

SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY
WEEK 24: EXODUS 33-34 – RADIANT MOSES INTERCEDES

OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS 32-34

I. The Golden Calf – Exodus 32

- A. **Aaron makes a golden calf** and the people worship “their gods” (Exodus 32:1-6)
- B. God’s anger and Moses’ intercession (Exodus 32:7-13)
- C. God changed his mind (Exodus 32:14)
- D. Moses smashes the tablets and destroys the golden calf (Exodus 32:15-20)
- E. Aaron defends his actions (Exodus 32:21-24)
- F. Sons of Levi step up and kill 3,000 (Exodus 32:25-29)
- G. Moses intercedes again (Exodus 32:30-34)
- H. God sends a plague on the people (Exodus 32:35)

II. The Command to Leave Sinai – Exodus 33

- A. Command to leave Sinai but God won’t go with them (Exodus 33:1-6)
- B. The tent outside the camp where God and Moses speak (Exodus 33:7-11)
- C. Moses wants to see God’s glory and Moses cuts new tablets (Exodus 33:12-34:4)

III. Moses Makes New Tablets – Exodus 34

- A. God descends in the cloud and speaks (Exodus 34:5-7)
- B. Moses bows and worships (Exodus 34:8-9)
- C. God renews the covenant (Exodus 34:10-27)
- D. Moses spends 40 days and 40 nights with God and writes the ten commandments (Exodus 34:28)
- E. **Radiant-faced Moses** comes down, gives commandments, and puts on a veil (Exodus 34:29-35)

SUMMARY OF CHAPTER 32

Moses is delayed from returning from his visit with God and the people are getting anxious. They convince Aaron to build a reassuring symbol of God’s presence for them and he does. And ironically, it leads to their alienation from God. Aaron declares a feast day where they will worship Yahweh and offer sacrifices to God (as God had instructed in chapter 24). But God is not pleased. They have broken God’s commandment (#2 no idols) and now God wants to wipe out the Israelites and start over with descendants from Moses. But Moses is able to change God’s mind. An angry Moses returns to camp, smashes the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, destroys the golden calf, pulverizes it, mixes it with water and has the Israelites drink it. He then asks what Aaron what happened and calls everyone to make a decision: “Who is on the Lord’s side?” Only the Levites step forward; all of them. They slaughter 3,000 Israelites that day. Moses once again intercedes for them with God, but God says that the sinners will be blotted out of the book. And God tells Moses to lead them to the Promised Land and God sends a plague upon the Israelites as a punishment for their sin.

EXODUS 33 (NRSV)

Exodus 33:1-6

¹ The LORD said to Moses, “Go, leave this place, you and the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt, and go to the land of which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘To your descendants I will give it.’” ² I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out the Canaanites, the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ³ Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; but I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” ⁴ When the people heard these harsh words, they mourned, and no one put on ornaments. ⁵ For the LORD had said to Moses, “Say to the Israelites, ‘You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you. So now take off your ornaments, and I will decide what to do to you.’” ⁶ Therefore the Israelites stripped themselves of their ornaments, from Mount Horeb onward.

In speaking with Moses, God once again talks about them being Moses’ people, not God’s people; “the people whom **you** have brought up out of the land of Egypt.” Apparently, God is still a little hot under the collar. Once again, God calls the Israelites “a stiff-necked people;” God doesn’t like their stubbornness. And the Israelites hear about it. What is God

going to do to them? God declares that God needs to keep God's distance, otherwise God would consume them. Paradoxically, God's withdrawal of God's presence is a mercifully preventive measure. Even though in verse 2, God promises to drive out the people from the land, in verse 3 God says, "I will not go up among you." So, God promises to send **an** angel (not "the" or "my" angel) to lead them. The Israelites are fearful of what God might do to them and so they mourn. They obey God's every word. They don't put on their ornaments. God is going to make a decision. The fact that God will not go with them is a huge deal. Wasn't that the purpose of the whole Exodus out of Egypt. Isn't that God's ultimate desire, to be their God and they would be God's people and they would dwell together. Isn't that what the tabernacle is all about. But apparently their decision to create an idol to represent God's presence among them has really set God and God's plans off kilter.

The image we get of God here is very humanlike. God doesn't seem to trust that God can control God's anger. God changes God's mind. God has to make a decision about God's relationship with them. What is God going to do with them? Their relationship with God seems very tenuous. Sure, they are commanded to continue traveling towards the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the land promised to their ancestors, AND God says that God will drive out the people of the land so that it can be theirs, but God doesn't seem to be very reassuring. God commands them not wear any jewelry (ornaments), and so they obey. This makes sense. It was with their ornaments of gold that the golden calf was created. And, they are going to have to give up their ornaments to make the provisions for the tabernacle. So, they might as well get used to not wearing them.

