

2 Corinthians 3

Pastor: 2 Corinthians 3: The veil of the old covenant has been removed.

“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Messiah, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence we have through Messiah toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate *as* servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading *as* it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses *it*. For if that which fades away *was* with glory, much more that which remains *is* in glory. Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in *our* speech, and *are* not like Moses, *who* used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Messiah. But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there* is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.”

ch 3 There are significant statements appearing in 2 Corinthians ch. 3, which bear understandable importance for today’s Messianic movement, as they involve Jewish evangelism and common Jewish resistance to the good news of Yeshua the Messiah.¹ 2 Corinthians 3:14 depicts the common predicament of Jewish people often being closed to the gospel: “for to this day the same veil remains over them when they read the Old Covenant; it has not been unveiled, because only by the Messiah is the veil taken away” (CJB/CJSB). *Only with proper Divine intervention can many Jewish people receive a revelation of Yeshua as the Jewish Messiah.* For the Apostle Paul writing in the First Century, much of this was just the result of a stubbornness and close-mindedness which needed to be overcome. For many of us today, a close-minded obstinance has been compounded by a complicated history of relations between the Jewish Synagogue, and a largely non-Jewish Christian Church that has often wanted little or nothing to do with its faith heritage and connections to Judaism. The Messianic community has obviously emerged to help resolve some of these problems.

While there are deep emotions and experiences which can be invoked, when today’s Messianic people approach 2 Corinthians ch. 3—there are also significant theological discussions and debates that one will encounter, which today’s Messianic people, unfortunately, do not tend to handle very well. Many Christian readers of 2 Corinthians ch. 3 draw the conclusion that the Apostle Paul teaches that the Old Covenant—widely classified to be the Torah or the Law of Moses—was a veil of condemnation and death that was abolished by the work of Yeshua the Messiah. Thus, any one purporting to be a Believer in Jesus should not even be considering following its commandments and instructions. However, when one pays close attention to the statements made *within the text* of 2 Corinthians ch. 3, a much different picture is presented than one of the “Old Covenant law” needing to be superseded by “New Covenant grace.”

Even though it is common for one to hear a great deal of talk about the differences between the New Covenant and the Old Covenant, too frequently what the “Old Covenant” specifically composes or represents is misdiagnosed. The term “old covenant” (Grk. *tēs palaias diathēkēs*, τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης) only appears once

¹ This entry has been adapted from the commentary *2 Corinthians for the Practical Messianic*.

in the Apostolic Scriptures, in 2 Corinthians 3:14. Most people who see Paul's assertion here, simply assume that "the reading of the old covenant" means "the reading of the Old Testament" (NKJV), either the Tanach Scriptures or perhaps just the Torah of Moses. It might be concluded or thought that people who only read these Scriptures cannot see the Messiah whose life is recorded in the so-called "New Covenant," but we have to remember that when Paul made this statement there was no "New Testament" written.² While today's Messianics often use terms like Old and New Testament, in piecemeal, to refer to parts of Scripture, *because these are familiar terms used by scholars and laypersons alike*—neither the Tanach nor Apostolic Writings make up a "covenant," but are simply the inspired words of God delivered through His human vessels. Furthermore, it cannot be overlooked that the terminology "old covenant" is not employed again until the late Second Century C.E., in the writing of Melito of Sardis—a gap of around 140 years.³ Could the good Apostle Paul have used "old covenant" to mean something a little different than just the Tanach Scriptures?

We have to make some strong efforts to understand what the "Old Covenant" is, as *specifically defined* by Paul. It is correctly noted, in part, by J. Paul Sampley, how Paul is describing "that contemporary, non-believing Jews have hardened minds...when they read the 'old covenant,'"⁴ meaning that many of Paul's Jewish brethren have some kind of an inability to see the Messiah. But whether this "Old Covenant" is actually the Torah proper—God's Instruction to His people for holy living—should be disputed. Is the "Old Covenant" really the Mosaic Torah? Or, in contrast to the "New Covenant" of permanent forgiveness and reconciliation, is the "Old Covenant" the ministry of death and condemnation upon unrepentant sinners?

Everyone who has come to faith in Messiah Yeshua, being cleansed of his or her sins and spiritually regenerated, has partaken of the New Covenant—a reality that has clearly dawned in this post-resurrection era, and is accessible to all who cry out to the Lord. It indeed involves a permanent forgiveness and cleansing from sins *and* a supernatural transcription of God's Instruction on a redeemed heart and mind. It would be most pointless to argue that the New Covenant, which has presumably been enacted within the lives of redeemed persons in the Messiah—is something completely divorced from the Torah. The expressed intention of the New Covenant as prophesied and anticipated in the Tanach (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27) is that the Lord will "put [His] laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts" (Hebrews 8:10, RSV), speaking of inscribing His Instruction onto the hearts of saved men and women **by the power of the Holy Spirit** so that they might *keep and obey* it. This in no way describes an abolition of the Law of Moses, but a re-emphasis of its importance for those who intend to be holy.

Furthermore, a steadfast component of the good news or gospel message is that the reality of the New Covenant can *only be enacted* in the lives of those who receive Yeshua (cf. Luke 22:20). The New Covenant is **a significant spiritual condition or force to be reckoned with**. While people commonly associate the terminology "New Covenant" with the Apostolic Writings and the terminology "Old Covenant" with the Tanach Scriptures—if a person has not partaken of the New Covenant promises of reconciliation with God and permanent forgiveness, now accessible by the sacrificial work of Yeshua, then what would such unregenerated people be affected by? The spiritual condition or force they would logically be affected by would be the condemnation pronounced upon unrepentant sinners, or the ministry of death. This is a spiritual condition of hostility toward, and exile from, God.

The position represented by this resource, and will be defended from the text of 2 Corinthians 3, is that what we actually see in terms of the comparison and contrast of the Old Covenant and New Covenant are **two different functions** of Moses' Teaching, which either manifest in the lives of the unredeemed **or** in the lives of the redeemed:

² Witherington, *1-2 Corinthians*, 379 fn#12 points out, "Paul is not claiming to be a minister of the *New Testament*, which did not yet exist."

³ Ralph P. Martin, *Word Biblical Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, Vol 40 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986), 69 describes, "Paul evidently coined the expression," yet has to note, "its next occurrence is as late as Melito of Sardis, *On the Passion* (before A.D. 190)."

Witherington, *1-2 Corinthians*, 381 fn#21 similarly confirms, "The next" usage of this terminology "seems to be from Melito of Sardis late in the second century."

⁴ J. Paul Sampley, "The Second Letter to the Corinthians," in Leander E. Keck, ed. et. al. *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 11:68.

- **The Old Covenant:** The ministry of death/condemnation is how the Torah functions for those who are not in the Messiah, who have a veil lying over their hearts, and who fail to have God's Spirit transcribe His Instruction on their hearts.
- **The New Covenant:** The ministry of the Spirit/righteousness is how the Torah functions for those who are in the Messiah, who have the veil over their hearts removed, and who live according to the freedom from condemnation they have in Him.

Within Paul's discussion in 2 Corinthians, he will compare and contrast what he labels as "the ministry of death" (2 Corinthians 3:7) or "condemnation" (2 Corinthians 3:9a), with "the ministry of the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:8) or "righteousness" (2 Corinthians 3:9b). Those who are born again Believers, and have recognized Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel, are those who are obvious beneficiaries of the latter; those who are not spiritually regenerated and are condemned as sinners, are subject to the effects of the former.

Much of the Torah's Instruction undeniably regards what will happen to people who break the Law. For many people who read the Torah, and realize that they stand as condemned sinners before a holy and righteous God—this causes them to turn toward Him, *utterly broken because of their human failures*, and claim the covering of Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) so that they can be reconciled and redeemed. Those who hear the Old Covenant ministry of death/condemnation read and are convicted of their sin *should* turn to the Lord, and as a result of receiving salvation will have the New Covenant ministry of the Spirit/righteousness enacted within them. The veil, that is to be removed, is the barrier that exists between an unredeemed sinner and a Perfect God. Unfortunately for many people, be it Paul's First Century Jewish brethren, or various persons identifying as "Christians" today—they can be so stubborn and obstinate, that they remain unconvinced that they need Yeshua the Messiah in their lives, so that the Old Covenant ministry of death/condemnation can be nullified.

3:1 Paul's discussion, about comparing and contrasting the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, is actually based in the ongoing interaction that 2 Corinthians includes about Paul defending his apostleship to the Corinthians. As he inquires of his audience, "Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you?" (2 Corinthians 3:1, TLV). The REB has, "Are we beginning all over again to produce our credentials? Do we, like some people, need letters of introduction to you, or from you?"

It should be recognized from 2 Corinthians 3:1 that Paul is not condemning the practice of letters of recommendation being provided by First Century ministers of the gospel from some central authority. Providing a letter of recommendation was something present within Second Temple Judaism (Acts 9:2; 22:5), and the practice was employed by the First Century *ekklēsia* (Acts 18:27; Romans 16:1), with the Epistle of 3 John possibly being a letter of recommendation. In the case of what Paul is confronting throughout the letter of 2 Corinthians, for a congregation so tied to him already, Paul hardly needed a letter of recommendation to legitimately serve the Corinthians.

That a figure like the Apostle Paul would need a letter of recommendation or endorsement for his activity among the Corinthians—as Paul was the major founder of the Corinthian assembly, and spent eighteen months in the region seeing them be established (Acts 18:1-18)—is generally thought to be the result of some kind of a countermission to that of Paul having arisen (cf. 2 Corinthians 10:12-18; 11:4, 12-15). Paul's main detractors, who had arrived in Corinth, were most probably Jewish (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:22-23), and could have raised the point whether or not Paul had a formal letter of support from the Jerusalem congregation, or at least some of the congregations of Judea (cf. Galatians 1:22). Paul's discussion in 2 Corinthians ch. 3 is based in how he did not need a letter of recommendation to validate his ministry; the Corinthians, having been changed by the New Covenant, were all the validation he needed.

