

Bible Study # 63 Exodus 34.29–35 04–20–2021

The final description, completing the narrative concerning the renewal of the covenant, concerns Moses' appearance when he emerged from the LORD's presence. He who had asked to see God's glory (33:18) reflected that glory when he came to the Israelite community to tell them what had been commanded.

For the second time, Moses came down from Mount Sinai with two tablets in his hands. They are called here 'the two tablets of the Testimony'. The word 'testimony' refers to unspecified commands of God and occurs in parallel with 'law' (tôrâh) in Psalm 78:5.

The meaning of the expression here is clear from the context as the tablets contained 'the words of the covenant' (v. 28), and in Deuteronomy 9:9, 15 reference is made to 'the tablets of the covenant'. As he descended from the mountain Moses was unaware that his face was 'radiant' because he had spoken with the LORD.

The verb means 'to shine, send out rays', and it only occurs in verses 29, 30, and 35 in the Old Testament. The LXX does not help greatly as it says that Moses' face was 'glorified'. In v. 30 the narrative says that when Aaron and all the people saw Moses, 'behold', his face shone.

This 'behold' is significant and should be translated (see RSV, NASB, NKJV, and ESV), as it draws attention to a remarkable phenomenon. Moses' appearance was such that when Aaron and all the people saw him they were afraid, and did not want to approach him.

Aaron and the other leaders were reassured by Moses' invitation to them, and they returned to listen to him. Afterwards all the people approached Moses and he related all that the Lord had commanded. This is a summary statement that should not be taken to mean that, at that time, everything was communicated, for chapters 35–40 show that the divine instructions for assembling the Tent of Meeting came later.

On finishing speaking to the people, Moses put a covering over his face. The word for covering is a hapax legomenon (a word used only once in the Bible, which the LXX translated as a 'veil', a translation carried over in Paul's use of this passage in 2 Corinthians 3:7–18).

Moses' habitual practice was to remove the veil when he entered the LORD's presence, and not to replace it until he had told the Israelites what he had been commanded. While speaking to the people, his face was radiant, but then the veil was replaced until he again went in to speak with the LORD. God's glory and God's word were joined together.

After delivering the divine commands Moses covered his face, as the Israelites could not continue to look on the glory that represented God Himself. Most probably that revelation of God's glory reminded them of his holiness but also of their own sin and rebellion.

Paul's use of the passage is where he is contrasting the era of the old covenant and that of the new, showing that believers in Christ have a new freedom through the Spirit.

Our study will continue with an examination of Exodus 35:1–35.