

THE LAW KILLS BUT THE GOSPEL GIVES LIFE:  
THE LETTER-SPIRIT DUALISM IN 2 CORINTHIANS 3.5-18

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The passage 2 Cor. 3.5-18 describes the contrast between two different ministries: one associated with the letter (γράμμα), another with the spirit (πνεῦμα). The antitheses fleshed out in this passage are emphatic: ‘a new covenant’ (v. 6) versus ‘the old covenant’ (v. 14), ‘spirit’ versus ‘letter’ (v. 6), ‘kills’ versus ‘gives life’ (v. 6), ‘ministry of the spirit’ (v. 8) versus ‘ministry of death’ (v. 7), ‘ministry of justification’ versus ‘ministry of condemnation’ (v. 9), and ‘the permanent’ versus ‘what was set aside’ (v. 11). This contrast has been understood in different ways. I will argue that this contrast is best understood along the traditional lines of the dualism between law and gospel.

First, we will see how the competing interpretations have serious difficulties in accounting for all the evidence. Second, the positive arguments for the traditional interpretation will be laid out. Finally, I will attempt to demonstrate that this is the interpretation that fits best with the ‘abrogation statements’ in vv. 11-16.

*Weaknesses of the ‘Letter Plus Spirit’ Interpretation*

According to an interpretation that seems to be gaining popularity, the contrast between the letter and the spirit should not be understood dialectically, but rather in continuum. In the old covenant, the law was externally written, on the stone tablets, whereas in the new covenant, the law was internally written, in the hearts of the believers. The contrast between the old and the new covenants is explained by taking the

spirit as that which enables the believers to keep the old covenant law.<sup>1</sup>

A similar interpretation insists that the contrast here depicted is not between the old and the new covenants as such. ‘The letter’ refers not to the Old Testament law, but to a defective understanding of the law, the law as something merely written.<sup>2</sup> Both of these interpretations share the conviction that the function of the spirit according to this passage is to enable the believer to keep the law. They also agree that the new covenant can be described as ‘the law plus the spirit’. In the following we will see how these views hold up to the textual data.

1. Carol Kern Stockhausen, *Moses’ Veil and the Glory of the New Covenant* (AnBib, *Investigationes Scientifcae in Res Biblicas*, 116; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1989), p. 73-74; N.T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), pp. 182-83, 192; Scott J. Hafemann, *Paul, Moses, and the History of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 284, 361. Similarly, Martin Hasitschka, “‘Diener eines neuen Bundes’”. Skizze zum Selbstverständnis des Paulus in 2 Kor’, *ZKT* 121 (1999), pp. 291-99 (293). Cf. also E.-B. Allo, *Saint Paul seconde épître aux Corinthiens* (EBib; Paris: Gabalda, 2nd edn, 1956), pp. 84-88; W.J. Dalton, ‘Is the Old Covenant Abrogated (2 Cor 3.14)?’, *ABR* 35 (1987), pp. 88-94 (90).

2. So Jacob Kremer, ‘Denn der Buchstabe tötet, der Geist aber macht lebendig: Methodologische und hermeneutische Erwägung zu 2 Kor 3,6b’, in Josef Zmijewski and Ernst Nellessen, *Begegnung mit dem Wort* (Festschrift Heinrich Zimmermann; BBB, 53; Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1980), pp. 219-50 (226); Karl Kertelge, ‘Buchstabe und Geist nach 2 Kor 3’, in James D.G. Dunn (ed.), *Paul and the Mosaic Law* (WUNT, 89; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1996), pp. 117-30 (122-24); Jens Schröter, ‘Schriftauslegung und Hermeneutik in 2 Korinther 3. Ein Beitrag zur Frage der Schriftbenutzung des Paulus’, *NovT* 40 (1998), pp. 231-75 (255); and James D.G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p. 149. A more remotely related interpretation is that which sees the contrast as between two different interpretations of the law, the γράμμα referring to an incorrect, legalistic interpretation, whereas the πνεῦμα refers to the correct one (C.K. Barrett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, 2nd edn, 1990], p. 113; J.-F. Collange, *Enigmes de la deuxième épître de Paul aux Corinthiens: Etude exégétique de 2 Cor. 2:14—7:4* [SNTSMS, 18; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972], p. 64; Thomas E. Provence, ‘Who Is Sufficient for These Things?’, *NovT* 24 [1982], pp. 54-81 [66-67]; and C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, II, [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979], p. 854; Anacleto de Oliveira, *Die Diakonie der Gerechtigkeit und der Versöhnung in der Apologie des 2. Korintherbriefes: Analyse und Auslegung von 2 Kor 2,14-4,6; 5,11-6,10* [NTAbh, 21; Münster: Aschendorff, 1990], p. 424). For a comprehensive survey of different interpretations, see Randall C. Gleason, ‘Paul’s Covenantal Contrasts in 2 Corinthians 3.1-11’, *BSac* 154 (1997), pp. 61-79 (70-78).

The first observation that seems to confirm such an interpretation is the clear allusion to the prophecy of Jer. 38.33 (LXX), which describes the new covenant as characterized by the writing of the law on the heart. 'The law' is often taken as a reference to the Mosaic law. The thrust of this passage in its context in the book of Jeremiah is that the new covenant is contrasted to the old by virtue of its inwardness. No longer is there a need for a law to be imposed from outside. Therefore, there will be no need to 'teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord' (Jer. 31.34).<sup>3</sup>

It should be noted that this 'internalism' is the point Paul draws from his use of Jer. 38.33 (LXX) and Ezek. 11.19; 36.26 (vv. 2-3).<sup>4</sup> He does not affirm that it is the torah that has been written on the hearts (v. 3).<sup>5</sup>

3. William McKane observes, 'Here one enters an ideal world where Law imposed from outside and inward moral assent co-exist very uneasily...and one's inclination is to ask whether Law has not become redundant' (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, II [ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996], p. 818). Cf. O. Palmer Robertson, who argues that the term 'law' has a broad use in Jeremiah. It stands for the Lord's teaching generally (*The Christ of the Covenants* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980], p. 282).