Exodus 33:7-11

⁷ Now Moses used to take the tent and pitch it outside the camp, far off from the camp; he called it the tent of meeting. And everyone who sought the LORD would go out to the tent of meeting, which was outside the camp. ⁸ Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent. ⁹ When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the LORD would speak with Moses. ¹⁰ When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent. ¹¹ Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.

We have already seen the unadvised precursor to the mercy seat that will rest atop the ark of the covenant (in the golden calf). Now we hear about the precursor to the tabernacle, what Moses called the "tent of meeting." This was where God and Moses (or anyone who was seeking the Lord) would go and meet with God. And the people would watch Moses, and they would see the pillar of cloud (the pillar that led them out of Egypt by day; representing God's presence) and know that Moses and God were speaking. And, in awe, they would bow down and worship.

It's interesting to note the location of the tent; where Moses sets it up. He sets it up outside the camp, far away. This highlights the peoples' alienation from God. Remember, the people had asked Moses to be the buffer between them and God. Is Moses creating an actual physical buffer by setting up the tent way outside the camp? Or is there another reason the tent is outside the camp? In Numbers 2:2, the tent of meeting is located at the center of the camp with each ancestral house camped facing it on every side. But in Numbers 5, everyone who would "defile" the camp was to be put out of the camp. Could it be that the tent won't be put in the camp until the camp is cleansed from being spiritually defiled from the golden calf affair?

Once again, we notice the highlight of the special relationship between God and Moses: God and Moses speak face to face, as one speaks to a friend (see Deuteronomy 34:10 and Numbers 12:6-8; mouth to mouth). We also notice the role of Joshua who never leaves the tent of meeting.

Exodus 33:12-17

¹² Moses said to the LORD, "See, you have said to me, 'Bring up this people'; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, 'I know you by name, and you have also found favor in my sight.' ¹³ Now if I have found favor in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people." ¹⁴ He said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." ¹⁵ And he said to him, "If your presence will not go, do not carry us up from here." ¹⁶ For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, unless you go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and your people, from every people on the face of

the earth.”¹⁷ The LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing that you have asked; for you have found favor in my sight, and I know you by name.”

In these next several verses, Moses is going to make the following argument with God: “If you are pleased with me, please give me and the people your presence.” God has promised to send an angel before them, but Moses doesn’t seem to be satisfied with that. Verse 12 is a little strange. Is Moses asking to know the name of the angel that will go ahead of him?

We would do well to remember the promise made to Moses regarding the angel in chapter 23:

Exodus 23:20–30 (NRSV)

²⁰ I am going to send an angel in front of you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. ²¹ Be attentive to him and listen to his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression; for my name is in him. ²² But if you listen attentively to his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and a foe to your foes. ²³ When my angel goes in front of you, and brings you to the Amorites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Canaanites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, ²⁴ you shall not bow down to their gods, or worship them, or follow their practices, but you shall utterly demolish them and break their pillars in pieces. ²⁵ You shall worship the Lord your God, and I will bless your bread and your water; and I will take sickness away from among you. ²⁶ No one shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. ²⁷ I will send my terror in front of you, and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. ²⁸ And I will send the pestilence in front of you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. ²⁹ I will not drive them out from before you in one year, or the land would become desolate and the wild animals would multiply against you. ³⁰ Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land.

Clearly Moses wants to know if this is still the case and in verse 13, Moses wants to know God’s intentions and God’s will; “show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in your sight.” There is a connection between what Moses is asking here and Psalm 103:7-18 which comments on it:

Psalm 103:7–18 (NRSV)

⁷ He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel. ⁸ The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. ⁹ He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever. ¹⁰ He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities. ¹¹ For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us. ¹³ As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him. ¹⁴ For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust. ¹⁵ As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field; ¹⁶ for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more. ¹⁷ But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children’s children, ¹⁸ to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

In verse 14, God promises to personally accompany the Israelites on their journey **and** to give them **rest**, which is a huge concession on God’s part when you look at what God has said in verse 3. The promised rest is in line with the whole purpose of the Exodus (freeing an oppressed people). But this promise seems to fall on deaf ears. It’s strange that in the flow of the narrative, Moses doesn’t seem to hear these words or believe them. In verses 15 and 16, God’s presence is so important to Moses that Moses pleads with God not to ask him or the Israelites to leave Sinai without it. And he bases his appeal on God’s concern for God’s own glory/reputation. God has just promised God’s personal presence, and yet Moses makes this appeal. What is going on here? It’s also instructive that Moses tries to include the people in God’s favor in verse 16.

