

# 2 Corinthians 3

*The Ministry of the New Covenant — engraved on stone, written on the heart*

δόξα ♦ כְּבוֹד

GLORY · KAVOD — THE THREAD RUNNING FROM STONE TO SPIRIT

**18 verses** · situated within Paul's apostolic self-defense, 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 · interpretive controls:  
Romans 11:1, 11:29 (irrevocable gifts and calling)

**Constraints registered before analysis:** interpretive hierarchy (original language → literary context → canonical context → inter-Testamental connections → Second Temple background); Soulen's three-tier filter (punitive / economic / structural); the positive commitment of Romans 11:1, 11:29; the approved-source list with the flagging requirement; and the CJB text in its location within Paul's defense of his ministry.

**Orientation to the chapter.** Paul, defending his ministry against rivals who carry letters of recommendation (3:1), argues that the Corinthians themselves are his "letter," written by the Spirit on human hearts, not ink on stone (3:1–3). He is a servant of a *New Covenant* whose essence is Spirit, not a written text (3:6). He then runs a lesser-to-greater comparison: if the Sinai service — which came engraved on stone and brought death and condemnation — was nonetheless *glorious*, the service of the Spirit and of righteousness is far more glorious (3:7–11). Moses veiled his fading radiance; a veil still lies over those who read the old covenant without turning to the Lord; in Messiah the veil is removed, and the unveiled are transformed "from glory to glory" by the Spirit (3:12–18).

## 01 Original Language Foundation

### ● διακονία *diakonia*

"service, ministry, administration" — vv. 7, 8, 9

CJB renders it *service*. The genitives that follow are genitives of *effect/result*: "the service that resulted in death" (v. 7), "the service that results in condemnation" (v. 9) — not "the service that *is* death," and emphatically not "the Torah is death." Cross-refs: Romans 11:13; Romans 15:8 (Messiah a servant to the circumcised to confirm the patriarchal promises).

**TRANSLATION NOTE** "ministration of death" (KJV) invites the misreading that the Sinai covenant is intrinsically death-dealing, rather than death-dealing **to covenant-breakers apart from the Spirit**.

### ● δόξα / כְּבוֹד *doxa/kavod*

"glory, weight, honor, radiance" — vv. 7–11, 18

The Greek tracks the Hebrew *kavod* of Exodus 33–34, the manifest weighty presence of Adonai, and Moses' face that "sent out rays" (קָרַן, *qaran*, Exod 34:29–35). Cross-refs: Exodus 24:16–17; Ezekiel 1:28. Crucial: Paul **affirms** the old covenant "came with glory" (v. 7, ἐγενήθη ἐν δόξῃ). His argument is comparative, never a denial that Sinai was glorious.

### ● καταργέω *katargeō*

"to render inoperative, nullify, make ineffective, bring to an end" — vv. 7, 11, 13, 14

In vv. 7 and 13 it is a **present passive participle** (τὴν καταργουμένην, τοῦ καταργουμένου) — *continuous*: "in the process of being rendered inoperative," i.e., the glory that *kept fading* from Moses' face. Two disputes matter: **(a) the referent** — the glory on the face, the condemning *function* of the service, or the Sinai administration as a covenant-mode; **(b) the grammar** — Garland notes the neuter participle in v. 11 (τὸ καταργούμενον) cannot directly modify the feminine δόξα, cautioning against the flat conclusion "the glory simply faded." Cross-refs: Romans 3:31 (faith does *not* *katargeō* the Torah — same verb, denying abolition); Romans 6:6; 1 Cor 13:8–11.

**TRANSLATION NOTE** KJV "abolished" (v. 13) overstates a finished, total abrogation; the participle is processual and its object is contested.

● γράμμα vs. πνεῦμα *gramma* vs. *pneuma*

"written text / letter" vs. "Spirit" — v. 6

CJB deliberately renders *gramma* as "**a written text**" ("the written text brings death") rather than "the letter," to block the inference *Torah* = *death*. Cross-refs: Romans 2:29 (circumcision "of the heart, in Spirit not in *gramma*"); Romans 7:6. The contrast is **the written code apart from the Spirit** (which exposes sin and so condemns) versus **Torah internalized by the Spirit** (which gives life).

**TRANSLATION NOTE** Capitalizing "Letter" or glossing it as "the Old Testament" turns a mode-contrast into a canon-contrast — the single most consequential mistranslation pressure in the chapter.