4. For a discussion of Paul's use of the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, see Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, 'The Midrash in II Corinthians 3: A Reconsideration', *JSNT* 9 (1980), pp. 2-28; E. Stegemann, 'Der neue Bund im Alten. Zum Schriftverständnis des Paulus in II Kor. 3', *TZ* 42 (1986), pp. 97-114; Richard E. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 122-53; Otfried Hofius, 'Gesetz und Evangelium nach 2. Korinther 3', in *idem*, *Paulusstudien* (WUNT, 51; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1989), pp. 75-120 (88-107); Stockhausen, *Moses' Veil*; David A. Renwick, *Paul, the Temple, and the Presence of God* (BJS, 224; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), pp. 47-156; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, 'Glory Reflected on the Face of Christ (2 Cor 3:7-4:6) and a Palestinian Jewish Motif', *TS* 42 (1991), pp. 630-44; Hafemann, *Paul*; Schröter, 'Schriftauslegung'; Linda L. Belleville, *Reflections of Glory: Paul's Polemical Use of the Moses-Doxa Tradition in 2 Corinthians 3.1-18* (JSNTSup, 52; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), pp. 20-79. A summary of Belleville's work can be found in her article, 'Tradition or Creation? Paul's Use of the Exodus 34 Tradition in 2 Corinthians 3.7-18', in Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders (eds.), *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel* (JSNTSup, 83; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 165-86.

5. Correctly Heikki Räisänen, *Paul and the Law* (WUNT, 29; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1983), p. 245; Schröter, 'Schriftauslegung', p. 250. Contra Thomas R. Schreiner, who assumes that the law is the content of the writing of v. 3 (*The Law and its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993], p. 130).

This stress on inwardness is a repeated concern in the Pauline literature (Rom. 12.2; Gal. 5.22; Eph. 4.23). Conformity to the will of God is something that springs from the heart, as being made new by encounter with the gospel of Christ. The means by which this new heart comes about, however, is not the law, but the new covenant, whose character is fundamentally different from that of the law.

The inter-textual link to Exod. 32-34 has also been understood as an argument for the 'letter plus spirit' interpretation. Based on his own reading of this text, Scott J. Hafemann, a main proponent of this interpretation, maintains that the reason for Moses' veiling his face was to prevent the Israelites from dying. With hardened hearts and without the spirit they could not see the glory of God and live.<sup>6</sup> The problem with this interpretation is that this purpose is not made explicit by Paul. He says that Moses put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from staring, not to keep them from dying (v. 13). Another problem is that it is not the glory that is concealed, according to Paul, but the *τέλος* of the glory.<sup>7</sup> Nor does this interpretation pay attention to the sequence of events in Exod. 34. While Moses was speaking to the Israelites, they feared to approach him because of the glory. But it was not until after he had finished speaking to them that he put on the veil (Exod. 34.33). Whereas the purpose of the veil is not explained in the Exodus story, Paul apparently understands the purpose to be a prevention of continued staring.<sup>8</sup> Paul does not call attention to the ethical incompetence of the wilderness generation as much as to the temporary nature of the old covenant (see further below).

Apart from here, the letter–spirit contrast is found only in Rom. 2.27-29 and 7.6. Hafemann finds confirmation in these verses that the letter is associated with possession of the external law, without obedience to its commandments. The spirit, on the other hand, refers to the keeping of the law as distinct from the mere possession of it.<sup>9</sup> To this I reply that, in Rom. 2.29, the *πνεῦμα*, in contradistinction to the *γράμμα*, is associated with the ethical ability of certain Gentiles. This is not an ability to keep the Mosaic law as such, however, as is seen from the

6. Hafemann, *Paul*, pp. 223, 353, 361.

7. Margaret E. Thrall, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, I (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), p. 260.

8. Belleville, *Reflections of Glory*, p. 208.

9. Hafemann, *Paul*, pp. 177-80. See also Provence, 'Who Is Sufficient', pp. 64, 66; Oliveira, *Die Diakonie der Gerechtigkeit*, pp. 162-63.

fact that the Gentiles in question are uncircumcised in flesh (v. 27), contrary to the requirements of the Mosaic law.<sup>10</sup> The πνεῦμα, then, is associated with an inward ability (circumcision of the heart) which is not necessarily in conformity with the Mosaic law.

As an argument for the interpretation that identifies the new covenant with the old plus the spirit, it has been noted that the contrast Paul describes is not between the covenants as such, but between the ministry of Paul and the ministry of Moses. It is maintained that no contrast between the covenants is intended.<sup>11</sup> The ministries that Paul contrasts, however, are the ministries of the old and new covenants as such. The ministry of death was written with letters on tablets of stone (v. 7), an unambiguous reference to the law from Sinai.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the premise for Paul's argument that Moses' ministry is inferior is that the old covenant is inferior. His three *kal va-homer* arguments (i.e., arguing from the lesser to the greater) in vv. 7-11 are based on the assumption that the new covenant is superior. Since the new covenant is superior to the old covenant, the ministry of the new covenant must be more glorious than the ministry of the old. The old covenant has death as its result and, by extension, that function is made to apply to Moses' ministry as well (vv. 6-7).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, in Paul's argument Moses and his ministry

10. C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (BCNT; London: A. & C. Black, 2nd edn, 1962), p. 59. Similarly, James D.G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC, 38A; Dallas: Word Books, 1988), p. 127.

11. Wright, *The Climax*, p. 182. Similarly, Oliveira, *Die Diakonie der Gerechtigkeit*, p. 69. Dunn thinks that the mention of the hardening of the hearts is intended as an excuse on the part of the Israelites for not seeing the end of the old covenant (*Paul*, pp. 148-49). The recollection of the hardening, however, is a strongly pejorative statement concerning the Israelites, as the preceding, adversative ἀλλά indicates. Whenever the verb πωρόω is used in the New Testament, the connotations are strongly negative; it is used to characterize the lost (Jn 12.40; Rom. 11.7), who do not receive the word of God (Mk 6.52), or to rebuke the disciples (Mt. 8.17). For the negative connotations of the word against its background in the Old Testament, see Hafemann, *Paul*, pp. 366-67.

12. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, 'The New Covenant in the Letters of Paul and the Essene Documents', in Maurya P. Horgan and Paul J. Kobelski (eds.), *To Touch the Text: Biblical and Related Studies in Honor of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), pp. 194-204 (196-97).

13. Stockhausen, *Moses' Veil*, pp. 79, 114. Thomas E. Provenca objects to this interpretation that it is often based on identifying the opponents of Paul as proponents of a higher view of the old than of the new covenant. This is methodologically unsound, he maintains, for apart from 2 Cor. itself we do not know anything about

are so closely related that 'Moses' can be used as a synonym for 'the old covenant.' (Compare v. 14: ἐπὶ τῇ ἀναγνώσει τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης, and v. 15: ἀναγινώσκηται Μωϋσῆς).<sup>14</sup>

### *The New Covenant as Contrasted to the Old*

A better reading seems to be, therefore, that the term γράμμα and the characteristics killing and condemnation are employed here to characterize the Mosaic covenant as such, a covenant that is now obsolete.<sup>15</sup> This interpretation conforms with v. 10 where it is said that the old covenant has had glory, but now, on account of the surpassing glory of the new, does not have any glory.<sup>16</sup> If the new covenant is defined as

Paul's opponents. Moreover, if Paul were contrasting the old and the new covenants here it would not help the case he has to argue: his qualification as a minister of the word of God ('Who Is Sufficient', p. 69). As we have seen, however, strong contrasting language is found in the passage itself, and the negative statements are associated with ἡ παλαιὰ διαθήκη. These observations are not contingent upon the identification of Paul's opponents. As for Paul's case, he is here arguing that, as a minister of the new, spiritual covenant, Paul's letter of recommendation is accordingly a spiritual letter, not a written letter, which is characteristic of the old covenant. This line of argument is aimed precisely at what Paul has to refute: the need for a letter of recommendation (3.1).

14. Hofius, 'Gesetz und Evangelium', p. 76. Contra Hafemann (*Paul*, p. 284) and Dunn (*Paul*, p. 149), who are reluctant to see a reference to the law, insisting that the term νόμος is not used. Schröter also warns that this pericope should not be understood as a treatment of the law, the term νόμος not being used ('Schriftauslegung', pp. 236, 250). It is not uncommon, however, in the New Testament that γράμμα can refer to the torah (Jn 5.47; 2 Tim. 3.15; and possibly Jn 7.15; Acts 26.24). Cf. Reinhold Liebers, *Das Gesetz als Evangelium: Untersuchungen zur Gesetzeskritik des Paulus* (ATANT, 75; Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1989), p. 96.

15. So Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915), p. 87; Rudolf Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1976), p. 80; Victor P. Furnish, *II Corinthians* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1984), pp. 198-99; Hofius, 'Gesetz und Evangelium', pp. 76-77; Liebers, *Gesetz*, p. 96; Samuel Vollenweider, *Freiheit als neue Schöpfung: Eine Untersuchung zur Eleutheria bei Paulus und in seiner Umwelt* (FRLANT, 147; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989), pp. 271-72; Frank Thielman, *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1994), p. 111; Thrall, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 241-42.

16. Gleason, 'Contrasts', p. 75. Contra Provence, who maintains that the contrast is between 'a greater and lesser glory rather than a contrast between the func-

giving the ability to obey the law of the old, we would expect Paul to say that the old covenant has now reached its full glory.

Apart from 2 Cor. 3, Paul uses the phrase 'new covenant' only in 1 Cor. 11.25, where it refers to the covenant inaugurated by Jesus at his death.<sup>17</sup> The designation 'old covenant' is only used here in Paul.<sup>18</sup> The explicit contrasting of two covenants is found in one other instance, however, viz. Gal. 4.21-31.<sup>19</sup> The contrast in this passage is between the Sinaitic covenant and the Abrahamic covenant, renewed in Christ. In v. 24 the act of 'bearing children for slavery' is predicated of the Sinaitic covenant. Gal. 4.21-31 is therefore another instance where the new covenant is not seen merely as an added quality to the old but as a covenant with an opposite function: producing freedom versus slavery.

A possible parallel to the γράμμα of 2 Cor. 3, though often disregarded, is the 'handwriting', χειρόγραφον, of Col. 2.14.<sup>20</sup> In the im-

tion of the two glories' ('Who Is Sufficient', p. 73).

17. The Qumran community understood themselves as partakers of a new covenant (CD 6.19; 8.21; B 19.33-34); cf. Thrall, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 236. This new covenant is in no way contrasted with an old covenant, rather, it is closely associated with the law (CD B 20.9-13). The parallel with Paul is merely formal (Barrett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 113). Cf. Murphy-O'Connor, 'New Covenant', p. 200.

18. Lloyd Gaston observes that the terminology has neither a Jewish nor early Christian counterpart (*Paul and the Torah* [Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1987], p. 164).