For some of the discussion that follows, the purpose of invoking the life-changing power of the New Covenant, is so that Paul can emphasize to the Corinthians how *they themselves are his letter of recommendation* (2 Corinthians 3:2). Some, such as Murray J. Harris, consider Paul's major detractors who have arrived in Corinth, to likely have been "from the Pharisaic wing of the Jerusalem church, those Judaizers

who insisted on the scrupulous observance of the Mosaic Law as essential for salvation (Acts 15:5) and were unable to distinguish between the Law-abiding conduct of the Twelve and legalistic teaching.”⁵ It might have been that some of those who had stirred controversy against Paul, portrayed him as being less-than-loyal to Moses, with them being more loyal to Moses. Paul and his colleagues, on the other hand, were “servants of a new covenant” (2 Corinthians 3:6), representatives of a further stage of salvation history.

That the anticipated New Covenant has a Tanach background and positive expectations as they involve the relationship of redeemed persons to God’s Law, has been too often overlooked and underplayed. Paul was not disloyal to God’s Torah, but he was a minister of the mission of seeing that people be redeemed from the condemnation and penalties pronounced by the Torah upon unregenerated sinners.

3:2 Paul directs his Corinthian audience how they and their transformed lives were to serve as the letter of recommendation, and all the real evidence of Paul’s genuine apostleship, needed: “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all” (2 Corinthians 3:2, ESV). In spite of the panoply of problems which were addressed in previous letters like 1 Corinthians, and here with Paul’s apostolic service in question, 2 Corinthians 3:2 is actually reflective of something very positive about the Corinthians. As he had previously written, “but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Yeshua the Messiah and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:9). Many of the Corinthians serve as a positive testimony of Paul’s ministry work for the Lord Yeshua, as they would be read by all people like a letter of recommendation, as their lives were observed by others. Paul’s use of language, while it invokes the terminology of the prophesied New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27), immediately addressed in 2 Corinthians 3:3, is employed to convey how important the Corinthians were to Paul and his associates.

George H. Guthrie usefully interjects, “The fruit of genuine ministry, initiated by God, is that it is transparently authentic before the world and understood for what it truly is.”⁶ David E. Garland also appropriately indicates, “Today most people in churches recognize that it is not the degrees earned that truly commend a ministry but rather the degree of concern for the lives of others and the willingness to sacrifice for them.”⁷ Paul’s manner and style of ministry were different from those who would try to dismiss or discredit him. **But Paul had the Corinthians’ changed lives as proof of his authentic service.**

3:3 The Apostle Paul lauds the spiritual condition of the Corinthians, asserting that they are a letter or epistle of Messiah—a letter which has been written resultant of his ministry, and should serve as genuine evidence of him being a servant of the Lord (2 Corinthians 3:5-6). The Holy Spirit has written on the Corinthians’ hearts of flesh, an indication of them being spiritually regenerated and born again via the good news. As 2 Corinthians 3:3 appears in the American Standard Version, “being made manifest that ye are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in tables *that are* hearts of flesh.” The key activity, which has taken place to the Corinthians, has been by the Holy Spirit’s activity *ouk en plaxin lithiniais all’ en plaxin kardiais sarkiniais* (οὐκ ἐν πλαξίν λιθίναις ἀλλ’ ἐν πλαξίν καρδίαις σαρκίνας), “not in(on) tablets of stone but in(on) tablets [which are] hearts of flesh” (Brown and Comfort).⁸

Most commentators and examiners on 2 Corinthians correctly recognize that Paul’s language is to be associated with the New Covenant prophecies of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-27 for sure, and likely also Ezekiel 11:19-20. These prophecies, originally given within the context of the restoration of Israel’s Kingdom, not only promise forgiveness for past sins of idolatry and rebellion against the Lord—but the promise of God’s Instruction to be supernaturally written on a new heart. For a figure like the Apostle Paul, this redemptive work has been present among the Corinthians by their reception of the good news. The

⁵ Murray J. Harris, *New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 260.

⁶ George H. Guthrie, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 189.

⁷ David E. Garland, *New American Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1999), 157.

⁸ Brown and Comfort, 628.

following chart has compiled a number of significant quotations from 2 Corinthians commentators, on how Jeremiah's and Ezekiel's prophecies play some role in what Paul is communicating:

2 CORINTHIANS 3:3 AND THE NEW COVENANT	
TANACH (OT) BACKGROUND	EXAMINERS WHO RECOGNIZE JEREMIAH 31:31-34 AND EZEKIEL 36:25-27 AS SIGNIFICANT
<p>“Behold, days are coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD. ‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, “Know the LORD,” for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,’ declares the LORD, ‘for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).</p> <p>“And I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them. And I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My ordinances and do them. Then they will be My people, and I shall be their God” (Ezekiel 11:19-20).</p> <p>“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put</p>	<p>“This language [of v. 3] echoes Jer. 31.33, where under the new covenant Yahweh will write his law on his people’s hearts, and Ezek. 11.19; 36.26, where he promises to give them ‘a heart of flesh’ in place of their ‘stony heart’....Paul and his colleagues [are] effective ministers of a new covenant. The gospel covenant is new (cf. 1 C. 11.25) by contrast with the covenant established between Yahweh and Israel at the foot of Sinai (Exod. 24.3-8); that was based on a written code, ‘the book of the covenant’ (Exod. 24.7), but this is fulfilled in the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8.3f. where the ‘just requirement of the law’ which the old order was powerless to translate into action, is ‘fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit’).”⁹ F.F. Bruce</p>
	<p>“[I]t is Jer 31 (38):33 which alone, in the OT, mentions a ‘new covenant,’ with the law placed ‘in their minds’ (διάνοιαν [<i>dianoian</i>]) and written ‘on their hearts’ (ἐπὶ καρδίας αὐτῶν [<i>epi kardias autōn</i>])...”¹⁰ Ralph P. Martin</p>
	<p>“Here Paul leaves behind the contrast between the work of a scribe using pen and ink and the work of an apostle ministering in the power of the Spirit, and introduces another contrast, that between writing on tablets of stone and on human hearts. This latter contrast is clearly an allusion to the prophetic description of the new covenant (cf. Je. 31:31-34; Ezk. 36:24-32) under which God would write his law on human hearts.”¹¹ Colin Kruse</p>

⁹ Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 190.

¹⁰ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 52.

¹¹ Colin Kruse, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 91.

a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (Ezekiel 36:25-27).

“Paul’s gloss on Ezekiel’s text, whereby in place of a ‘heart of stone’ he substitutes ‘tablets of stone,’ is a clear reference to the tablets of stone on which the commandments were written. According to Paul, under that dispensation the tablets of the Law, given outwardly to Moses, were internalized within the people as ‘tablets of stone.’ Thus Paul signifies that the Law of God given to Moses became, in the hearts of the covenant people, stonelike, dead. Implicit in Ezekiel’s ‘promise’ of a ‘heart of flesh’ in place of a ‘heart of stone’ is the conviction that the people do not ‘follow’ God’s ‘decrees’ or ‘keep’ his laws,’ which is probably the reason why Paul interprets the prophet’s ‘hearts of stone’ as ‘tablets of stone.’ Disobedience to God’s laws has desensitized ‘hearts of flesh’ so as to become ‘tablets of stone’; the Law of God is as dead within them as their own dead hearts....The hearts of the people have been changed from ‘tablets of stone’ to ‘tablets of hearts of flesh,’ that is, to ‘living hearts.’ This remarkable transformation of the hearts of the people from ‘stone’ to living hearts of ‘flesh’ is attributable to ‘the Spirit of the living God,’ in demonstration of the genuineness of Paul’s claims as a minister of the long-awaited new covenant. The Law of God has been internalized in hearts made alive by the Spirit of the living God (see Jer 31:33; cf. v. 6).”¹²
Paul Barnett

“Under the old covenant, the locus of God’s activity was in the law; in the new age promised by Ezekiel, God will be at work in human hearts by the power of the Spirit. Paul’s ministry is therefore nothing less than a fulfillment of the promise of the new covenant as prophesied by Ezekiel. The Corinthians need look only at themselves for proof that the new age of the new covenant has dawned (cf. Isa 32:15; 44:3; 59:21; Joel 2:28-29; also the use of Jer. 31:31-34 in 2 Cor. 3:6). Their rejection of Paul’s ministry, therefore, means not only a denial of their own genuine existence as believers, but also a disavowal of God’s work in Christ as the fulfillment of the prophetic hope.”¹³
Scott J. Hafemann

¹² Paul Barnett, *New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 169.

¹³ Scott J. Hafemann, *NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), pp 117-118.

	<p>“The idea that Paul’s commendatory letters have been written on flesh-and-blood hearts (καρδίαίς σαρκίναίς <i>kardiais sarkinais</i>) echoes Jeremiah’s prophecy of a new covenant, not like the old one ‘with their ancestors...a covenant that they broke’ (Jer 31:32-32 NRSV), but one written ‘on their hearts’ (Jer 31:33; cf. Jer 38:33 LXX).”¹⁴ J. Paul Sampley</p>
	<p>“...Paul’s language in 3:3 alludes especially to two biblical promises he regards as fulfilled in his day (cf. 1:20). First, in Ezek 36:26 (cf. 11:19), God’s Spirit would give his people hearts of flesh instead of hearts of stone, so they would keep his commandments (36:27; cf. 11:20)...Whereas God’s finger had written the law in the stone tablets (Ex 31:18; 34:1, 4), God’s Spirit (Ezek 36:27) now inscribed divine life in their hearts (cf. Rom 8:2)...Second, he alludes to Jeremiah: in contrast to the disobedience of God’s people in history, the new covenant would write the law in their hearts (Jer 31:32-33; on that new era, cf. Jer 3:15-16; 16:14-15; 23:7-8). This text explains Paul’s introduction of the new covenant in 3:6. Paul must have already explained these promises to the Corinthians (cf. 1 Cor 11:23, 25; cf. Rom 7:6). Now their existence as people of the new covenant functioned as proof of Paul’s ministry (3:2-3; also 1 Cor 9:2).”¹⁵ Craig S. Keener</p>
	<p>“[Paul] wants to contrast the giving of the law that was engraved on stones (Exod 24:12; 31:18; 32:15-16; 34:1; Deut 9:10) with the promise of the new covenant that will be inscribed on hearts. God prefers living hearts to dead stones because they can better communicate what the purposes of the living God are for humanity and what the presence of the life-giving Spirit can do. In composing 3:3, Paul appears to have drawn on more than one Old Testament text in which he interprets Scripture by Scripture....{quoting Exodus 31:18; Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26; Jeremiah 31:33}.”¹⁶ David E. Garland</p>

¹⁴ Sampley, in *NIB*, 11:63.