● διαθήκη / בְּרִית *diathēkē* / *berit*

"covenant" — vv. 6, 14

καινὴ διαθήκη ("New Covenant," v. 6) is a direct citation of בְּרִית הַחֲדָשָׁה (*berit chadashah*), Jeremiah 31:31. παλαιὰ διαθήκη ("old covenant," v. 14) denotes the **Sinai administration**, not the Hebrew Scriptures as a book. Cross-refs: Jeremiah 31:31–34; Ezekiel 36:26–27.

**TRANSLATION NOTE** Rendering v. 14 "the Old Testament" is anachronistic — the canonical category did not yet exist — and seeds the "the Tanakh is the dead letter" error.

● κάλυμμα *kalymma*

"veil" — vv. 13–16

The LXX word for Moses' veil in Exodus 34:33–35. Cross-ref: Exodus 34:34, the base text Paul is interpreting.

● πωρόω / πώρωσις *pōroō* / *pōrōsis*

"to harden, make callous / a hardening" — v. 14 ("their minds were made stonelike")

The **decisive canonical hinge**: the cognate *pōrōsis* governs Romans 11:25 — "a hardening *in part* (ἀπὸ μέρους) has come upon Israel, *until* the fullness of the nations comes in." Cross-refs: Romans 11:7, 25; Isaiah 6:9–10. Paul's own usage defines this hardening as **partial and temporary**, not total or permanent.

● ἐλευθερία *eleutheria*

"freedom" — v. 17

Freedom *for* covenant faithfulness, not freedom *from* God's instruction. Cross-ref: Galatians 5:1, 13.

● μεταμορφώω *metamorphoō*

"transform" — v. 18

The same verb as the Transfiguration (Matt 17:2; Mark 9:2) and Romans 12:2 (transformation by the renewing of the mind). The transformed are "all of us" with unveiled faces — Jew and gentile alike in Messiah.

## 02 Historical-Jewish Context

A first-century Jewish audience would not have heard "new covenant" as "replacement covenant." **Jeremiah 31:31–34** — the text Paul cites — locates the *berit chadashah* explicitly "with the house of Israel and the house of Judah," and defines its *content* as Torah internalized: "I will put my Torah within them, and on their hearts I will write it" (Jer 31:33). Within Second Temple expectation — including the covenant-renewal self-understanding at Qumran, used here only as background, not authority — "new covenant" meant **renewal and intensification**, not the cancellation of Sinai. So the more-than-glory of the new covenant is the more-than-glory of **Torah written on the heart by the Spirit**.

The "tablets of stone vs. tablets of human hearts" (v. 3) and "the written text brings death, but the Spirit gives life" (v. 6) are saturated with **Ezekiel 36:26–27**: God removes the "heart of stone" (לֵב אֲבָן, *lev even*), gives a "heart of flesh" (לֵב בָּשָׂר, *lev basar*) and a new spirit, "and I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes." For Ezekiel the Spirit's gift is precisely what makes **Torah-keeping possible** — the opposite of Torah's abolition.

The veil imagery presupposes that Moses' radiant face (Exod 34) was familiar territory; the Torah reports the veil but withholds the reason, and Paul supplies an interpretation (the radiance was fading, vv. 7, 13). A Jewish hearer would recognize Paul reasoning by **qal vachomer** (lesser-to-greater, the standard *a fortiori* of rabbinic argument): *if even the condemning service was glorious, how much more the life-giving service* (vv. 8–9, 11). The form itself **presupposes the genuine glory of Sinai** as the premise of the inference.

Sociopolitically, the chapter is **occasional and polemical**, not a treatise. Paul writes against rivals (the "some" of 3:1; the "super-apostles" of 11:5, 13) who trade in letters of recommendation and credentials. Several Paul-within-Judaism readers note that if those rivals were pressing *their* Jewish bona fides on a gentile congregation, Paul's sharp contrasts target **his opponents' boasting**, not Israel or Torah as such.

### 03 Authorial Intent Analysis

**Who, to whom, why.** Sha'ul (Paul), a Torah-observant Jewish emissary of Messiah Yeshua, writes to the largely gentile Corinthian assembly to **defend the legitimacy and surpassing glory of his Spirit-empowered apostolic ministry** against rivals who challenge his credentials. 2 Cor 2:14–7:4 is one sustained apologia; chapter 3 is a link in that defense, not a freestanding doctrine of the law.

