayer took place on Good Friday. Gregory reports that after the Jew had been baptized, another Jew poured rancid oil on him, whereupon the bishop had to prevent the crowd from stoning the Jew who had committed the insult. On Ascension Day, however, when the bishop strode from the cathedral to the basilica of Saint Martin, the crowd who followed him attacked the synagogue of the Jews and demolished it. The following day Avitus sent envoys to the Jews in order to exhort them to believe in Christ or to leave the town. After much deliberation more than 500 Jews decided to believe in Jesus as the Son of God who had been promised by the prophets and to be baptized.⁵⁴

The tradition to pray for the Jews on Good Friday is attested by the *Gelasian Sacramentary* (seventh century CE) and by the *Roman Missal* that was composed by the Council of Trent (1570). The beginning of the prayer reads,

Let us also pray for the unbelieving (*perfidis*) Jews, that our God and Lord may take away the veil from their hearts, that they too may acknowledge Jesus Christ our Lord.⁵⁵ [p. 250]

Most likely the Christian usage of this image of Moses' veil is the reason why, except for the targums, it is hardly referred to in ancient rabbinical literature.⁵⁶

Assessment

This survey of the patristic reception history of Paul's reception of an Exodus narrative may fill the reader with mixed feelings. In accordance with the apostolic tradition of the 'catholic' church, Christians appropriated the Old Testament as a canonical collection of books that witnessed prophetically and allegorically to Jesus Christ, in whom they recognized the LORD God. One of the images that served as a means of this appropriation was the story about Moses wearing a veil, first exploited by Paul in his correspondence with the young Corinthian church and applied to the Jews who were supposed to be veiled when reading the books of Moses. Initially the Christians were a tiny group within Judaism. Since they also accepted Gentile believers, they not only came to distinguish themselves from Judaism, but also – at least in the Roman empire – gradually grew more influential than the Jews and finally greatly

⁵² Cf. Schreckenberg, *Adversus-Judaeos-Texte*, 367-368.

⁵³ Gregory of Tours, *Historiarum libri decem*, ed. R. Buchner (AQDGMA 2; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1970).

⁵⁴ Gregory, *Historiae* V,11 (AQDGMA 2). See Schreckenberg, *Adversus-Judaeos-Texte*, 419-421.

⁵⁵ *Sacramentarium Gelasianum* (PL 74, 1105B); cf. the *Liber Sacramentorum Engolismensis* 673 (CCSL 159C).

⁵⁶ P. Billerbeck, *Die Briefe des Neuen Testaments und die Offenbarung Johannis erläutert aus Talmud und Midrasch* (Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch 3; München: C.H. Beck, 1926), 516, could not find any reference. It is true that Moses' veil is not mentioned in, e.g., J.Z. Lauterbach, *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* 1-3 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1949); H. Bietenhard, *Midrasch Tanhuma B 1* (JudChr 5; Bern etc.: Peter Lang), 416; S.M. Lehrman, *Midrash Rabbah. Exodus* (London: Soncino Press, 1961³), 544-546; J.J. Slotki, *The Babylonian Talmud. Index Volume* (London, New York: Soncino Press, 1990), 262, 289 (s.v. 'veil' and Ex. 34:29-35); L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* 3 (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968⁵), 143-144; idem 7 (Index by B. Cohen, 1938), 322-330, 489 (s.v. 'Moses' and 'veil'); however, a few references have been detected by Belleville, *Reflections of Glory*, 69-70.

outnumbered them. The eventual result was a considerable difference between Paul, who expressed sorrow for his fellow Jews ‘according to the flesh’, whose hearts he considered veiled and for whose salvation he prayed (Rom. 9:1-5; 10:1), and the Gentile bishops and Church Fathers who were convinced that the Jews were blind to the spiritual meaning of their own Scriptures and needed to turn to Christ. For it makes a difference whether a Jew admonishes other Jews, or whether Gentile Christians express the same, or similar, admonitions to the Jews. The disasters to which the attitude of Christian superiority led are well-known. There is a direct connection between the Christian interpretation of the veil ^[p. 251] over Moses’ face and the demolition of the synagogue of Clermont-Ferrand in 576.

Yet, strangely enough, to a large extent it is thanks to such allegorical interpretations that the Old Testament was preserved in ‘catholic’ Christianity and eventually spread among non-Jews in the whole world. As a consequence, millions of believers ever since have been fortified and challenged by its stories, have prayed its Psalms, and have been inspired by its commandments, prophecies, and wisdom. Thanks to the preservation of the Old Testament in the church, it has remained clear where Jesus had his ancestral and spiritual roots. Moreover, images such as the unveiled church and the veiled synagogue have been most influential not only for the position of the Old Testament in the church but also for academic research. For if the church had not interpreted the Old Testament as a witness to Christ and the Christian message, thereby giving it a secure place in its liturgy, and if, inconceivable though this may seem, Marcion or the Gnostics and Manicheans had won the spiritual battle, academic research into the writings of the Old Testament canon would have been considered far less relevant than has in fact been the case.

Research on the Old Testament is nowadays concerned mainly with its historical meaning, although more and more attention is being paid to its reception history as well.⁵⁷ In this paper we have dealt with one chapter of this reception history. While the Church Fathers embraced the Old Testament as scripture, their hermeneutical stance, inspired in part by 2 Cor. 3:12-18, led to an attitude of Christian superiority over Judaism, with frequently tragic results for Jews living in a predominantly Christian society. But does the patristic elaboration of Paul’s passage on the veil over Moses’ face inevitably lead to a position of Christian superiority over Judaism and even arrogance? Origen shows that this is not necessarily the case.⁵⁸ By applying the image of the veil over the Old Testament to the New Testament writings as well, he warns Christians that their faces may also be veiled, so that they are blind to the deeper, spiritual meaning of the gospel. It must be admitted that Origen’s creative hermeneutical principle can even be applied critically towards the Mosaic law, as we saw in Jerome’s comments on Mk 1:14. Although we would not want ^[p. 252] to plea for arbitrary allegorical interpretations of the New Testament, we think that, notwithstanding the Protestant confession concerning the *perspicuitas sacrae Scripturae*,⁵⁹ Origen’s hint at a veil over the New Testament writings might have been and may still be a wholesome corrective for Christians who tend to be arrogant towards those who do not share their beliefs, especially Jews. We would claim that, of all the patristic writers that we studied for this paper, Didymus the Blind gave, hermeneutically speaking, the most perspicuous interpretation of Paul’s pericope, in that he emphasized that even the knowledge of Christians is partial and will pass away at the final coming of the knowledge of the truth.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ E.g., C. Houtman, K. Spronk, *Ein Held des Glaubens? Rezeptionsgeschichtliche Studien zu den Simson-Erzählungen* (CBET 39; Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

⁵⁸ Cf. N. De Lange, *Origen and the Jews. Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations in Third-century Palestine* (UCOP 25; Cambridge: University Press, 1976).

⁵⁹ See G.C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture* (Studies in Dogmatics; Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 267-298.

⁶⁰ I thank Prof. Dr. Martin C. De Boer for his helpful suggestions for this paper and for his linguistic corrections.