¹⁵ Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, 167.

¹⁶ Garland, *2 Corinthians*, pp 159, 160 for refs.

	<p>“In 3:2-3...Paul develops the imagery of the letter in several directions under the stimulus of passages drawn from Jeremiah, Exodus, and Ezekiel. The letter is the Corinthian church as a whole as transformed by the gospel in fulfillment of Jeremiah 31 (38 in the LXX) and Ezekiel 11 and 36.”¹⁷ Murray J. Harris</p>
	<p>“Echoing Ezek. 36:26-27, yet using the image of the Spirit being written on the heart, Paul points to authentic Christian ministry in which God places the Spirit of God in the hearts of his people....[T]he image of the Spirit as performing a heart transplant in believers is conflated with the image of ‘writing on the heart,’ a word picture that seems to have its source in the prophet Jeremiah...{proceeding to reference Jeremiah 31:31-34}...Jeremiah’s use of writing imagery also concerns the effect of spiritual renewal on the hearts of Yahweh’s people, a renewal that issues in dynamic relationship. Significantly for our understanding of 2 Cor. 3, Jeremiah has the law written on the hearts of new-covenant people. So it seems that Paul primarily borrows from Jeremiah the image of writing on the hearts. Thus, when in 2 Cor. 3:3 he pictures the Spirit not as writer but as the written message, he offers a reflection of the Spirit’s work in the life of a new-covenant believer, bringing together images from both Ezekiel and Jeremiah.”¹⁸ George H. Guthrie</p>

Each one of the 2 Corinthians commentators, just referenced, does take 2 Corinthians 3:3 and the expectations of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-27, in a number of different ways. But more 2 Corinthians commentators than not, do not just recognize the role of these two Tanach prophecies in the language of “written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (RSV),¹⁹ but they also recognize **some positive place for God’s Torah or Law to be realized in the faith experience of the redeemed.**

(Notably absent from the chart above is Ben Witherington III, who does not once in his commentary on 1&2 Corinthians reference the Tanach prophecies of Jeremiah 31:31-34 or Ezekiel 36:25-27. This is to be contrasted with Scott J. Hafemann, who actually writes an excursus on the Tanach background of the New Covenant, in his 2 Corinthians commentary.)²⁰

With the Tanach background of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-27 properly recognized, the intention of 2 Corinthians 3:3 is that the Corinthians being “a letter of Messiah,” is that they compose the Divine work of Yeshua, “the result of our {Paul and his associates’} ministry” (NIV), transcribed onto the

¹⁷ Harris, 265.

¹⁸ Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, pp 192-193.

¹⁹ The Amplified Bible actually references the Tanach passages in its paraphrased rendering of 2 Corinthians 3:3:

“You show and make obvious that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, not written with ink but with [the] Spirit of [the] living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. [Exod. 24:12; 31:18; 32:15, 16; Jer. 31:33.]”

²⁰ Hafemann, pp 133-136.

redeemed hearts of flesh as promised to be given to those reconciled to the God of Israel. Mark A. Seifrid is correct in his conclusion, of how Paul “alludes to the Jeremicanic promise of a new covenant, as is clear in his characterization of the work of the Spirit as a *writing* upon the human heart (Jer 31:31-34). [Paul] goes on to define apostolic ministry in precisely this way.”²¹ Seifrid’s further conclusion, however, is, “Yet in contrast to Jer 31:33, Paul does not speak of the Law being written on the heart. It is Christ, the Law’s goal (*telos*), who is written there (v. 13; cf. Rom 10:4).”²² While none of us should be caught downplaying the sacrifice of Yeshua or the centrality of His work—Seifrid is one who **explicitly denies**, here at least, that God’s Instruction in the Torah of Moses is to be written onto the hearts of the redeemed, and concludes that Paul’s teaching stands in some contradiction to the details of Jeremiah 31:31-34. Yet, the Apostle Paul himself in Romans 8:3-4 would explain what a letter or an epistle of the Messiah is—the work to be brought about the good news:

“For what was impossible for the *Torah*—since it was weakened on account of the flesh—God has done. Sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as a sin offering, He condemned sin in the flesh—so that the requirement of the *Torah* might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the *Ruach*” (TLV).

The work of the Messiah involves Yeshua offering Himself as a sacrifice for the transgressions all people have committed by violating the Father’s Instruction (cf. Isaiah 24:5). Not only is permanent atonement provided and permanent forgiveness available—but the ability to live forth the requirements of the *Torah as promised in the New Covenant* is imparted.

3:4 The confidence of all Believers has to be something placed into a Divine sphere of operation, and not a human sphere. The Corinthians’ confidence can only come through the Messiah, as the operative power of gospel in their lives has enacted the spiritual realities of the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:3). Likewise, such activity manifested is because Paul and his associates have ministered and served the Corinthians. The NLT offers the slight paraphrase, “We are confident of all this because of our great trust in God through Christ.” But while 2 Corinthians 3:4 might suggest that the confidence of Believers—both of the Corinthians and of Paul and his colleagues—is due to the Messiah’s activity, the statement of 2 Corinthians 3:4 is especially used to highlight Paul’s own absolute reliance on the Lord in all of his activities. To the extent that these remarks have been made to contrast Paul to any detractors in Corinth—and detractors who would possibly invoke their Jewish background as a means to disparage Paul (11:22-23)—is something that has surely been indicated by commentators. In the estimation of Barnett,

“Paul wishes to establish that his ‘confidence toward God’ is ‘through Christ.’ Possibly this manner of expression also implies the former Pharisee-persecutor’s total inner conversion. Whereas once his ‘confidence’ toward God was on his own account (Phil 3:4-6; cf. Gal 1:13-14), now it is ‘through Christ,’ as he loses no opportunity to testify.”²³

Thankfully, Barnett is a commentator who is seen to laud the effects of the New Covenant in writing the principles of God’s Torah onto a redeemed heart and mind, but he is likely too affected by customary, negative views of Paul’s Jewishness. It is to be recognized that Paul was a Jewish Believer who had to go through a shift in his own spirituality, as his own Jewish pedigree was regarded as “refuse” (Philippians 3:8, RSV), **compared to what Yeshua had accomplished in his life**. Not all Jewish Believers in the First Century had gone through such an ideological shift. Unfortunately, too many Christian examiners think that Paul gave up on the basic tenets of Pharisaism when coming to Messiah faith, which he did not. What Paul absolutely gave up on, is correctly acknowledged to be *a total self-confidence in his human pedigree and abilities*, when true confidence must come by the operative power of the New Covenant in Yeshua. Paul recognized the proper place of his inherited Jewish theological and spiritual training, when he could declare before the

²¹ Mark A. Seifrid, *Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Second Letter to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 116.

²² *Ibid.*, 117.

²³ Barnett, 172.

Sanhedrin, “Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!” (Acts 23:6), as the Sadducees quantitatively denied the resurrection.²⁴

3:5 Paul stresses to the Corinthians the total reliance of himself and his ministry confidants, upon the Divine activity of God: “Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God” (2 Corinthians 3:5, NIV). On one level Paul can appropriately speak of *hē hikanotēs hēmōn* (ἡ ἰκανότης ἡμῶν), “our adequacy” (NASU) or “our sufficiency” (ESV)—but such is a confidence that originates from God working through Paul, not Paul working entirely by himself and on his own. The term *hikanos* (ἰκανός), “sufficiency, fitness” (LS),²⁵ is notably used to contrast the limitations of human beings, with the grand power of God, in the Septuagint version of Joel 2:11:

“The Lord shall give forth his voice before his force, because exceedingly large is his encampment, because strong are the actions of his words. For great is the day of the Lord, great and exceedingly remarkable, and who shall be sufficient for it [*kai tis estai hikanos autē*, καὶ τίς ἔσται ἰκανὸς αὐτῆ; Heb. MT *u’mi yekilennu*, וְיִכְלֵנוּ; and who can endure it,’ NASU]?” (NETS).

Ralph P. Martin draws out some of the linguistic points that can be made, notably as God being “sufficient” or *hikanos*, is often the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *shaddai* (שַׁדַּי):

“So in the divine presence (πρὸς τὸν θεόν [*pros ton Theon*], v 4) man as a human being is acutely aware of his frailty and finitude, and the appropriate attitude is humility, since man is only a mere mortal, while God is the ‘self-sufficient one’ (Heb. ‘*el shaddai* = שַׁדַּי, *šadday*, LXX ὁ ἰκανός [*ho hikanos*] in Ruth 1:20; Job 21:15; 31:2; 40:2; and Ezek 1:24[A]...)”²⁶

Guthrie draws out how Paul’s statement, of him only being sufficient through God, is something that should be associated with Moses’ response to God, when he encountered Him at the burning bush (Exodus 3:11; 4:10). As he observes, “it may be that Paul’s statement here, that he is ‘unqualified’ in and of himself, serves as an allusion to the call and ministry of Moses...God makes the inadequate to be adequate, the unqualified to be qualified, the incompetent to be competent, and this pattern dominates as one considers the call of other great leaders throughout redemptive history.”²⁷ While Paul will have some statements to make about “the ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7) or “condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:9a) first serviced by Moses, Paul likely associating himself with Moses—as both figures had to rely steadfastly on God—should not at all be taken as meaning that Paul is denigrating Moses. Both Moses and Paul have had to serve God, completely reliant upon Him, at important stages in His plan for human history.