19. Cf. Schröter, 'Schriftauslegung', p. 251.

20. It will take us too far, of course, to discuss the authorship of Colossians here. The position adopted in this article is that of Pauline authorship. Cf. Ernst Percy, *Die Probleme der Kolosser- und Epheserbriefe* (Lund: C.W.K. Gleerup, 1946), pp. 16-178; Werner G. Kümmel, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), pp. 340-46; G.B. Caird, *Paul's Letters from Prison (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon) in the Revised Standard Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 155-57; Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC, 44; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), pp. xli-liv; F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 28-33; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 4th edn, 1990), pp. 572-77; D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 331-34; Stanley E. Porter and Kent D. Clarke, 'Canonical-Critical Perspective and the Relationship of Colossians and Ephesians', *Bib* 78 (1997), pp. 57-86 (78-81). Cf. Jean-Noël Aletti, who concludes that the letter 'est très probablement de Paul' (*Saint Paul épître aux Colossiens* [EBib, 20; Paris: Gabalda, 1993], pp. 22-30, 208-209, 277-80). For the purpose of the present article,

diate context the contrast with the old covenant (by means of its sign, circumcision, v. 11) is prominent, as is the emphasis on the life-giving power of Christ (vv. 12b, 13b).<sup>21</sup> The meaning of χειρόγραφον maintained by most is ‘note of indebtedness’.<sup>22</sup> The word is richly attested in the papyri, and this evidence shows that, even though χειρόγραφον is commonly used for a note of indebtedness, this is not invariably so. It is also used for a sales contract,<sup>23</sup> for a receipt for a deposit,<sup>24</sup> for a work contract,<sup>25</sup> for a transfer of labor force,<sup>26</sup> and for a steward’s authorization.<sup>27</sup> These examples clearly show that ‘note of indebtedness’ should not be understood as the *meaning* of the term. Rather, it is a common *use*, among many others. The term simply means ‘handwriting’, something the author has written himself, the idea being somewhat similar to our ‘legally binding signature’, by which the writer legally binds himself or herself to what is stated above or below.

however, the identification of the author of Colossians is not determinative. If the letter were not by Paul, it was probably from someone so close to him that it still sheds light on Pauline theology. Cf. Dunn, who does not believe that Paul is the author of Colossians, but still considers it a source for understanding his theology (*Paul*, p. 13). Cf. also John M.G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* (NTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), p. 35.

21. E.-B. Allo also mentions Col. 2.14 as a parallel to ἐν γράμμασιν in 2 Cor. 3.7 (*Saint Paul seconde épître aux Corinthiens*, p. 86).

22. Adolf Deissmann, *Bible Studies* (trans. Alexander Grieve; repr.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), p. 247; Eduard Lohse, ‘χείρ κτλ.’, *TDNT*, IX, p. 435; Eugene C. Best, *An Historical Study of the Exegesis of Colossians 2,14* (Rome: Pontifica Universitas Gregoriana, 1956), p. 7; C.F.D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (CGTC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), p. 97; Eduard Lohse, *Die Briefe an Kolosser und an Philemon* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1968), pp. 164-65; Joachim Gnilka, *Der Kolosserbrief* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1980), p. 138; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, p. 125; Roy Yates, ‘Colossians 2,14: Metaphor of Forgiveness’, *Bib* 71 (1990), pp. 248-59 (256); James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 164.

23. BGU 50.5 (AD 114/115). This and the following citations from the papyri are taken from *Aegyptische Urkunden aus den koeniglichen Museen zu Berlin: Griechische Urkunden* (4 vols.; Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1895–1912).

24. BGU 378.19 (2nd/3rd century AD); 520.9 (AD 172); 637.9 (AD 212/213).

25. BGU 638.17 (AD 14).

26. BGU 981.1.13.16 (AD 79).

27. BGU 300.3 (AD 148).

In this capacity χειρόγραφον is naturally used for a note of indebtedness, as well as for a number of other things.<sup>28</sup>

Acknowledging that the primary idea conveyed by the word χειρόγραφον is something the author has written himself, it is difficult to maintain the interpretation ‘note of indebtedness’ in Col. 2.14. There is no evidence that Paul can be thinking of a note of indebtedness signed by humanity.<sup>29</sup> Several interpreters have understood Col. 2.14 against the background of the Jewish tradition of records that are kept in heaven regarding the good and evil deeds of human beings.<sup>30</sup> In the Pseudepigrapha the word χειρόγραφον is used to refer to these documents (*Apoc. Zeph.* 3.6-9).<sup>31</sup> Understanding the term against this background, however, makes the function of the succeeding τοῖς δόγμασιν enigmatic.<sup>32</sup>

The possibility that the dative δόγμασιν identifies the χειρόγραφον as the tablets with the Ten Commandments should not be excluded.<sup>33</sup> As these tablets are said to have been written with the finger of God (Exod. 31.18; Deut. 9.10), this interpretation is in keeping with the general meaning of the word. If this is correct, it would be a parallel to 2 Cor. 3 as interpreted here, a contrast between the old and new cove-

28. Cf. Paul Ewald, *Die Briefe des Paulus an die Epheser, Kolosser und Philemon* (KNT, 10; Leipzig: Deichert, 2nd edn, 1910), p. 382.

29. O’Brien refers to Deut. 27.14-26 and 30.15-20, and notes that ‘the Jews had contracted to obey the law’ (*Colossians, Philemon*, p. 125). But there is no handwriting involved there. Moule maintains that the note is signed by human consciousness, but he does not cite any evidence for such a metaphorical use of χειρόγραφον (*Colossians and Philemon*, p. 97).

30. Lohse refers to the Jewish tradition that God keeps an account of humanity’s debt (‘χείρ κτλ.’, *TDNT*, IX, p. 435). His evidence is taken from Strack–Billerbeck, who cite evidence that God keeps a record of the sins of human beings (*Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, III [Munich: Beck, 1926], p. 628). Gnilyka presents the same argument (*Kolosserbrief*, p. 138).

31. Dunn, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 164.

32. As Dunn concedes (*Colossians and Philemon*, p. 165).

33. Richard C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus, and to Philemon* (Minneapolis Augsburg, 1964), p. 114; Eduard Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians* (trans. Andrew Chester; London: SPCK; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1982), pp. 150-51; Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon* (Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 107. Gnilyka objects that the question regarding the law in Colossians is treated differently than in the older Pauline writings, but that is circular reasoning (*Kolosserbrief*, p. 139).

nants being intended; the death of Christ abrogates the old covenant and inaugurates the new. The Christ event affected the old covenant law, not only the ethical competence of believers.