**Single intended meaning.** Paul's controlling claim: *the ministry of the New Covenant — the Spirit writing on hearts — carries a greater and abiding glory than the Sinai ministry, and therefore its ministers can speak with unveiled boldness.* The "letter/Spirit," "death/life," "fading/abiding" contrasts all serve that one comparative thesis about **two ministries**, evaluated by their glory. They are not a verdict on Israel's standing.

**Function in the argument.** 3:1–3 answers the recommendation-letter jibe. 3:4–6 grounds his competence in God and names his sphere: the New Covenant of the Spirit. 3:7–11 mounts the *qal vachomer*. 3:12–16 draws the pastoral consequence: boldness, and grief over a veil that lifts only by turning to the Lord. 3:17–18 universalizes the unveiled, transforming access to glory, flowing into 4:1–6 ("the glory of God in the face of Messiah").

**Theme traced backward (Tanakh):** Exodus 24/33–34 (kavod, Moses' radiance, the veil) → Jeremiah 31:31–34 (New Covenant = Torah on the heart, *with Israel*) → Ezekiel 36:26–27 (heart of stone → flesh; Spirit enables obedience). **Forward (Apostolic Writings):** Romans 2:29 and 7:6 (Spirit vs. *gramma* = Torah-without-Spirit, not Torah-as-such) → Romans 8:1–4 ("no condemnation"; the Torah's righteous requirement *fulfilled* in those who walk by the Spirit) → **Romans 11:25–29** (the hardening is partial, temporary; gifts and calling irrevocable). Read across Paul's corpus, "the written text kills" cannot mean "the Torah is evil" — in Romans 7:12 the Torah is "holy, righteous and good," and in Romans 3:31 faith *upholds* (does not *katargeō*) it.

## 04 Messianic Jewish & Post-Supersessionist Reading

**The core recovery.** Messianic and post-supersessionist readers — David H. Stern; the FFOZ / Beth Immanuel teaching tradition; and the Paul-within-Judaism stream — argue that the contrast is **Torah-without-the-Spirit vs. Torah-with-the-Spirit**, not Torah vs. grace. Stern's CJB encodes this: *gramma* becomes "the written text" (so "the written text brings death" cannot be heard as "the Torah brings death"), and v. 16's promise of unveiling is voiced by "**the Torah**" itself ("But," says the Torah, 'whenever someone turns to Adonai, the veil is taken away'), making the Torah the witness to its own proper, Spirit-illuminated reading rather than the thing discarded.

**What "fades / is rendered inoperative."** On this reading, *katargeō* targets the **condemning, death-dealing function** of the Sinai service *for those now in Messiah* (cf. Rom 8:1, "no condemnation"), and/or the transient *glory on Moses' face* — **not** God's covenant with Israel and not the Torah as divine instruction. The FFOZ / Beth Immanuel "Glory to Glory" teaching states plainly that the passage is *commonly* taken to imply replacement theology and Torah's cancellation, but that close reading reveals the Torah's continuing role in **both** covenants — the new covenant being Jeremiah's Torah-on-the-heart.

**The veil and the hardening.** The veil (vv. 14–15) is read with **Romans 11**: a *partial* (Rom 11:25, ἀπὸ μέρους) and *temporary* ("until") hardening, over which Paul *grieves as a brother* and which he *expects to be lifted* — never a permanent racial indictment. Mark Kinzer's bilateral ecclesiology and William S. Campbell's covenantal-identity work both insist the text leaves Israel's election intact (Rom 11:28–29).

**Where this recovers lost meaning.** It restores (1) the **affirmation of Sinai's glory** as the load-bearing premise of the *qal vachomer*; (2) the **Jeremiah/Ezekiel substructure** in which "new" means *internalized Torah*; (3) the **occasional, anti-rival** rhetorical setting; and (4) the **canonical governance of Romans 11**, which forbids reading 3:14–15 as Israel's permanent rejection.

### WHERE THIS READING IS ITSELF CONTESTED — STATED HONESTLY

- ◆ Stern's "**says the Torah**" in v. 16 is a defensible but *minority* translation choice (most read "when one turns to the Lord," with Adonai = Yeshua/the Spirit per v. 17); it is interpretively loaded.
- ◆ Glossing *gramma* as "**legalism**" specifically goes beyond the lexicon; standard commentary (e.g., Ellicott) takes it as the *whole written code of Judaism*. The post-supersessionist must argue "Torah-as-written-apart-from-Spirit" from Romans 7:6 — plausible, but not the majority reading.
- ◆ The "**rivals, not Judaism**" reconstruction is an inference from 2 Cor 10–13 retrojected into ch. 3 — reasonable but not demonstrable from ch. 3 alone.
- ◆ The whole pericope is famously opaque — labeled "the Mount Everest of Pauline texts." No single reading should be preached as obvious.