Exodus 33:18-23

¹⁸ Moses said, “Show me your glory, I pray.” ¹⁹ And he said, “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, ‘The LORD’; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. ²⁰ But,” he said, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.” ²¹ And the LORD continued, “See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; ²² and while my glory passes by I will put you in

a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by;²³ then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.”

In Verse 18, Moses asks to see God’s glory (Hebrew: **כָּבוֹד** *kavod*). Hasn’t Moses already had this experience? Is Moses asking for a repeat performance or something new?

It is interesting how God responds in verse 19. “Sure Moses! Will do... however...”

God says, “I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you the name, YHWH.” “But,” God says in verse 20, “you cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.”

What exactly is God’s goodness? In Hebrew, the word is **טוֹב** *tub*, which can be translated either as:

- “goodness” as in the “best” part; or
- “loveliness/splendor” as in “I will cause my full splendor to pass in front of you.”

And what are we to make of this response in light of what we have seen and heard throughout the book of Exodus?

Exodus 3:4–6 (NRSV)

⁴ When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, “Moses, Moses!” And he said, “Here I am.”⁵ Then he said, “Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”⁶ He said further, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Exodus 24:9–12 (NRSV)

⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up,¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness.¹¹ God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.¹² The Lord said to Moses, “Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.”

Exodus 33:8–11 (NRSV)

⁸ Whenever Moses went out to the tent, all the people would rise and stand, each of them, at the entrance of their tents and watch Moses until he had gone into the tent.⁹ When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses.¹⁰ When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tent.¹¹ Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend. Then he would return to the camp; but his young assistant, Joshua son of Nun, would not leave the tent.

What appears to be going on here, beyond what source theory might say, is that God is accommodating Moses; showing Moses just enough of God’s self to give Moses confidence in God’s presence, but not enough for Moses to get an overwhelming good look. God will give Moses limited exposure.

Because of the great sin of idolatry in chapter 32, Moses wants some sort of incontrovertible evidence that God has again accepted God’s people and would go with them into the promised land. Moses wants to see God’s glory.

God decides to put Moses into a cleft of a rock as God passes by and God will shield Moses with God’s hand until God has passed by. Then Moses can look and catch a glimpse of God’s back side.

EXODUS 34 (NRSV)

Exodus 34:1-7

¹ The LORD said to Moses, “Cut two tablets of stone like the former ones, and I will write on the tablets the words that were on the former tablets, which you broke.² Be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning to Mount Sinai and

present yourself there to me, on the top of the mountain. ³ *No one shall come up with you, and do not let anyone be seen throughout all the mountain; and do not let flocks or herds graze in front of that mountain.* ⁴ *So Moses cut two tablets of stone like the former ones; and he rose early in the morning and went up on Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him, and took in his hand the two tablets of stone.* ⁵ *The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, "The LORD."* ⁶ *The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,* ⁷ *keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."*

"You broke it, you buy it." Is this what God is saying regarding the tablets? God tells Moses to be ready to present himself to God up on top of the mountain. Moses must go it alone; not a person, not a flock, not a herd. So the next morning, Moses does what he is told. He cuts new tablets of stone and carries them in his hands as he heads up the mountain. These stone tablets will be exactly like the old ones, written by the hand of God.

Moses apparently knows how to chisel things out of stone. In Greek, they use the term *tekton* which is usually translated as craftsman or artisan; a stone mason or carpenter. Jesus was also a *tekton* (see Mark 6:3 and Matthew 13:55). Was Jesus a carpenter (worker with wood) or a stone mason (worker with stone)? In Greek, it isn't clear. In both places, the Greek word is simply *tekton*.

And according to verse 5, Yahweh descended in the cloud and stood with Moses there and spoke the holy name "Yahweh." As we remember from before, the name, Yahweh, comes from a form of the Hebrew verb "to be" that means "I am who I am." This is the word that God used to identify himself to Moses. When Moses asked God his name, God replied, *YHWH* or "I am who I am" (Exodus 3:14).

In that culture, people considered a person's name to be more than a simple label to identify that person. They believed that something of the person's identity was tied up in the name—that the name expressed something of the person's essential character. They also assumed that a name—at least some names—possessed something of the power of the one who wore that name. When Yahweh agrees to proclaim before Moses the name, Yahweh, he is inviting Moses and Israel back into the intimate relationship that once characterized them.