The statement that the letter kills is not derived directly from the Exodus narrative, upon which Paul's argument here is based. The shorthand manner of his introducing this characteristic of the γράμμα leads us naturally to assume that Paul has elaborated on this theme in his oral teaching in Corinth. We have to resort to his teaching on these matters in Gal. 3 and Rom. 7 to understand Paul's thinking on this matter.<sup>34</sup>

The understanding of the contrast between the old and the new covenant proposed in this article is in line with Paul's argument elsewhere. The old covenant had the character of a command (Rom. 7.7), whereas the new covenant has the character of promise (Gal. 3.17-22).<sup>35</sup> Paul's description of David (who was a righteous man living in the time of the old covenant) in Rom. 4.6-14 is further confirmation that our interpretation is correct. Paul makes David a witness, not of a 'spirit-filled' old covenant, but of the fact that the old covenant is not necessary for justification (it is stressed that the μακαρισμός of David applies to the uncircumcised).

According to our interpretation, 2 Cor. 3.5-18 teaches that the old covenant and the new covenant both came in glory, but they perform different tasks. The old covenant kills and condemns, which was its divine purpose (cf. Rom. 5.20; Gal. 3.19).<sup>36</sup> The new covenant justifies and makes alive. The old covenant is superseded by the new, which is permanent and more glorious. Interpreters who maintain that γράμμα should not be identified with the law often observe that Paul does not dismiss the law altogether. He attributes glory to the law.<sup>37</sup> But this

34. Gleason, 'Contrasts', p. 76; and Gordon D. Fee, who also observes the similar, shorthand expression in 1 Cor. 15.56 (*God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], p. 306).

35. Cf. Hofius, 'Gesetz und Evangelium', pp. 82-84.

36. Hugo Odeberg stresses, 'Ty vem är det, som dödar i bokstaven? Det er Gud själv (For who is it that kills through the letter? It is God himself)' (italics his; *Korintierbrev* [Tolkning av Nya Testamentet, 7; Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses Bokförlag, 1944], p. 373). Hofius says, 'Die παλαιὰ διαθήκη...zu keinem anderen Zweck von Gott gegeben ist als dem, das richterliche Urteil Gottes über den Sünder auszusprechen ('The παλαιὰ διαθήκη...is given by God to no other end than to pronounce the judicial judgment of God on the sinner') ('Gesetz und Evangelium', p. 84).

37. Dunn, *Paul*, p. 148; Provence, 'Who Is sufficient', pp. 69-70. Similarly,

glory is associated with the killing and condemning function of the law. The glory is attributed to the ministry of death (v. 7), the ministry of condemnation (v. 9), and that which is being nullified (v. 11).<sup>38</sup>

An objection that has been raised against this interpretation, however, is the observation that Paul's ministry may lead to death (2 Cor. 2.15-16a).<sup>39</sup> This observation seems to be confirmed by 4.3, where Paul concedes that even the gospel can be characterized by κάλυμμα, the same fault as he finds with the ministry of Moses (vv. 13, 14, 15). The meaning seems to be that both the law and the gospel may lead to death (cf. 2.16) for those who have a hardened heart (3.14) and lack the spirit (cf. 3.6). In other words, to cause death is an attribute both of the law and the gospel, and the contrast Paul is describing cannot be a contrast simply between the law and the gospel. Rather, the contrast is between the ministry of Moses, characterized by not giving the spirit and thus not being able to transform the hardened hearts, and the ministry of Paul in the spirit.

A careful reading of Paul's argument, however, reveals that no real parallelism between the law and the gospel exists. First, we note that the dual function Paul ascribes to his own ministry is not ascribed to the ministry of the law. The law only leads to death, not to life. Second, although Paul's ministry may lead to death, the gospel is not said to do so. His ministry may have death as its result, but that holds true only when the gospel is hidden (4.3) and when the glory of Christ remains unseen. The agent of death, therefore, is the god of this eon, who blinded the eyes of the unbelievers (4.4). The Israelites could not look at the glory of the law, but those who look at the glory of the gospel are transformed to the same glory (3.18; 4.4). There is no real parallelism, therefore, between the gospel and the law. Whereas confrontation with

Barrett, who recalls that the law is good (*Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 113).

38. Elsewhere Paul has other positive things to say about the law. He frequently refers to the law as an authority (Thielman, *Paul and the Law*, pp. 69-237). The gospel he preaches can also be said to be a fulfillment of the law (Rom. 3.31); the law testifies to his gospel (Rom. 3.23; Gal. 4.21). A full discussion of the interrelationship between these statements falls outside the scope of this article, of course. In the present passage, Paul's concern is to point out the fundamental dualism between the covenant from Sinai and the new covenant in Christ.

39. Provence, 'Who Is Sufficient', pp. 55, 71-72. Hafemann insists that it is not the gospel as such that gives life, but the spirit (*Paul*, p. 284). This reading is too pedantic, however. In Rom. 1.16 Paul calls the gospel a power to salvation.

the law results in death, it is lack of confrontation with the gospel that can also be said to result in death.<sup>40</sup>

### *The Abrogation of the Torah*

Our interpretation is further confirmed in vv. 11-16 where the old covenant is described as abolished. In vv. 11, 13 we read about ‘that which is being abrogated’.<sup>41</sup> Most commentators agree that this must refer to the old covenant.<sup>42</sup> In v. 14 it is stated that something is abrogated in Christ. The subject of the καταργεῖται of v. 14 can be either the veil that Moses put over his face or the old covenant itself. In keeping with his understanding of the basic contrast in this passage as a contrast between the spirit and the hardened hearts of the Israelites, Hafemann maintains that the veil is the subject and that the veil in turn represents ‘the “stiff-necked” nature of Israel’.<sup>43</sup> If the veil is the subject, the preceding participle ἀνακαλυπτόμενον must either be taken as

40. In Rom. 7.13 Paul seems to explain the death-bringing function of the law in a similar way, clarifying that it was sin, not the law, that brought death. Nevertheless, we note that, when Paul in Rom. 3.8 (cf. 6.1) describes those who abuse the gospel, he does not say, as he does with regard to the law, that for these the gospel brought death. The law is associated with death (Rom. 7.10), the gospel with life (Rom. 1.16). The law provokes sin (Rom. 5.20; 7.5, 8), and freedom from the law and freedom from sin go together (Rom. 6.14). While the root of evil lies in human beings, not in the ordinances of God, the law and the gospel serve fundamentally opposite functions in God’s dealings with these human beings. Whereas the law is the means by which God brings condemnation and death (Rom. 3.19-20; 7.10-11), the gospel is the means by which God brings salvation, justification and life (Rom. 1.16-17).