## 05 Modern Evangelical Contrast & Diagnostic

### Reading A — "The old covenant is the ministry of death; the Torah / Old Testament is obsolete."

- ◆ **TIER Economic + Structural.** Israel's covenantal instrument is treated as expired and superseded; the Tanakh is demoted to mere "background."
- ◆ **BREAK FROM INTENT** It reads *katargeō* as **total, finished abolition** rather than a processual rendering-inoperative of a contested referent, and **conflates** "old covenant" (the Sinai administration of condemnation) with "the Torah / Scriptures as such" — ignoring that the cited Jeremiah 31 defines the New Covenant *as Torah internalized, made with Israel*.
- ◆ **WHERE IT APPEARS** "Law kills / grace gives life" sermons that treat the Tanakh as the negative pole; "we're New Testament Christians" framing that functionally Marcionizes the Hebrew Bible; study-Bible notes glossing v. 14 as "the Old Testament."

### Reading B — "A veil lies over Jewish hearts; the Jews are blind, the Church sees."

- ◆ **TIER Punitive + Structural.** A partial, temporary, mournful hardening is converted into a permanent indictment of "the Jews."
- ◆ **BREAK FROM INTENT** It severs vv. 14–15 from **Romans 11:25–29** (same author, same *pōrōsis* word, explicitly partial/temporary/irrevocable-calling), and reads Paul's *fraternal grief* as triumphal contrast.
- ◆ **WHERE IT APPEARS** Transfiguration-Sunday preaching drawing a Church-sees / Synagogue-blind binary; replacement-theology teaching on "the spiritual blindness of Israel"; "the veil that still covers them" used as a put-down rather than a hope — though Paul's hope is precisely *removal*.

### Reading C — "'The letter kills' means the written law / the literal Old Testament is deadening."

- ◆ **TIER Structural** (with antinomian drift).
- ◆ **BREAK FROM INTENT** It equates *gramma* with **Scripture/Torah itself** rather than the written code *apart from the Spirit* (Rom 7:6; 2:29), and ignores that Paul calls that very Torah "holy, righteous and good" (Rom 7:12) and says faith *upholds* it (Rom 3:31 — the *same verb* used negatively here).
- ◆ **WHERE IT APPEARS** The ubiquitous "letter of the law vs. spirit of the law" cliché used to wave off Tanakh commands; "the Bible is a person, not a book" moves that denigrate the written word; Spirit-led spontaneity pitted against any structured obedience.

## 06 Warnings for Preachers & Teachers

### Specific errors to avoid

- ◆ *Do not* translate v. 14 as "the Old Testament." Say "the Sinai / old covenant." (Error: "to this day when they read the Old Testament a veil covers them.")
- ◆ *Do not* preach *katargeō* as "abolished, finished, gone." Name the grammar: a **present-passive, ongoing** rendering-inoperative whose object is **debated**.
- ◆ *Do not* let "the letter kills" become "the Torah / Old Testament kills." Anchor it in Romans 7:6 and 2:29 — **Torah without the Spirit**.
- ◆ *Do not* present the veil as **permanent Jewish blindness**. Govern it by Romans 11:25–29: partial, temporary, irrevocable calling.

### Common doctrinal distortions

- ◆ **Flattening Jewish context** into Law-bad / Gospel-good (and its ugly extension, Jewish-believer-bad / Christian-believer-good).
- ◆ **Triumphalism** mistaking Paul's grief for a victory lap.
- ◆ **Antinomian drift** — "freedom" (v. 17) read as freedom *from* God's instruction rather than freedom *for* Spirit-empowered faithfulness.
- ◆ **"Claiming" the glory** — a prosperity-adjacent misuse of v. 18 ("glory to glory") as guaranteed ascending personal blessing. The verse is corporate, moral-spiritual transformation into Messiah's image by the Spirit, not material escalation.

