

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Exodus 34:29-35

NRSV

While Moses was on Mount Sinai the first time, the people of Israel, under Aaron's leadership, made a golden image of a calf as a symbol of God. So irate was Moses when he discovered the revelry around the Calf that he smashed the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written (32:19). God was angry that the people had broken the commandment against casting idols of the deity, but in time has forgiven them; he has invited Moses to ascend the mountain again to receive a replacement set of tablets. While there, God has conversed with Moses. Vv. 10-26 are the "covenant" (agreement) God has made with the Israelites. In exchange for (1) being their god (vv. 10, 24); (2) acting among them so that the indigenous peoples of the land will recognize Israel's uniqueness; and (3) giving them victory over these peoples (v. 11); the Israelites must, as well as obeying the Ten Commandments: (1) not enter into any pact with these peoples (vv. 12, 14); (2) destroy their religious symbols (v. 13); (3) not worship with them (v. 16); (4) not intermarry; (5) dedicate their first-born to him (vv. 19-20); (6) keep the feasts of Passover (Weeks, *Shavuot*, v. 22) and "ingathering" (Tabernacles, *Sukkot*); (7) observe the Sabbath (v. 21); (8) make pilgrimages three times a year (v. 23), and (9) offer the first of the harvest to God (v. 26).

Now Moses descends the mountain again. His face is *radiant*: an expression of his privileged place as servant close to God: he reflects God's glory. Perhaps "returned" (v. 31) is an echo of the Golden Calf incident. Moses dons a "veil" (v. 33) to avoid overwhelming his hearers with God's reflected glory. Again Moses *speaks* with God. One account (33:11) says that "the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face" but another (from a different source) says that God only allowed Moses to see his back (33:20-33). A final point: the word translated "shining" (v. 30), *karan*, can be written out as *keren*, meaning *horn*. Thus Jerome translated it, and so Michelangelo sculpted Moses with horns!

Psalm 99

NRSV

This is a hymn of praise to God as king. The endings of Vv. 3, 5 and 9 are perhaps a refrain, said or sung by worshippers as they "extol" (v. 9) God. God, on his throne above the "cherubim" (v. 1, the half-human, half-animal creatures thought to hover above the altar) in the Temple, is to be praised by "all the peoples" (v. 2). V. 4 lists some qualities God has shown "Jacob", the people of Israel. His "footstool", v. 5, is the Ark. For Israel, God has also: (1) helped people in need (vv. 6, 8); (2) given them just laws (v. 7); and (3) punished and forgiven them where appropriate (v. 8). "Moses ... Aaron" (v. 6) and "Samuel" were known for communicating with God and were his representatives. "His holy mountain" (v. 9) is Mount Zion, the hill on which Jerusalem stands.

Paul contrasts his ministry with that of Moses. In 3:3, he says that his readers, supported and enabled by the Holy Spirit, are "a letter of Christ", prepared by him and his colleagues: a letter written on "tablets of human hearts", not on "tablets of stone". This is the "confidence that we have through Christ" (3:4). The dead letter of the Law has been replaced by the living letter of the Spirit.

Paul interprets the "veil" (3:13) in Exodus as signifying the limited duration of the old covenant. The *new covenant* in Christ *sets aside* the old. The thinking of Israelites was frozen in time ("hardened", 3:14), and it still is: when they hear the Law read ("old covenant", 3:14; "Moses", 3:15), they only see God's plan for saving people dimly, i.e. through a "veil", but when one is converted ("turns to the Lord", 3:16), one sees the plan clearly. In Judaism and Christianity, the *motive force* is the spirit, but for us Christ and the Holy Spirit are one ("the Lord is the Spirit", 3:17), and in Christ we have "freedom" from the Law: as we become more and more Christ-like, we are more and more able to render to God the honour ("glory", 3:18) he is due, with the Spirit's help. In 10:9-11, Paul's accusers claim that he is strong on words but weak on action. He now retorts: "by God's mercy" (4:1) he has turned from persecuting Christians to "this ministry" which he does with "great boldness" (3:12), not losing heart. Unlike his accusers, he has cast aside his horrible hidden deeds of the past, namely unscrupulous acts and misrepresentations of the gospel (4:2). He speaks openly, appealing to all to authentically discern the truth.

Luke 9:28-36,(37-43a)

NRSV

Jesus has predicted his suffering, death and resurrection to his disciples; he has called on them to "take up their cross" (v. 23), has warned that those who hear the gospel but fail to trust in it will be condemned, and has promised that some present will see the kingdom of God. Now he and the inner circle of disciples ascend "the mountain" (v. 28). In Luke, Jesus always prays before an important event.

An aura of unnatural brightness is linked with mystical appearances in Exodus and Acts; "dazzling white" (v. 29) is a symbol of transcendence. In Jewish tradition, both "Moses and Elijah" (v. 30) were taken into heaven without dying. Jesus' agenda is in accord with the Law and the prophets; he is doing God's will. "Two men" also appear at the resurrection and at the ascension. Jesus' "departure" (v. 31, *exodos* in Greek) is his journey to Jerusalem and his passage from this world. Peter clearly doesn't understand; perhaps he thinks he is witnessing a super Feast of Tabernacles ("dwellings", v. 33) – a time when the whole city was brightly illuminated. The "cloud" (v. 34) is a symbol of God's presence; the words from it recall Jesus' baptism, and add "listen to him!" (v. 35). Vv. 37-43a, the healing of an epileptic child, present three contrasts: (1) from the mountain to the needy world; (2) Jesus' great power over evil (vs. the disciples'); and (3) Jesus' fidelity to God vs. general human infidelity. The child is in miserable condition. In healing him, Jesus shows God's "greatness" to "all" (v. 43).