41. When the word καταργέω refers to the old covenant, its meaning is best rendered by ‘nullify’, ‘make void’, ‘cause to become idle’, or ‘render ineffective or powerless’ (Belleville, *Reflections of Glory*, p. 204). It is almost a technical term, denoting the old age coming to an end at the first (Rom. 3.31; 6.6; 7.6; Eph. 2.15; 2 Tim. 1.10) and at the second coming of Christ (1 Cor. 13.8, 10; 15.24, 26; 2 Thess. 2.8) (Hafemann, *Paul*, pp. 303-309).

42. Furnish, *II Corinthians*, p. 205; E.P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 139; Thrall, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 252. Similarly Karl Prümm, *Diakonia Pneumatos. I. Theologische Auslegung des zweiten Korintherbriefes* (Rome: Herder, 1967), p. 128; Barrett, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 118; Belleville, *Reflections of Glory*, p. 203; and Hafemann, *Paul*, p. 355.

43. Hafemann, *Paul*, pp. 379-80.

a predicate of μένει<sup>44</sup> or we must assume a pause after μένει, translating: ‘The same veil...remains, unlifted because...’<sup>45</sup> The problem with both of these solutions is that they make the ἀνακαλυπτόμενον pleonastic. But it has long been noted that the strength of μένει makes ἀνακαλυπτόμενον superfluous if taken together with it.<sup>46</sup> According to a Gramcord search, a participle as a predicate of μένει cannot be found either in the New Testament or in the LXX.

On the other hand, if the subject is the old covenant, the participle ἀνακαλυπτόμενον must be taken with the following, as an absolute participle (‘not revealing that it is abrogated in Christ’). The difficulty with this solution is that the absolute participle is rare in the New Testament and, furthermore, that an absolute participle should not be assumed when there is a possible subject for the participle (viz., the preceding τὸ αὐτὸ κάλυμμα).<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, reading the old covenant as the subject of καταργεῖται is the least difficult interpretation and is to be preferred.<sup>48</sup> The context supports this. When the participle of καταργέω is employed in the previous verses (vv. 11, 13), the referent is the old covenant. It is difficult to see how κάλυμμα can be the subject of καταργεῖται in v. 14. If it were it would be the same κάλυμμα as that of the following v. 15, which would require that the article be used with κάλυμμα in v. 15.<sup>49</sup> Neither is καταργεῖται a proper term to go with κάλυμμα.<sup>50</sup> When the old covenant is understood as the subject of καταργεῖται, the following

44. So Plummer, *Second Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, p. 100.

45. Thrall, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 265.

46. Albrecht Oerke, ‘καλύπτω κτλ.’, in *TDNT*, III, p. 561.

47. Thrall, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 264.

48. So also Philipp Bachmann, *Der zweite Brief des Paulus an die Korinther* (KNT, 8; Leipzig: Deichert, 3rd edn, 1918), p. 168; Bultmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, p. 89; Prümm, *Diakonia Pneumatos*, p. 143; Hanson, ‘The Midrash’, p. 18; Oliveira, *Die Diakonie der Gerechtigkeit*, p. 82; and Ralph P. Martin, who also cites Moffatt and Godet (*2 Corinthians* [WBC, 40; Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986], p. 69).

49. Belleville, *Reflections of Glory*, p. 238. H.A.W. Meyer also notes that, when the removal of the veil is spoken of in v. 16, Paul uses the verb περιαιρείται (*Kritisch exegetisches Handbuch über den zweiten Brief an die Korinther* [KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2nd edn, 1850], p. 70). The choice of word in v. 16, however, is probably determined by the allusion to Exod. 34.34.

50. Bachmann, *Der zweite Brief an die Korinther*, p. 167; Hanson, ‘The Midrash’, p. 18; and Martin, *2 Corinthians*, p. 69.

ὅτι can be taken as descriptive, the force it always has in the New Testament when it follows a verb denoting disclosing, revealing, or declaring.<sup>51</sup> The sense of v. 14c would then be: 'It is not being revealed that the old covenant is abrogated in Christ'.

It has been objected that the meaning 'reveal' would require the word ἀποκαλύπτω, not ἀνακαλύπτω, as here.<sup>52</sup> If the meaning 'reveal' were intended, that would further require an active participle.<sup>53</sup> There is ample evidence, however, that ἀνακαλύπτω can carry the meaning 'reveal' (Isa. 22.9; 26.21; *Pss. Sol.* 4.7; 8.8) also in the middle (Isa. 22.14), and that the word can be used with a play on the double meanings 'uncover' and 'reveal' (Isa. 22.8-9, 14; Philo, *Somn.* 1.87 and 1.99), which is probably the case here (compare v. 14 and v. 18).<sup>54</sup> As a consequence of the hardening of the hearts of the Israelites (v. 14a), Paul says, the abrogation of the old covenant is not even revealed to the Israelites today.<sup>55</sup> It is only when someone<sup>56</sup> converts to the lord<sup>57</sup> that the obstacle for this revelation is removed (v.16).

The ἀλλά of v. 14 introduces a contrast between the temporary character of the law (its termination, v. 13) and the inability of the Israelites to eventually acknowledge its temporariness (the same veil remains, v. 14b). The ἀλλά is taken up again in v. 15, and Paul repeats his critique of the Israelites of his day for their inability to see the termination of the old covenant. The negative consequences of the hardening of the

51. Mt. 16.21; Jn 3.21; 1 Cor. 12.3; 2 Cor. 3.3; 2 Thess. 2.4; 1 Pet. 1.12; 1 Jn 2.19.

52. Thielman, *Paul and the Law*, p. 116.

53. Thrall, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 264.

54. Belleville, *Reflections of Glory*, p. 235.

55. Paul's reference to the synagogue of his day in vv. 14-15 should probably not be taken as an identification of his opponents. While defending himself against his critics introduced in v. 1, the reference to the synagogue was prompted by his excursus on the temporary, condemning, and killing nature of the old covenant.