### Best practices

- ◆ **Establish the historical-covenantal frame first:** Exodus 34 → Jeremiah 31 → Ezekiel 36, *then* Paul. Show that the "New Covenant" he cites is, by definition, Torah on the heart, made with Israel.
- ◆ **Distinguish what the text *meant* from what it *means for us*:** application to church life is legitimate only after the historical sense is set.
- ◆ **Name when a "church" reading has silently displaced an "Israel" reading:** whenever "old covenant" slides into "Judaism / Jews," stop and correct it.
- ◆ **Name your extrapolations:** when you move beyond "two ministries compared by glory" into claims about Israel's status or Torah's abrogation, say so — and check it against Romans 11.
- ◆ **Flag the source-tradition:** readings descending from Augustine, Chrysostom, Luther, or Calvin that turn this chapter into Israel's displacement carry **supersessionist scaffolding** — historically weighty, but not normatively binding on this point.

## 07 Summary Comparison Table

| DIMENSION                                       | JEWISH CONTEXTUAL READING                                                                                                                                           | COMMON EVANGELICAL READING                                                                 | KEY DIVERGENCE                                                                  | TIER                  |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| "Letter / Spirit" (v. 6)                        | Torah <i>as written code apart from the Spirit</i> (which condemns) vs. Torah <i>internalized by the Spirit</i> (which gives life); cf. Rom 2:29; 7:6               | "The written law / the Old Testament is the deadening letter; the Spirit frees us from it" | Whether <i>gramma</i> means Torah-without-Spirit or Torah/Scripture itself      | STRUCTURAL            |
| What "fades" (vv. 7, 11, 13 — <i>katargeō</i> ) | The transient glory on Moses' face and/or the <i>condemning function</i> of the Sinai service for those in Messiah; present-passive, processual; referent contested | "The Old Covenant / the Torah is abolished, finished, obsolete"                            | Ongoing rendering-inoperative of a debated object vs. total finished abrogation | ECONOMIC + STRUCTURAL |
| "Old covenant" (v. 14)                          | The <i>Sinai administration</i> ; the New Covenant of Jer 31 is Torah on the heart, made with Israel                                                                | "The Old Testament (the Hebrew Scriptures as a book)"                                      | Sinai administration vs. Tanakh as canon                                        | STRUCTURAL            |
| The veil over Israel (vv. 14–15)                | A <i>partial, temporary</i> hardening (Rom 11:25) over reading-without-turning; Paul grieves and expects its removal                                                | "Permanent Jewish blindness / the Jews are judged and the Church sees"                     | Temporary, mournful, hope-laden vs. permanent, triumphal indictment             | PUNITIVE + STRUCTURAL |
| "Ministry of death / condemnation" (vv. 7, 9)   | Genitive of <i>result</i> : the service that <i>brought</i> death to covenant-breakers apart from the Spirit; Sinai still "came with glory"                         | "The Law is intrinsically death; Judaism is a religion of death"                           | Effect-on-the-unredeemed vs. essence-of-the-Torah                               | ECONOMIC              |

| DIMENSION                     | JEWISH<br>CONTEXTUAL<br>READING                                                                                   | COMMON<br>EVANGELICAL<br>READING                                    | KEY<br>DIVERGENCE                                                   | TIER                         |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| "New Covenant" (v. 6)         | <i>Berit chadashah</i> of Jer 31:31–34 — with Israel, Torah written on the heart, expanded to include the nations | "The covenant that replaced and cancelled the covenant with Israel" | Renewal / expansion vs. replacement / cancellation                  | ECONOMIC                     |
| "From glory to glory" (v. 18) | Corporate ("all of us," Jew and gentile in Messiah) transformation into Messiah's image by the Spirit             | (Distortion) personal ascending blessing to be "claimed"            | Transformation into Messiah's image vs. escalating personal benefit | NONE — PROSPERITY DISTORTION |

## Sources consulted

**Approved tradition:** David H. Stern, *Complete Jewish Bible & Jewish New Testament Commentary*; First Fruits of Zion / Beth Immanuel ("Glory to Glory," "Torah of Messiah"); Paul-within-Judaism scholarship (Mark D. Nanos; Mark S. Kinzer; J. Brian Tucker, *Reading Romans after Supersessionism*; William S. Campbell); R. Kendall Soulen (tier taxonomy).

**Background, lexical & conventional readings** (used as foil or for grammar): David E. Garland and Scott J. Hafemann on *katargeō* and the veil; standard lexical notes on *gramma*; the *qal vachomer* structure; Exodus 34, Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, Romans 7–8, and Romans 11 as the canonical controls.

*Note:* 2 Corinthians 3 is widely acknowledged as among the most difficult passages in Paul. Several judgments above — especially the precise referent of *katargeō* and Stern's v. 16 rendering — are defensible but genuinely contested, and are flagged as such in §4.