After speaking the divine name, God then proclaims a bit more about God's own nature: *merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin.* All great and wonderful things.

But God continues, saying, *"yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation."*

The curious and astute observer, we never hear about God's goodness passing by or Moses being placed in the cleft of a rock. Instead, God stands with Moses and makes the above pronouncement. And how does Moses respond. See below.

Exodus 34:8-9

⁸ *And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth, and worshiped.* ⁹ *He said, "If now I have found favor in your sight, O LORD, I pray, let the LORD go with us. Although this is a stiff-necked people, pardon our iniquity and our sin, and take us for your inheritance."*

This is Moses response. He quickly bows his head (when he should have been shielded by the hand of God. And Moses does correctly when Moses bows to worship God. This is supposed to be where Moses sees God's glory. This was supposed to be the sign Moses needed that would reassure him that God would be present among them. But instead we have glorious words spoken by God about God's self and Moses bows his head and worships. And then Moses begs God to go with them, even though they are a stubborn people. Moses asks God to forgive their iniquity and sin and to restore their status as part of God's family.

Exodus 34:10-27

¹⁰ He said: I hereby make a covenant. Before all your people I will perform marvels, such as have not been performed in all the earth or in any nation; and all the people among whom you live shall see the work of the LORD; for it is an awesome thing that I will do with you. ¹¹ Observe what I command you today. See, I will drive out before you the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. ¹² Take care not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going, or it will become a snare among you. ¹³ You shall tear down their altars, break their pillars, and cut down their sacred poles ¹⁴ (for you shall worship no other god, because the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God). ¹⁵ You shall not make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to their gods, someone among them will invite you, and you will eat of the sacrifice. ¹⁶ And you will take wives from among their daughters for your sons, and their daughters who prostitute themselves to their gods will make your sons also prostitute themselves to their gods. ¹⁷ You shall not make cast idols. ¹⁸ You shall keep the festival of unleavened bread. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month of Abib; for in the month of Abib you came out from Egypt. ¹⁹ All that first opens the womb is mine, all your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep. ²⁰ The firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. No one shall appear before me empty-handed. ²¹ Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even in plowing time and in harvest time you shall rest. ²² You shall observe the festival of weeks, the first fruits of wheat harvest, and the festival of ingathering at the turn of the year. ²³ Three times in the year all your males shall appear before the LORD God, the God of Israel. ²⁴ For I will cast out nations before you, and enlarge your borders; no one shall covet your land when you go up to appear before the LORD your God three times in the year. ²⁵ You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven, and the sacrifice of the festival of the passover shall not be left until the morning. ²⁶ The best of the first fruits of your ground you shall bring to the house of the LORD your God. You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. ²⁷ The LORD said to Moses: Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.

And so, God responds by establishing a new covenant with Moses and the people. God will do marvelous things for God's people. And the people will have to obey God's commandments when they enter the land. This covenant agreement includes:

- Not making a covenant agreement with any of the land's inhabitants
- Tearing down their places of worship and items used to worship other gods
- Not eating their sacrificial meat
- Not taking their wives and daughters
- Not making cast idols
- Keeping the festival of unleavened bread
- Dedicating the firstborn to the Lord, but redeeming firstborn sons
- Not appearing before God empty-handed
- Remembering the sabbath
- Observing the three pilgrimage festivals
- Bringing the best of the first fruits of the ground to God

One of the things we see in this text is where God declares that God's name is Jealous or **קַיָּוֶן** in Hebrew. This is perhaps a play on words since the root of God's name, Yahweh, can mean "to crave"; see Proverbs 10:3).

Exodus 34:28

²⁸ He was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments.

Forty days and forty nights, a symbolic number we have seen with the story of Noah. But of course, Moses must not only be hungry, he must be starving. No food or water for 40 days and 40 nights. Isn't that how many days Jesus went without food or water before being tempted in the wilderness?

And do we notice who is doing the writing on the tablets that Moses chiseled? Wasn't that supposed to be God's work?