56. Thrall, objecting that if 'anyone' should be taken as the subject here we would expect Paul to have inserted τίς, opts for taking the implicit subject as Moses as a type of a Christian convert (*Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 271). Paul's phraseology, however, may be explained as an allusion to Exod. 34.34.

57. The general consensus of recent studies is that κύριος refers to Yhwh of the Old Testament. E.g. Stockhausen, *Moses' Veil*, p. 10; Belleville, *Reflections of Glory*, p. 262; *eadem*, 'Paul's Polemic and Theology of the Spirit in Second Corinthians', *CBQ* 58 (1996), pp. 281-304 (301); and Thrall, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 272-73.

heart of the Israelites, on which Paul wants to focus, therefore, are not in the wilderness generation as much as in the Israelites of his time ('for until this very day', v. 14b). Neither is it ethical inability (disobedience to the law) that is the negative consequence that Paul is concerned with here, but cognitive inability (lack of recognition of the cessation of the old covenant).

Verse 13 says that the Israelites could not see the τέλος of that which is being abrogated. Both the meanings 'termination' and 'goal' are attested for the word τέλος in Paul.<sup>58</sup> The question is whether the term, in this particular context, takes on the teleological or the temporal aspect. It may be noted, however, that, apart from the fixed expression ἕως τέλους in 2 Cor. 1.13, which means 'completely',<sup>59</sup> in all other occurrences of τέλος in the Corinthian correspondence the meaning is 'termination' (1 Cor. 1.8; 10.11; 15.24; 2 Cor. 11.15). The most natural reading here, which corresponds to καταργουμένου in the immediate context,<sup>60</sup> is 'termination'.

The role that the Mosaic covenant as such had to play in redemptive history is now over. The new covenant is not described as in continuity with the old, as if the new covenant by giving the spirit brought the old covenant to fulfillment. For Paul, the old covenant was something that

58. Robert Badenas maintains that the sense 'termination' is found in Paul only in eschatological contexts (1 Cor. 1.8; 10.11; 15.24; 2 Cor. 11.15; Phil. 3.19). He also insists that τέλος with the genitive generally is used where the meaning is 'result', 'outcome' (*Christ the End of the Law: Romans 10.4 in Pauline Perspective* [JSNTSup, 10; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985], pp. 78-79). Granted that this first observation is correct, 'eschatology' must be defined as the new age inaugurated by the coming of Christ, cf. 1 Cor. 10.11, which in turn would qualify 2 Cor. 3.13-4 as an eschatological context (cf. ἐν Χριστῷ καταργεῖται). The second observation has been refuted by Hofius, who cites Lk. 1.33, Heb. 7.3, 1 Pet. 4.7 and numerous examples from extra-biblical literature ('Gesetz und Evangelium', pp. 103, 111). Provence's statement, that, granted that 'goal' is the meaning in Rom. 10.4 and 2 Cor. 3.13, this would be the meaning in all the occurrences of the word in Paul, is unwarranted ('Who Is Sufficient', p. 75).

59. Badenas, *End of the Law*, p. 71.

60. Assuming this meaning does not make Paul guilty of pleonasm. The qualification τοῦ καταργουμένου is necessary to identify what it was that was ending and the term τέλος is necessary to identify what it was that was concealed from the Israelites. The covenant (τὸ καταργούμενον) was not concealed but its end (τὸ τέλος). Contra Hafemann, *Paul*, p. 356.

was added (παρεισῆλθεν) for the purpose of revealing sin (cf. Rom. 5.20).

It has been objected that if the τέλος in v. 13 should be taken to mean 'termination' this would make Moses a deceiver.<sup>61</sup> Paul understood it to be the purpose of God, however, that the Israelites should be under the taskmaster of the law until the fullness of time (Gal. 3.21-25; 4.1-5).<sup>62</sup>

Our exegesis thus indicates that we have here a motif similar to the παιδαγωγός motif of Gal. 3.21-25, 4.1-5. Table 1 shows the parallels between Gal. 3.21-25, 4.1-5, and 2 Cor. 3.

Table 1. *Galatians 3.21-25, 4.1-5 and 2 Corinthians 3*

<i>2 Corinthians 3</i>	<i>Galatians 3.23-25; 4.1-5</i>
ζωοποιεῖ 3.6	ζωοποιῆσαι 3.21
περιαιρεῖται τὸ κάλυμμα 3.16 ἀνακεκαλυμμένω 3.18	ἀποκαλυφθῆναι 3.23
διακονία τῆς δικαιοσύνης 3.9	δικαιωθῶμεν 3.24
τὸ καταργούμενον...τὸ μένον 3.11	οὐκέτι 3.25
παρρησία 3.12 ἐλευθερία 3.17	υἰοθεσίαν 4.5
πνεῦμα 3.6	πνεῦμα 4.6
ἀποκτεννεῖ 3.6	συνέκλεισεν 3.22
διακονία τοῦ θανάτου 3.7	ὑπὸ νόμον ἐφρουρούμεθα συγκλειόμενοι 3.23
διακονία τῆς κατακρίσεως 3.9	παιδαγωγός 3.24 οὐδὲν διαφέρει δούλου 4.1 ὑπὸ ἐπιτρόπους ἐστὶν καὶ οἰκονόμους 4.2 ἡμεθα δεδουλωμένοι 4.3

61. Hays, *Echoes*, p. 138; C.F.G. Heinrici, *Das zweite Sendschreiben des Apostel Paulus an die Korinther* (Berlin: Hertz, 1887), p. 179, cited in Thrall, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 260.