3:6a While thematically the Tanach promises of the New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27) are detected in 2 Corinthians 3:3 previously, in 2 Corinthians 3:6a Paul explicitly tells the Corinthians, “[God] has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant” (NIV). The statement of importance, per the Divine activity manifested through Paul’s service, is *hos kai hikanōsen hēmas diakonous kainēs diathēkēs* (ὅς καὶ ἰκάνωσεν ἡμᾶς διακόνους καινῆς διαθήκης), “who also made us competent [as] ministers of a new covenant” (Brown and Comfort).²⁸ A number of statements do appear in 2 Corinthians 3:6, as they regard the function of God’s Torah or Law toward the unsaved or unredeemed, and also as they regard the function of the Holy Spirit in association with the expectations of the New Covenant.

Paul first says in 2 Corinthians 3:6 that God “made us adequate *as* servants of a new covenant.” **What is this New Covenant?** Various commentators, just as with 2 Corinthians 3:3, do fairly conclude that the contents of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-27, play some role in what Paul is invoking here with the ministry service with which God has commissioned him. Guthrie describes, “The reference to the ‘new covenant’ has as its backdrop Jer. 31:31-34 (38:31-34 LXX)...That covenant would involve knowing the Lord, the internalization of the laws of God, and the decisive forgiveness of sin, realized in the new-covenant

²⁴ For a further discussion, consult the author’s article “You Want to be a Pharisee,” appearing in the *Messianic Torah Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

²⁵ LS, 378.

²⁶ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 53.

²⁷ Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, pp 195-196.

²⁸ Brown and Comfort, 628.

sacrifice of Christ on the cross (Heb. 8:7-10:18)...and Paul's ministry proclaims that same covenant."²⁹ This summary is to be appreciated, because many readers think that the New Covenant *only and exclusively* involves Yeshua's word, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20).

A dispensationalist like David K. Lowery draws the conclusion that what are considered to be the spiritual aspects of the New Covenant, per passages like Hebrews 8:7-13, are applicable to non-Jewish Believers—but that further aspects of the New Covenant, witnessed within Jeremiah 31 or Ezekiel 36, are not applicable. As he concludes,

"It was inaugurated by Christ in His sacrifice on the cross (Luke 22:20), and is entered into by faith (Phil 3:9) and lived out in dependence on the Spirit (Rom. 7:6; 8:4). (However, the physical and national aspects of the New Covenant which pertain to Israel have not been appropriated to the church. Those are yet to be fulfilled in the millennium. The church today shares in the soteriological aspects of that covenant, established by Christ's blood for all believers [cf. Heb. 8:7-13])."³⁰

People in today's Messianic community, who would adhere to a bilateral ecclesiology of the Commonwealth of Israel composed of two sub-peoples of God, Israel proper and "the Church," would likely agree with some form of what Lowery has stated. Those who would adhere to an "enlarged Kingdom realm of Israel" view of ecclesiology, such as this writer—where a restored Twelve Tribes of Israel has expanded borders to welcome in the righteous from the nations (cf. Amos 9:11-12; Acts 15:15-18)—are likely to conclude something similar. In this framework, all of God's people are participants in Israel's restoration, with all of the redeemed in Messiah regarded as members of Israel's Kingdom or Commonwealth (Ephesians 2:11-13; 3:6), but with not all participating in a return to tribal territories in the Promised Land, even though all will be ruled by Israel's Messiah.³¹ The key aspects of the New Covenant, in which all participate, are the promises of a new heart, forgiveness from sins, and a supernatural transcription of God's Instruction onto the redeemed psyche (cf. Titus 2:14).

Hafemann, stating that textually the Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophecies must be factored into recognizing what Paul is actually saying in 2 Corinthians 3:6, comes to a conclusion that is not too common among Christian layreaders. Not only does Hafemann directly associate Paul's speaking of the work of the Spirit with these Tanach prophecies, but that the work of the Spirit is to produce a proper obedience to God's Torah. Hafemann astutely concludes,

"Once Ezekiel 36:25-26 and Jeremiah 31:31-34 are seen to be the keys to Paul's thinking in 2 Corinthians 3:6, the meaning of the letter/Spirit contrast becomes readily apparent. The passages from Ezekiel supply Paul's references to the work of the Spirit in 3:3b, while the Jeremiah passage provides the focus on the new obedience to the law in 3:6. Within the framework created by these two texts, Paul's role as a servant of the new covenant involves mediating the Spirit, which in turn brings about the transformation of the 'heart' that makes obedience to the law possible."³²

While today's Messianic people might have some difference of approach with the details of what this means, as seen in Hafemann's commentary, we can be in broad agreement that the prophesied New Covenant includes a supernatural compulsion to obey the Torah.

Seifrid is a commentator who properly recognizes that *some* Tanach expectations play a role in Paul saying that he is a minister of the New Covenant. In his view, "The new covenant will be different from the covenant made at Sinai, which Israel broke. The Lord will place his Law *within* them and shall write it on their heart (Jer 31:33). They will thus belong to him as his people, and he will belong to them as their God (Jer 31:33; cf. Ezek 11:20)."³³ We can be in essential agreement with this, but we cannot be in agreement with Seifrid's dismissal of the details of Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36. Instead of these Prophets' declaring that

²⁹ Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 197; also Harris, 271.

³⁰ David K. Lowery "2 Corinthians," in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), pp 560-561.

³¹ If necessary, do review the author's publication *Are Non-Jewish Believers Really a Part of Israel?*

³² Hafemann, 132.

³³ Seifrid, 121.

God's Torah will be transcribed onto the hearts of his people, Seifrid actually says, "No longer will there be any need for anyone to admonish and instruct one another. The written Law, the very purpose of which is to provide the basis of instruction, no longer shall be necessary (cf. Exod 24:12). All shall know the Lord and obey him with the spontaneity that marks true obedience (Jer 31:34)."³⁴ Rather than the principles of God's Instruction actually being transcribed onto a redeemed heart and mind—as Jeremiah 31:33 and Ezekiel 36:27 explicitly declare—Seifrid only thinks that some "spontaneity" in obedience is all that will be manifest.

It is to be fairly witnessed, given Paul's specific reference to the "new covenant" in 2 Corinthians 3:6, how various commentators and examiners have not just properly associated this with Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-27—but that these prophecies include more than just permanent forgiveness and an intimate knowing of God. *The work of the Spirit is to also produce obedience.* It is witnessed how some indeed associate, and thankfully so, such obedience with the commandments of God in the Torah. Others, however, may stress that some kind of vague "principles" are to be written onto a redeemed heart.

Harris is one, for example, who says, "For Paul, the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2), engraved on the hearts of believers by the life-giving Spirit, was the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy that under the new covenant God would write his law on the hearts of his people (Jer. 31:33)."³⁵ Today's Messianic people would widely conclude that the Galatians 6:2 "law of Christ" (*ton nomon tou Christou, τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ*) involves "the Torah's true meaning, which the Messiah upholds (CJB/CJSB). Many Christian examiners instead conclude that the "law of Christ" mainly involves the Messiah's teachings in His Sermon on the Mount. Yet, the Sermon on the Mount is predicated on the continued validity of Moses' Teaching (Matthew 5:17-19), and summarizes the Torah as upheld in Yeshua's ministry and example for living. **That the work of the New Covenant is to involve an emulation of Yeshua's Torah obedience, cannot be denied.**

Past Protestant exegetes may have concluded that the instructions written on the heart, per the involvement of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-27, would have involved the so-called "moral law" of the Torah. While sub-dividing the Torah's Instruction into the so-called civil law, ceremonial law, and moral law might seem a bit artificially contrived—an artificially contrived "moral law" would still compose the majority of the Torah's code of conduct.³⁶ Having the so-called "moral law" written onto the heart and mind, is a much better option to consider, than some vague principles of "spontaneous obedience."

Evangelical Christianity, in the early decades of the Twenty-First Century, has been significantly and lamentably suffering, from dismissing the Torah's Instruction and the witness of the Tanach Scriptures. And sadly, when it is encountered from Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-27, that the New Covenant does not just involve a forgiveness from sins *but also the provision to follow God's Law*, it is witnessed how some theologians will just flat dismiss the Biblical text.

3:6b The New Covenant that Paul ministers forth is stated by him to be *ou grammatos alla pneumatos* (οὐ γράμματος ἀλλὰ πνεύματος), "not of the letter but of the Spirit," inappropriately taken by some versions to be "not in a written code but in the Spirit" (RSV), reflecting an inappropriate value judgment of the letter equating to God's actual commandments. Similar terminology, explicitly stating what the relationship of born again Believers is to the Torah, is employed by Paul in Romans 7:6: "But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter [*en kainotēti pneumatos kai ou palaiotēti grammatos, ἐν καινότητι πνεύματος καὶ οὐ παλαιότητι γράμματος*]." The letter as depicted here is a negative force that has needed to give way to the activity of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the redeemed. The point should be made that the absolute letter of the Law will kill someone, as the Torah frequently prescribes a death penalty to those who violate its most serious commandments.

Colin Kruse concludes that a proper obedience to God is a part of the ministry of the New Covenant, and that Paul's words here are actually aimed against an improper usage of the Torah:

³⁴ Ibid., pp 121-122.

³⁵ Harris, 274.

³⁶ Consult the FAQ, "Torah, moral and ceremonial law" and "Torah, division of commandments."