Exodus 34:29-35

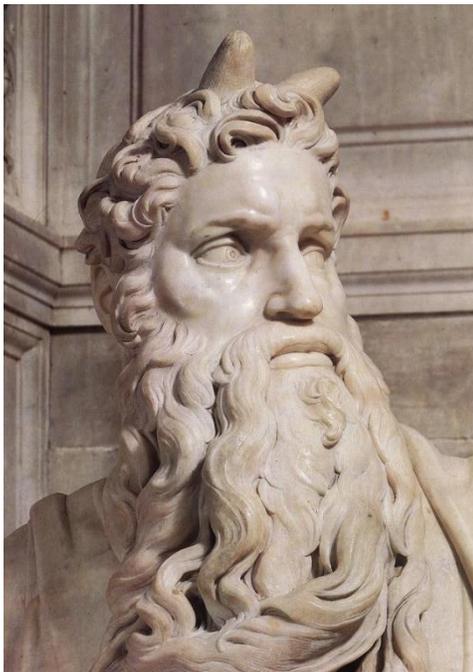
²⁹ Moses came down from Mount Sinai. As he came down from the mountain with the two tablets of the covenant in his hand, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ When Aaron and all the Israelites saw Moses, the skin of his face was shining, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them; and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses spoke with them. ³² Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he gave them in commandment all that the LORD had spoken with him on Mount Sinai. ³³ When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil on his face; ³⁴ but whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would take the veil off, until he came out; and when he came out, and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, ³⁵ the Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining; and Moses would put the veil on his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

When Moses comes down from the mountain, he is radiant. His face is shining because he has been talking with God. And the people are afraid. But Moses calls them near and gives his “glowing” report. Then he puts a veil on his face. Has Moses become a cross-dresser? No. Think more in terms of the function of the veil in the tabernacle. The veil shields God’s people from God’s glory. Moses only wears it when in the presence of the people after he has given the Lord’s commands. In God’s presence, Moses doesn’t put it on.

The Hebrew word for veil (*masweh*) is unusual, occurring only here in the Hebrew scriptures. However, the context makes it clear that this is some sort of covering over Moses’ shining face, and there is no scholarly controversy regarding this word. Again, Moses did not wear the veil when in the presence of Yahweh, nor did he wear it while speaking to the people. It is only after he is finished speaking to the people that he dons the veil. It is clear, then, that he does not wear the veil to protect the people’s eyes from the radiance of his face. Why then does Moses wear this veil?

There are at least two possibilities:

- The Apostle Paul, whose interpretation reflected popular rabbinic interpretation, said that Moses veiled his face “that the children of Israel wouldn’t look steadfastly on the end of that which was passing away” (2 Corinthians 3:13).
- Given that Moses does not wear the veil while receiving Yahweh’s words or delivering Yahweh’s words to the people, it seems that the absence of the veil (Moses’ shining face) signifies that Moses is acting in his official role as a mediator between Yahweh and Israel. If this is the intent, then the veil indicates that Moses is off-duty—not acting in his official capacity as Yahweh’s spokesman.



Now to be clear, there is some question about the meaning of the Hebrew verb *qaran* that is translated as “shone.” Is Moses “shiny” or “horny”? This verb is a bit unusual and it is derived from a Hebrew noun that means “had horns”. But it can also be used to refer to “rays of light”.

When the Old Testament was translated into Latin, what we call the Vulgate, this verb got translated as “had horns” rather than “shone.” And of course, this led to medieval art showing Moses with horns.

This statue of Moses, housed at San Pietro in Vincoli (Basilica of St. Peter in Chains), is part of the tomb of Pope Julius II, who was notable for commissioning the Sistine Chapel, as well as the destruction and reconstruction of St. Peter’s Basilica.

At first glance, the statue seems ordinary, or at least as ordinary as a Michelangelo masterpiece can. Look more closely, though, and you’ll find that the subject has sprouted a pair of horns. Michelangelo’s sculpture is the most famous of many images with the same quirk.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, called the Septuagint, uses the Greek word for “shone” here. And if you look at Paul’s reference to this incident in 2 Corinthians, chapter 3, you’ll see that

Paul speaks of “the glory of (Moses’) face,” which is consistent with the translation “shone.” And so, most scholars today agree that “shone” is the better translation. Besides, it makes more sense within the context of the passage than horns.

This story of a radiant Moses echoes into the New Testament and serves as the background for Jesus’ transfiguration, which resulted in Jesus’ face shining and his clothing becoming dazzling white (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). It is no accident that the transfiguration took place on a high mountain, just as Moses’ encounter with God took place on Mount Sinai.

NEXT WEEK: Read Exodus 35-40 – The Building of the Tabernacle

Incidentally, the word tabernacle is an English rendition of the Hebrew word *miskan*, or “dwelling place.” We’re going to discuss the building of the tabernacle next week.