62. Similarly, Thrall, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 259-61. Belleville maintains that Moses' intention was to prevent the continued gazing of the Israelites so that they should not be so occupied with the glory of the covenant that they did not understand its temporary nature (*Reflections of Glory*, pp. 200, 208, 223). This reading seems to be based on eisegesis, however. It was exactly the cessation that was hidden.

Based on our exegesis, we may paraphrase vv. 13-15 as follows:

13 [We do] not [do] as Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites should not stare at the termination of the covenant that was going to be abrogated. (The termination was not clearly revealed because the law was intended to be a taskmaster until the fullness of time.) 14 But their minds were hardened, so that even until this very day the same veil is there when the old covenant is being read. It is not being revealed that the old covenant is abrogated in Christ. 15 But till this very day, when Moses is read, a veil is over their hearts.

This analysis indicates that these verses must be understood as reflecting the motif of the development of redemptive history.<sup>63</sup> The termination of the old covenant was not clearly revealed until the coming of Christ.<sup>64</sup>

63. Similarly Thrall, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, pp. 258-61; and Prümm, *Diakonia Pneumatos*, pp. 138-39.

64. A more remote parallel to this line of thought in 2 Cor. 3.5-18 is found in Eph. 3.1-13. Even though the content of the new revelation is defined differently in Eph. 3.1-13, as the inclusion of the Gentiles, rather than the superiority of the new covenant, the terminological parallels between 2 Cor. 3 and Eph. 3.1-13 are too numerous to be accidental (κάλυμμα in 2 Cor. 3.13, 14 and μυστήριον in Eph. 3.3; μὴ ἀνακαλυπτόμενον in 2 Cor. 3.14 and οὐκ ἐγνωρίσθη in Eph. 3.5 and ἀποκεκρυμμένου in Eph. 3.9; περιαιρεῖται τὸ κάλυμμα in 2 Cor. 3.16 and ἀποκάλυψιν in Eph. 3.3; ἀνακεκαλυμμένω in 2 Cor. 3.18 and ἀπεκαλύφθη in Eph. 3.5; πνεῦμα in 2 Cor. 3.6 and ἐν πνεύματι in Eph. 3.5; διακόνους in 2 Cor. 3.6; 4.1 and διάκονος in Eph. 3.7; ἰκανότης ἡμῶν ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ in 2 Cor. 3.5 and δωρεὰν... χάριτος... δοθείσης in Eph. 3.7; παρρησία in 2 Cor. 3.12 and παρρησίαν in Eph. 3.12; Διὰ τοῦτο... οὐκ ἐγκακοῦμεν in 2 Cor. 4.1 and διὸ... μὴ ἐγκακεῖν in Eph. 3.13). Furthermore, the basis for the shift described in Eph. 3.1-13 is that Christ 'has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances' (2.15). For scholars who maintain Pauline authorship of Ephesians, see Percy, *Die Probleme*, pp. 179-466; J.N. Sanders, 'The Case for the Pauline Authorship', in F.L. Cross (ed.), *Studies in Ephesians* (London: Mowbray, 1956), pp. 9-20; Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser: Ein Kommentar* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2nd edn, 1958), pp. 22-28; Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (AB, 34; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), pp. 36-50; A. Van Roon, *The Authenticity of Ephesians* (NovTSup, 39; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974); Caird, *Paul's Letters*, pp. 11-29; Bruce, *The Epistles*, pp. 229-40; Guthrie, *Introduction*, pp. 496-528; M.D. Goulder, 'The Visionaries of Laodicea', *JSNT* 43 (1991), pp. 15-39; Carson, Moo and Morris, *An Introduction*, pp. 305-309; Porter and Clarke, 'Canonical-Critical Perspective', pp. 78-81; C.E. Arnold, 'Ephesians, Letter to the', in Gerald Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid (eds.), *Dictionary of Paul and his Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993), pp. 238-49; Peter T. O'Brien,

### *Theological Reflections*

The passage 2 Cor. 3.5-18 is related to the Pauline teaching that the law was not given to give life and to justify (Gal. 2.16; 3.21) but rather to reveal sin and to pass a death sentence (Rom. 3.20; 7.10; 1 Cor. 15.56). The ministry of the gospel, however, is the life-giving ministry, the ministry that 'gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist' (Rom. 4.17; cf. 2 Cor. 4.6). Thus, the ministry of the old covenant is not seen as merely negative, but the ministry of the old covenant and the ministry of the new covenant are seen as complementary.

In a number of other passages, Paul makes statements about the continuing value of the Mosaic law.<sup>65</sup> His expectations regarding the ethical standard of the believers are modeled upon the Mosaic law.<sup>66</sup> The question of the degree of continuity and discontinuity with the Mosaic law for Pauline ethics, and the question of consistency or inconsistency in his thought regarding the law are questions that fall outside the scope of this article. The results of this investigation pertain to the Pauline understanding of justification, and to the understanding of how the hearts of men and women are changed, so that their conformity to the will of God is something that comes from the inside and not from a law imposed from the outside.

In this regard, 2 Cor. 3.5-18 gloriously illustrates the doctrine of God's *opus proprium* (proper work in the gospel) and his *opus alienum* (alien work in the law). Paraphrased with this terminology, Paul is saying, 'If the alien, death-bringing work of God was glorious, how much more glorious must his proper, life-giving work be!'

### ABSTRACT

According to a common interpretation, the difference between the old and new covenants in 2 Cor. 3.5-18 should be explained by taking the spirit as the new element which enables human beings under the new covenant to comply with the commandments of the law. The arguments for this interpretation are examined and

*The Letter to the Ephesians* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 4-47. See also n. 20.

65. Räisänen, *Paul and the Law*, pp. 64-72.

66. Thielman, *Paul and the Law*, pp. 69-237.

found to be lacking. Rather, Paul describes a radical dualism between the old and the new covenants as such, where the function of the old is understood as condemnation and death and the function of the new is understood to be justification and life.