“The answer seems to be that...[the law] kills when it is used improperly, *i.e.* as a set of rules to be observed in order to establish one’s own righteousness...To use the law in this way inevitably leads to death, for no-one can satisfy its demands and therefore all come under its condemnation...However, the ministry of the Spirit is quite different. It is a ministry of the new covenant under which sins are forgiven and remembered no more, and people are motivated and enabled by the Spirit to do what the improper application of the law could never achieve (*cf.* Je. 31:31-34; Ezk. 36:25-27; Rom. 8:3-4).”³⁷

Barnett, specifically invoking the expectations of Ezekiel 36:26-27—“Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances”—does not just focus on the New Covenant providing a new heart to God’s people, but also that God’s Spirit will enable them to obey:

“The new covenant, as prophesied by Jeremiah, will replace the outward imposition of the Law on a people of rebellious heart. Rather...the Law of God will be in the hearts and minds of a forgiven people, who from least to greatest, will ‘know the LORD’ (Jer 31:33-34)...The oracle of Ezekiel...so similar to that of Jeremiah—explains what Paul has in mind when he writes ‘for the letter kills.’ ‘The letter’ comes to a people whose hearts are ‘stone,’ that is, dead, unable to ‘follow’ God’s ‘decrees’ or ‘keep’ his ‘laws.’ Thus ‘the ministry [of the letter]’ is a ‘ministry of death’ and a ‘ministry of condemnation’ (vv. 7, 9). By contrast, ‘but the Spirit gives life’ is—to use Ezekiel’s words—a replacement of hearts of stone with hearts of flesh, God’s own Spirit within the people moving them ‘to follow [his] decrees.’”³⁸

Indeed, while popular Christian preaching on the New Covenant might be quite keen to stress discontinuity with the Torah—the Biblical expectations of the New Covenant are in continuity with the Torah. Rather than the letter of the Law being employed to condemn those in disobedience, the New Covenant of the Spirit is to provide a new heart of obedience (*cf.* Romans 8:3-4).

3:7-11 What Paul speaks of in 2 Corinthians 3:7-11 is contextually him comparing and contrasting “the ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7) or “condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:9a), with “the ministry of the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:8) or “righteousness” (2 Corinthians 3:9b). As will be seen, various examiners conclude that God’s Torah or Law is being contrasted with God’s Spirit. *It is widely concluded that the Torah was given for condemnation, and the Spirit was given for life.* This is not a conclusion which is sustainable, when the Tanach background of the New Covenant is consciously considered (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27). Two different ministries, or modes of operation, as they involve God’s Torah in the life of an unredeemed person or a redeemed person, are instead what is intended here. These modes of operation need to be understood in the context of salvation history, as for a figure like the Apostle Paul, the era of New Covenant has arrived via the death, burial, and resurrection of Israel’s Messiah. The New Covenant is to be personally enacted in an individual’s life by receiving Him and the forgiveness provided in Him. But without this an operative reality, then people are subject to the previous powers of death and condemnation, and no decisive atonement for their disobedience to God’s Torah or Law can be enacted.

3:7 2 Corinthians 3:7a first notes the presence of *hē diakonia tou thanatou en grammasin entetupōmenē lithois* (ἡ διακονία τοῦ θανάτου ἐν γράμμασιν ἐντετυπωμένη λίθοις), “the ministry – of death in letters having been engraved in stones” (Brown and Comfort).³⁹ This is to be fairly recognized as the Ten Commandments engraved on stone tablets, which while denoting firmness and durability, can also be taken as representing rigidity and strictness. **Only remaining engraved on stone tablets, all God’s Law could largely be used for would be as a ministry of condemnation.** When violated, strict penalties—not infrequently capital penalties—would be realized for commandment breakers.

Even when formally delivered to Ancient Israel, the Torah operative via a “ministry of death,” is something which Paul testifies *egenēthē en doxē* (ἐγενήθη ἐν δόξῃ), as it “came in glory” (YLT) or “came with such splendor” (RSV). When the Ten Commandments were delivered to Ancient Israel, they surely were

³⁷ Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, pp 92-93.

³⁸ Barnett, pp 176-177.

³⁹ Brown and Comfort, 628.

given via the awesome presence of God's glory that was reflected from Moses as His agent to the people. Exodus 34:29-32 records that God's glory was radiating off of the face of Moses, making it difficult for the Israelites to look at him:

"It came about when Moses was coming down from Mount Sinai (and the two tablets of the testimony were in Moses' hand as he was coming down from the mountain), that Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because of his speaking with Him. So when Aaron and all the sons of Israel saw Moses, behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. Then Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the rulers in the congregation returned to him; and Moses spoke to them. Afterward all the sons of Israel came near, and he commanded them *to do* everything that the LORD had spoken to him on Mount Sinai."

When the Ancient Israelites were given the commandments at Mount Sinai, all the people could do was be afraid, recognizing that if these statutes were violated, it could be their death—as high penalties are frequently detailed throughout the Pentateuch to those who violate its most severe commandments, **especially the Ten Words**. But is it the Ten Commandments or Ten Words, the Torah's commandments themselves, that compose "the ministry of death"? Or is it instead the operative principle that *when commandments were violated* that "the ministry of death" then became operable? That various theologians have had difficulty processing Paul's statements—or are just confused about how to approach his statements—is easy to witness. More commentators than not associate "the ministry of death" with the Torah itself, rather than the operative "ministry of death" being the consequence of Torah violation. As is represented by Martin,

"It is clear that Paul found no fault with Torah, the law itself (Rom 7:12, 14), but he knew from his own experience that the law set a high standard which it beckoned a person to attain, yet it provided no power to achieve the goal. The trouble lay with 'man' as *σάρξ* [*sarx*] ('flesh'); so human frailty and proneness to evil allowed the *σάρξ* [*sarx*] to turn the law of God (which God intended as good) into a death-dealing instrument (Rom 7:13)...[T]he law produces 'a *διακονία* [*diakonia*] (an administration) that leads to death.'"⁴⁰

Guthrie makes various statements of accuracy and inaccuracy here:

"At the giving of the law, anyone who crossed the boundaries of the mountain died (Exod. 19:12), and death was the punishment for a wide variety of transgressions (e.g., Exod. 21:12, 14-17, 28-29; 22:2, 19; 31:14-15). Theologically, Paul holds that the old covenant and its law, by their very nature, were associated with death."⁴¹

It is to be recognized that within the Torah, various commandments when violated can see the violator(s) executed. But to argue that the Torah was given to facilitate death, is like saying that the Sixth Commandment (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17) which prohibits murder and is designed to prevent death, was actually given to cause death. Leviticus 18:5 indicates that the Torah was given to Ancient Israel to promote a culture of life and blessing: "So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD."⁴² Kruse fairly indicates, "Although Leviticus 18:5 may promise life to those who keep the law, Paul knew that no-one does so in fact, and that the law can only pronounce the verdict of death over the transgressor."⁴³ And for the purposes of 2 Corinthians 3:7, the ministry of condemnation is delivered on tablets of stone, whereas the work of the Spirit is to be manifested on tablets of human hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3).

The ministry of death, while being something which was originally delivered to the Ancient Israelites, by Moses, in glory, is stated by Paul to have had a glory that was "fading." There is controversy over how to render the clause *autou tēn katargoumenēn* (αὐτοῦ τὴν καταργουμένην), which the Brown and Comfort interlinear has as, "the[glory] [which] is fading."⁴⁴ The key verb of note is *katargeō* (καταργέω), which BDAG

⁴⁰ Martin, *2 Corinthians*, 61; Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 171 has a much more negative approach.

⁴¹ Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 207; Seifrid, 151 has a much more negative approach.

⁴² Consult the FAQ, "Leviticus 18:5," for a discussion about how this verse promises a high quality of life when God's commandments are observed, not eternal life resultant of obedience to God's commandments.

⁴³ Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, 95.

⁴⁴ Brown and Comfort, 628.

defines with both “to cause someth. to lose its power or effectiveness, *invalidate, make powerless,*” and “to cause someth. to come to an end or to be no longer in existence, *abolish, wipe out, set aside.*”⁴⁵ The clause *autou tēn katargoumenēn* is invariably translated with: “was to be done away” (KJV); “was passing away” (NKJV); “fading as this was” (RSV); “transitory though it was” (TNIV); “which was being brought to an end” (ESV); “now set aside” (NRSV).

“Fading” is probably the best way to render *katargeō* in association with the shining glory that was on Moses’ face, to be contrasted to the greater glory in “the ministry of the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:8). As F.F. Bruce usefully interjects, “The **fading** of the glory on Moses’ face is inferred from Exod. 34.33f, which is interpreted here as meaning that his face was ‘re-charged’ with glory every time he went into the presence of Yahweh in the ‘tent of meeting’.”⁴⁶ And here, what is in view is “the ministry of death,” the letter of the Torah or Law as transcribed onto dead, lifeless stones, which would widely be administered as a means of issuing punishment upon Law breakers. The Torah’s code of conduct, as principles to be followed by the redeemed and written onto their hearts by the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:8), is not in view.

3:8 If a prior, operative ministry of condemnation came in glory (2 Corinthians 3:7), then Paul asks the Corinthians, *pōs ochi mallon hē diakonia tou pneumatos estai en doxē* (πὼς οὐχὶ μᾶλλον ἡ διακονία τοῦ πνεύματος ἔσται ἐν δόξῃ), “how much rather the ministry of the Spirit will be in glory” (2 Corinthians 3:8, LITV), or “will not the ministry of the Spirit be even more glorious?” (NIV). The Apostle Paul, as a minister of the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6), is one who has seen this ministry of the Spirit be facilitated through his declaration of the good news of Yeshua, the permanent forgiveness from sins available through Him, and the unique indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to change lives. Paul is clear that if a prior, operative ministry of death (2 Corinthians 3:7)—a condition where there is no final resolution for human sin to be appropriated—came with glory, **then** the operative ministry of righteousness in Messiah Yeshua with a final resolution for human sin should be recognized to have even more glory.

The challenge for many Christian readers of 2 Corinthians 3:8, is likely not in recognizing that only those who are born again benefit from “the ministry of the Spirit,” with the unsaved liable to “the ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7). The challenge for many Christian readers is in failing to recognize that “the ministry of the Spirit,” with the Tanach background of the New Covenant properly factored in, **indeed involves a supernatural compulsion to obey God’s commandments in the Torah.** Kruse astutely concludes, “Unlike the law *carved in letters on stone*, which could not enable a person to fulfil its own demands, the Spirit given [according to] the new covenant actually causes people to walk in the way of God’s commandments (*cf. Ezk. 36:27; Rom. 8:3-4.*)”⁴⁷

Given the fact that the Tanach’s own New Covenant promise (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27) includes the explicit stipulation that the Torah is to be written onto the hearts of God’s people, we cannot see any disparagement of the Torah’s instruction or commandments here. Rather, it needs to be properly recognized how 2 Corinthians 3:7-8 include a comparison and contrast between a previous function of the Torah to the unredeemed, *and* an intended current function of the Torah to the redeemed.

3:9 In 2 Corinthians 3:9, The Apostle Paul contrasts *tē diakonia tēs katakriseōs* (τῆ διακονία τῆς κατακρίσεως), “the ministry of condemnation” with *hē diakonia tēs dikaiosunēs* (ἡ διακονία τῆς δικαιοσύνης) or “the ministry of righteousness.” He asserts, “For if there is glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness overflows even more in glory” (TLV). Contextually, when the details of the New Covenant as prophesied in the Tanach are weighed into Paul’s statement, then what he labels as “the ministry of condemnation” is to be regarded as the Torah’s stipulations of penalties, not what Paul will later describe how “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). It cannot be avoided how various commentators, though, have considered “the ministry of condemnation” to be the widescale enterprise of the Torah as a whole. Statements of accuracy and inaccuracy are witnessed in the words of Guthrie:

⁴⁵ BDAG, 525.

⁴⁶ Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 191.

⁴⁷ Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, 95.

“[T]hat covenant...came with a host of laws that were attended by penalties, and the Israelites experienced those penalties...Paul understood the law of that covenant as deadly (3:6), given in the context of a ministry of death (3:7).”⁴⁸

Noted by Guthrie is Exodus 35:2, which specified capital punishment to those who violated the Sabbath: “For six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy *day*, a sabbath of complete rest to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death.” From the perspective where “the ministry of condemnation” is the Torah or Pentateuch on the whole, its commandments can only bring death. It is insufficient, for many contemporary Christians, for the penalties for sins such as Sabbath violation to be absorbed by the Messiah in His death, but for the Sabbath to be kept as a commandment written on the heart by God’s Spirit; for many contemporary Christians, the institution like the Sabbath itself is a problem and has to be abolished.⁴⁹ Yet, in Romans 7:11, 13, it is the presence of sin which causes people to break God’s commandments, and sin originates in a cold, stony heart, and where the most God’s commandments can often do is condemn people for their rebellion.

No honest Bible reader can deny that the New Covenant “ministry of righteousness” is superior to the “ministry of condemnation.” But where too many examiners fail to deliver, is in recognizing how “the ministry of condemnation” is a *mode of operation*. God’s Instruction is to be supernaturally transcribed onto the hearts of His people via “the ministry of righteousness.”

“The ministry of condemnation” is something which was originally serviced by a figure such as Moses, who when being given the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, for certain, had to deal with a people of Ancient Israel who were widely obstinate in their obedience. *Many did not want to obey God’s holy commandments, and so they found themselves condemned and liable to punishment.* When Paul discusses “the ministry of condemnation,” is he at all negative toward Moses, or is Moses mainly used as a reference point? Witherington, who is not at all favorable to any post-resurrection era validity to the Torah, makes the surprising observation,

“Paul’s comparison of his ministry with that of Moses is mainly positive. His argument is in essence that one good thing is simply eclipsed by something better. But when he compares his ministry to that of the opponents and looks at the expectations of some of the Corinthians, then he resorts to parody, irony, and sarcasm...”⁵⁰

Craig S. Keener mentions something that Torah-positive Messianic people should greatly appreciate. He states that “At the giving of the law from Sinai, Moses’s experience with God rather than Israel’s violation of it (and inability to endure Moses’s experience) modeled what new covenant life would be like (2 Cor 3:7-18; cf. Ex 32-34).”⁵¹ Indeed, as is detailed, Moses had to shield himself with a veil (2 Corinthians 3:13), because the Israelites were unable to see God’s glory radiating off of his face. Those who are in the Messiah, and beneficiaries of the New Covenant, have no veil blocking themselves from God (2 Corinthians 3:16).

3:10 Given the transformative power of “the “ministry of the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:8) or “the ministry of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 3:9b), which supplies a permanent atonement for and permanent forgiveness from sins, it is not a surprise for a figure like Paul to conclude, “For even what was glorious is not glorious in comparison to the glory that surpasses it” (2 Corinthians 3:10, TLV). Ultimately, in view of what the New Covenant provides in terms of reconciliation and the Holy Spirit writing God’s Instruction onto a transformed person—there is no glory in seeing people condemned to death and ultimately exiled from God’s presence, if not repentant.

3:11 Contrasting the surpassing greatness of “the ministry of the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:6) or “ministry of righteousness (2 Corinthians 3:9b), with “the ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7) or “the ministry of condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:9a), Paul says, “For if that which fades away *was* with glory,

⁴⁸ Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 213.

⁴⁹ The mentioning of an institution such as the seventh-day Sabbath or *Shabbat* is especially poignant, given how Isaiah 66:23 speaks of the worldwide observance of the Sabbath during the Messiah’s Millennial reign.

For a further evaluation of this, and many other passages, consult the *Messianic Sabbath Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

⁵⁰ Witherington, *1-2 Corinthians*, 376.

⁵¹ Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, 168.

much more that which remains *is* in glory.” Recognizing the presence of glory that was radiating off of Moses’ face (2 Corinthians 3:6), the present passive participle *katargoumenon* (καταργούμενον) is best rendered as “is fading away.” Perspective issues are to surely be weighed, though, as this involves what is fading away, and what continues on. At the very least, it is to be recognized for a First Century audience still likely working through some of the details of new spiritual realities, that if the ministry of condemnation, which at best could be engraved onto lifeless albeit durable stone, had glory and Divine origins—then the ministry of the Spirit surely has glory as it has the same Divine origins. More to the point of what Paul communicates, the New Covenant of which he is a minister, is something which has a permanence to it, which the previous ministry of condemnation does not have. Harris is broadly correct in his assessment,

“The old covenant and its ministry belonged to a vanishing order, an economy that began to fade immediately after its inception, as was typified by the divine glory reflected on Moses’ face—a glory that began to fade as soon as he left the divine presence. On the other hand, the new covenant and its ministry began in splendor and will always be invested with glory...for it constitutes God’s final word to humankind.”⁵²

It is entirely proper to acknowledge how in the post-resurrection era, Yeshua the Messiah’s sacrifice for sinful humans has nullified the ministry of condemnation—He has “canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us...having nailed it to the cross” (Colossians 2:14)—inaugurating the New Covenant with its permanent atonement and forgiveness. But too frequently overlooked here is that what Paul actually describes as being “brought to an end” (ESV)—in contrast to something that is “permanent” (ESV)—is “the ministry of death” or “ministry of condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:7, 9a). While the ministry of condemnation can be rendered inoperative in the era where people acknowledge how Yeshua’s sacrifice offers final atonement for sin, and the penalties of condemnation are remitted by Him (Colossians 2:14)—**the standard of God’s holiness in the Torah is still with us.** To equate the holy commandments of God’s Torah, as being “the ministry of condemnation,” would fail to remember how the New Covenant promises actually include the Law being supernaturally written on the heart by the Spirit. Kruse astutely observes,

“It is important to recognize that Paul does not imply that the law itself was fading away. The law as the expression of the will of God for human conduct is still valid. In fact, Paul says the purpose of God in bringing in the new covenant of the Spirit was precisely that the righteous demands of the law might be fulfilled in those who walk by the Spirit (Rom. 8:4).”⁵³

Keener also properly states how “The new covenant format of the law in the heart has surpassed the old covenant format on stones, but it was always God’s good life; cf. Rom 7:12-14.”⁵⁴

In 2 Corinthians 3:11, Paul employs the verb *katargeō* (καταργέω), “**to cause someth. to come to an end or to be no longer in existence**” (BDAG),⁵⁵ describing how the ministry of condemnation is no more: “if that which fades away [*katargeō*] was with glory...” It notably also appears in his assertion of Romans 3:31, where Paul asks, “Do we then overthrow [*katargeō*] the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law” (RSV). Born again Believers are very much called to recognize the importance of God’s Torah, but how we uphold its validity is by the new “ministry of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 3:9b) brought about by the Messiah’s work and example left for us (Matthew 5:16-17ff).

3:12 Recognizing the great transformation which is to take place as a result of the New Covenant enacted within the lives of those who receive Yeshua (2 Corinthians 3:3), and the confidence that Paul has stressed that he has (2 Corinthians 3:4), he further informs the Corinthians, “Since we have such a hope, we are very bold” (RSV). The term *parrēsia* (παρρησία) implies an openness of approach that people can have not just toward one another, but toward God. TDNT usefully describes some of the uses of this term in the Pauline Epistles:

⁵² Harris, 291.

⁵³ Kruse, *2 Corinthians*, 96.

⁵⁴ Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, 169.

⁵⁵ BDAG, 525.

“Paul, too, stresses apostolic *parrhēsia* in both life (Phil. 1:20) and preaching (Eph. 6:19-20). Openness toward God and men, and in the gospel, is meant (Eph. 3:12; 2 Cor. 3:12; Eph. 6:19-20). The face that is open toward God is also open toward others (2 Cor. 3:7ff.). This open face reflects the Lord’s glory in increasing transformation by the Spirit. Openness implies a confident freedom of approach to God (Eph. 3:12). In its human dimension it has the nuance of affection in 2 Cor. 7:4 and authority in Phlm. 8. The ground of *parrhēsia* is faith (1 Tim. 3:13), and it is effected by the Spirit and related to union with Christ (Phil. 1:19-20). Christ himself triumphs ‘openly’ over the powers in Col. 2:15.”⁵⁶

3:13 The confidence that Paul and his associates have, indicates that new realities have dawned. Their work is contrasted with previous servants of God like Moses, “*who* used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away” (2 Corinthians 3:13), as Moses had to shield himself because of the glory shining forth from his face having been in God’s presence (Exodus 34:33-35). And why did Moses have to wear this veil or barrier? An extremely important thought, as offered by Peter Enns, in his commentary on Exodus, is “we may think of Moses’ veil functioning in a similar way to the veil or curtain in the tabernacle. Just as the people could not enter the Most Holy Place to behold God’s glory, now they cannot behold the glory of God reflected in Moses.”⁵⁷

The function of the veil, over Moses’ face, can be rightly compared to the heavy curtain which separated out the Holy of Holies in the ancient Tabernacle and Temple, a curtain which was torn in two at the crucifixion of Yeshua (Mark 15:38; Matthew 27:51; Luke 23:45). There are differences of opinion, though, on how to take what Paul labels as *to telos tou katargoumenou* (τὸ τέλος τοῦ καταργουμένου), with a version such as the NASU having, “the end of what was fading away,” and with the ESV having, “the outcome of what was being brought to an end.” That the glory on Moses’ face was to indicate something of limited value—as it was fading away—and that the veil he placed over his face represents a barrier to be removed, is clear enough. But what is the *telos* (te,loj) to be regarded as? Is it the eventual termination of “the ministry of condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:9a)? Or, is the *telos* of the fading glory, the greater glory inaugurated by the Messiah who was to come?

The clause *to telos tou katargoumenou* can certainly be rendered as “the goal of that which is fading away” (PME), as God’s glory reflected off of Moses’ face, a glory notably blocked by a veil, and a glory representing something of limited spiritual value (2 Corinthians 3:11a)—is something which is to point to a greater openness (2 Corinthians 3:12) that is only present when people recognize their need for restitution to “the ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7) problem. Paul makes the point that with such a veil on Moses’ face, the Ancient Israelites were unable to clearly see toward the *telos* or culmination of what would be accomplished by the Messiah’s ministry (cf. Romans 10:4, Grk.), the permanent atonement they needed, and hence the greater glory which would not fade away (2 Corinthians 3:11b).

3:14 The sad observation that the Apostle Paul made, in the First Century, was that it was not just the Ancient Israelites in the wilderness who could not see the Redeemer’s ultimate ministry coming. There is an obstinance present in their descendants, the majority of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries. 2 Corinthians 3:14 includes some loaded words, as the Apostle unfortunately observed, “But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ” (2 Corinthians 3:14, NASU). How to properly deduce what Paul is saying here, particularly in terms of his statements being reflective of new spiritual realities manifested in those who have received Israel’s Messiah, is not something easy for many Bible readers.

When most people read 2 Corinthians 3:14, they simply assume that when Paul makes light of the “reading of the old covenant,” *tē anagnōsei tēs palaias diathēkēs* (τῇ ἀναγνώσει τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης), that means hearing the Torah or Tanach Scriptures read. A Messianic version like the TLV actually has, “the

⁵⁶ H. Schlier, “*parrhēsia*,” in *TDNT*, 795.

⁵⁷ Peter Enns, *NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 587.

reading of the ancient covenant.”⁵⁸ That a negative condition manifests itself *when something is read* is obvious enough.

Paul observes how for both the Ancient Israelites and the majority of the First Century Jewish community, “their minds were made dull” (NIV) or “their minds were made stonelike” (CJB/CJSB). As Deuteronomy 29:4 informs us, “Yet to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear.” Isaiah 29:10 also speaks of the reality of how “the LORD has poured over you a spirit of deep sleep, He has shut your eyes, the prophets; and He has covered your heads, the seers.” Psalm 95:5 exclaims, “Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness” (cf. Exodus 17:2-7). This is reflective of a condition where sin has been perpetuated, not just erecting an obstacle between God and His people, but where the people themselves become increasingly calloused toward God and His intended ways and purposes. The great travesty is how this takes place even when God punishes His people, and then allows for some restitution and restoration to follow (cf. Nehemiah 9:16-31; Psalm 106:6-39; Ezekiel 20:8-36).

The Ancient Israelites had hardened minds, lacking the spiritual sensitivity required to acknowledge how Moses wearing a veil depicted how God’s holiness must be separate from sin, which in turn prevented them from looking into God’s further plan of redemptive history (2 Corinthians 3:13). Just as Moses wearing a veil (Exodus 34:34) depicted a barrier that was representative of God’s holiness being separate from sin, in a similar manner, the unredeemed or unsaved are depicted as having a veil over their hearts. But Paul asserts, *hoti en Christō katergeitai* (ὅτι ἐν Χριστῷ καταργεῖται), “because in Christ it is being abolished” (Brown and Comfort)⁵⁹ or “because it is removed in Christ” (NASU). The Corinthians are among those who have experienced the transformative power of the Messiah, and do not have a veil lying over their hearts. Barnett astutely concludes “‘in Christ’...is ‘abolished,’ allowing the glory of God to shine brightly and forever ‘in the face of Christ’ (4:6).”⁶⁰ When the veil over the heart of someone is removed, via the salvation of Yeshua, an ability to truly experience the holy presence of the Lord is to be manifest (2 Corinthians 3:16-18).

The majority of Paul’s Jewish brethren are said to have an unlifted veil over their hearts “at the reading of the old covenant.” The way that this has customarily been approached, is that at the reading of the Tanach—commonly called the “Old Testament”—that the Jewish people as a whole have a stubborn inability to see Yeshua in its recorded passages. Also quite frequent to hear from Christian examiners, is that the Jewish people as a whole lack some ability to see that the Torah or Law of Moses has been abolished. Bruce is one who concludes, “When the Torah is read in synagogue, they cannot see that the order of which it speaks is a temporary one, which has now been superseded by Christ.”⁶¹ A dissenting opinion is offered by Hafemann, who instead says that “Paul’s introduction of the terminology ‘old covenant’ is a declaration of his eschatology, not a denigration of the law. He refers to the Sinai covenant as ‘old’ only because he is convinced that Jesus, as the Christ, has inaugurated the ‘new covenant’ of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-27.”⁶²

That the era of the New Covenant has dawned is clear, as Paul is a minister of the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6). But what should also be clear, is that not all individuals have the realities of “the ministry of the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:8) or “the ministry of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 3:9b) operative within them—the promises of a new heart, a new spirit, *and* the supernatural transcription of God’s Torah or Law onto a psyche transformed by Lord via the good news. Instead, the unredeemed—and for Paul’s purposes in 2 Corinthians 3:14, the majority of his fellow Jews—are subject to “the ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7) or “the ministry of condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:9a), the declaration of high and often capital penalties which are resultant from disobedience to God’s Torah. While the New Covenant is “the ministry of the Spirit”

⁵⁸ This rendering actually serves to indicate that various Messianic Jewish leaders and theologians do not have a firm handling of this passage.

⁵⁹ Brown and Comfort, 629.

⁶⁰ Barnett, 195.

⁶¹ Bruce, *1 and 2 Corinthians*, 192.

⁶² Hafemann, 159.

(2 Corinthians 3:8) or “righteousness” (2 Corinthians 3:9b), then the Old Covenant should logically be classified to be “the ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7) or “condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:9a).

If the Old Covenant has been correctly identified as a *function* of the Torah—the Torah condemning sinners—to be contrasted against the New Covenant where the Torah is supernaturally transcribed on the hearts of the redeemed, then how are we to take Paul’s assessment that the Old Covenant is somehow “read”? Perhaps we should consider the dilemma of the Romans 7 sinner, the one who when he hears the Torah’s commandments like the Tenth Commandment, can only sin even more, suffer a condition of spiritual death, and exist in a state of condemnation before the Lord (Romans 7:7-24). The answer to the sinner’s dilemma is being released from condemnation and exile from God, via the salvation provided in Yeshua—which is to then enable obedience to the Law (Romans 7:25-8:4). Commenting on the ministry of death/condemnation (2 Corinthians 3:7-8), Barnett concurs that “The complex ‘wretched man’ passage (Rom 7:7-25) may be, in part, Paul’s personalization of the devastating impact of the Law of God on a person sinful of heart.”⁶³ God’s Torah is, of course, not the problem (Romans 7:12)—**sin, rebellion, and obstinance in an unregenerated person are** (Romans 7:13)!

When Paul claims that the Old Covenant is read, “the ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7) or “condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:9a)—**he is speaking of the condemning aspects of the Torah pronounced upon sinners.** When spiritually-sensitive people hear such a ministry of condemnation read, they are cut to the quick by the convicting grace of God to repent of their sins, and are drawn to Yeshua’s sacrifice at Golgotha (Calvary), which in history removed the Tabernacle/Temple veil separating people from the Father’s presence—but has to be removed from our individual, sinful hearts via personal salvation.

For the case of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries, their dull and stubborn minds prevented the veil from being removed. When the Old Covenant ministry of death or condemnation would hence be read, they would not be convicted to turn to the Lord in repentance—much less turn to the Lord in repentance *and receive Yeshua*. Noting Paul’s language of “to this day” (NIV) in 2 Corinthians 3:14, Hafemann associates it with the Torah declaration of Deuteronomy 29:4, and concludes that “this divine prerogative not only explains Israel’s past disobedience, but also grounds Moses’ proclamation that Israel will continue to break the covenant in the future, suffering the judgment of Exile as a result.”⁶⁴ For Hafemann, this means that “the issue in 3:14-15 is not that Israel *cannot* understand intellectually the implications of her history...and her consequent need for the death of the Messiah. Rather, the problem is that she *will not* accept it as true for her. Israel’s ‘stiff-necked’ condition continues to ‘veil’ her response to the Sinai covenant.”⁶⁵ Paul himself only came to Messiah faith via a Divine intervention on the Damascus Road; for the majority of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries, when presented with their past history of violation of God’s Instruction and their condemnation by it, they did not want to change. Barnett draws the general conclusion,

“Paul is not dogmatizing from a distance; Moses himself said as much (Deut 29:2-4; cf. Isa 6:9-10; 63:17). As God speaking through Jeremiah tersely stated, ‘My covenant, which they broke’ (Jer 31:32). In Paul’s words the hardening of the minds is like a veil that blinds the people.”⁶⁶

For certain, Jewish people can see the veil as a barrier separating themselves and God, removed by faith in Yeshua the Messiah. Paul himself as a Jew benefitted from the reality of, “because it is removed in Messiah.” But too frequently, often with no Tanach background of the Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:25-27 New Covenant, Christian examiners have thought that what is taken away is the relevance of the Torah and Tanach as a code of instruction to be followed.

Witherington does not agree with the conclusion that it is the veil which is nullified by faith in the Messiah, noting some grammatical points. He states, “The neuter participle *to katargoumenon* [τὸ καταργούμενον], ‘annulled,’ agrees with ‘that which was glorified’ in v. 10 and so applies to the whole of the old covenant...Therefore, what is spoken of as annulled through Christ in v. 14 is probably the Old Covenant

⁶³ Barnett, 182.

⁶⁴ Hafemann, 158.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Barnett, 194.

rather than the veil.”⁶⁷ The grammatical points being what they are, Witherington’s mistake is in failing to identify the Old Covenant as the ministry of death or condemnation which Yeshua has nullified. This Old Covenant would be the Torah’s capital punishment declared upon sinners, a consequence which comes from violating the commandments now to be written upon the heart by the power of the New Covenant. The veil that Moses wore, like the curtain in the Tabernacle and Temple, is simply the epitomization of what the ministry of condemnation causes: **separation from God**.

Walter C. Kaiser, an Old Testament theologian, naturally has a very high view of the Torah for God’s people. He recognizes how only faith in Jesus can render the barrier, curtain, or veil placed between God and sinful people inoperative. In his book *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, he describes how, “This blindness can only be remedied and Moses’ veil ‘lifted’ and the glory...revealed in its ultimate significance...whenever men and women turn to the Lord. Only then is the veil ‘removed’ (v. 14). Thus it is the ‘veil’ that is to be ‘abrogated’ or ‘removed’ according to Paul...”⁶⁸ The veil does not then represent God’s holy standard of conduct in the Law, but is the sad consequence of how a holy Creator must be separate from the presence of sin. Moses, as God’s representative (2 Corinthians 3:13), had to be shielded because of the Israelites’ sin. Similarly, unregenerated people have *to auto kalumma* (τὸ αὐτὸ κάλυμμα) or have “the same veil” (2 Corinthians 3:14) over their hearts. But contrary to having to shield others, like the presence of God radiating off of Moses, the barrier on a sinner separates the heart from God. Only by appropriating the sacrifice of Yeshua can people have this barrier removed and can full communion with the Creator be restored.

The challenge, for many Bible readers, is in thinking that “the old covenant” (*tēs palaiās diathēkēs*, τῆς παλαιᾶς διαθήκης) is just akin to the Tanach Scriptures—when what is to occur is a transference in people’s lives from the sphere of the ministry of death/condemnation to the ministry of the Spirit/righteousness (2 Corinthians 3:8-9). When the stipulations of the ministry of death/condemnation are read from the Torah, we are to be convicted by them for our need for a redeemer, and turn to God via His Son Yeshua. The status of having a veil or barrier placed between a person and God is not just a Jewish problem, but can be the problem of *any unregenerated person* hearing the Law read. When unregenerated or unsaved people hear from Moses’ Teaching, all they can really do is be condemned. **They suffer from the power known as the Old Covenant**, not having the New Covenant’s final atonement and permanent forgiveness present in their lives.

3:15 The critical point made by Paul’s statement in 2 Corinthians 3:15, “Yes, till today, whenever Moshe is read, a veil lies over their heart” (CJB/CJSB), takes on a different dynamic when “the reading of the old covenant” is associated with “the ministry of death” (2 Corinthians 3:7) or “condemnation” (2 Corinthians 3:9a), the penalties pronounced in the Torah upon Law-breakers. In order for it to be known that the Torah condemns those who violate its commandments—causing a veil, as a barrier on the heart, to be placed between oneself and God—the Torah needs to be a major part of one’s reading and study of Holy Scripture. The Jewish community, both in the First Century and today, has a major advantage, in that some attention is given every week in the Synagogue to the Torah portion. The institution of the Christian Church, in contrast, tends to be at a disadvantage, as the Pentateuch is not similarly read every week.

3:16 There has to be a recognition of a need for change, on the part of a person who hears the “Old Covenant” being read—the ministry of death/condemnation exiling one from God. As Paul states, “But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed” (2 Corinthians 3:16, ESV), *periaireitai to kalumma* (περιαιρείται τὸ κάλυμμα). Keener usefully indicates for the realities to be realized, “Whereas the glory of the first covenant was limited, transient, and deadly, those who ‘turn to the Lord’ receive the Spirit, hence the glory of the internalized, new covenant law (3:3, 6-11, 16-17).”⁶⁹ Guthrie further summarizes some of the significant realities to be experienced by those who turn to the Lord:

⁶⁷ Witherington, *1-2 Corinthians*, 380.

⁶⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 313.

⁶⁹ Keener, *1-2 Corinthians*, 169.

“[W]hen Moses put a veil over his face, cutting off the Israelites from the glory manifested in his ministry, they were kept from perceiving the true importance of the glory on Moses’ face—that God’s ultimate goal was for his covenant people to experience his presence and thus his glory. This would be at the heart of the new covenant, a covenant in which all of the covenant people would ‘know the Lord’ and have their hearts transformed (Jer. 31:31-34), when all would be able to go boldly behind the tabernacle curtain (which also stands as a barrier) into the holiest place of the Lord because their sins have been forgiven decisively (Heb. 10:19-20).”⁷⁰

While controversial for some, when Paul says that in order for the veil to be removed or taken away “whenever a person turns to the Lord,” *pros Kurion* (πρὸς κύριον), contextually relates to Yeshua the Messiah (2 Corinthians 3:14). When the background of Exodus 34:34 is considered—“But whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would take off the veil until he came out; and whenever he came out and spoke to the sons of Israel what he had been commanded”—then the statement of turning to the Lord in 2 Corinthians 3:16 can be taken as ancillary evidence, for sure, of Yeshua being integrated into the Divine Identity.

3:17-18 The dynamic, transformative power of not just the Divine in general, but of different manifestations of the plural Godhead, is seen in the statement, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Corinthians 3:17, RSV). Those who have experienced the transformative power of the good news, with the presence of God in their hearts, are those who can truly understand the profundity of what Paul says. The *eleutheria* (ἐλευθερία), the liberty or freedom, is a release from condemnation; it is not some kind of permissiveness allowing for a dismissal of God’s Torah as Instruction to be heeded and followed. Barnett excellently states,

“It is ‘freedom’ from the ‘condemnation’ arising from inability through ‘the flesh’ to keep the Law of God (cf. Rom 7:7-12). Furthermore, it is a Spirit-empowered freedom, arising from the ‘righteousness’ of those dedicated to God ‘in Christ’ (1 Cor 6:11; 2 Cor 3:8; 5:21) to fulfill the ‘righteous’ requirement of the Law (Rom 8:4). The new covenant as promised by the prophets was not a covenant of lawlessness, but a covenant under which people would be moved by the Spirit to ‘follow [God’s] decrees and be careful to keep [his] laws’ (Ezek 36:27), to have [his] law in their minds...[written] in their hearts’ (Jer 31:33)...”⁷¹

Of course, much of the new life which awaits those who see the operative power of the New Covenant within them, involves the fulfillment of the easy but difficult commands, as indicated by Barnett, “to love God and neighbor and to forgive one’s enemies (Mark 12:29-31; Matt 5:43-48; Rom 12:9-21; 13:8-10; Gal 5:14). This is the ‘law of Christ’ (Gal 6:2), the ‘royal law...the law of liberty’ (Jas 2:8-12).”⁷² Barnett is broadly reflective of Christian examiners who consider the so-called “moral law” of the Torah to be what is written on the heart and mind via the New Covenant, but such a vantage point is to be vastly preferred to those who would completely dismiss the view that the “laws” (Hebrews 8:10; 10:16) are indeed to be written on the heart and mind, as a consequence of receiving Yeshua into one’s life. Barnett is keen to draw attention to the existence of “the ethical passages that are so extensive in Paul’s writings and that, generally speaking, express the Law as radically crystallized—and...paradoxically, profoundly deepened—by Christ’s reinterpretation of the Law.”⁷³ And indeed, the very reason *why* born again Believers are to follow the Torah is because the Messiah Himself bids us to (Matthew 5:18-19), and **Messiah followers** must undoubtedly consider His interpretation of Moses’ Teaching to be prime!

The power of the New Covenant notably goes well beyond the Torah’s commandments being written on the heart, and even the availability to have permanent forgiveness with God. The New Covenant inaugurated in one’s life enables the redeemed to fully see the Lord—as any heavy veil or barrier separating us from His presence, which existed over our hearts when we were unregenerated sinners—is now to be gone! The Holy Spirit offers Believers great freedom, as the ministry of condemnation is no more (2

⁷⁰ Guthrie, *2 Corinthians*, 224.

⁷¹ Barnett, 203.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 204 fn#33.

Corinthians 3:17; cf. Romans 4:6-8; 8:1). This is why Paul can say how he and his ministry associates, unlike Moses who wore a veil representing God, can now in the New Covenant era go about bearing His presence as though they are unveiled: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18a). Paul himself, after all, had an epiphany of the Lord on the road to Damascus that changed him from within (Acts 9:1-18).

All Believers, as they grow in faith and knowledge of Yeshua, “are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18b). We should possess the confidence to speak forth what He has done within us (2 Corinthians 3:12). And in a new condition of following the Lord, the New Covenant imperative of proper obedience should certainly be present—as we should possess the ability to see the importance of Moses’ Teaching with the veil removed!