

Behind the Veil

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[Exodus 34:29-35](#), Psalm 99, 2 Corinthians 3:12-4:2, Luke 9:28-43a

Moses sighed. He knew that this time of quiet and reflection would soon be over. Every moment he spent outside of this tent seemed to be a moment filled with requests, frustrations and endless demands. People were constantly looking to him to solve their disputes and fix their problems, tell them what to do and say the words that would bring them all together to face the daily challenges of a wandering life.

They would ask him to make decisions that would affect the lives of men, women and children. If they turned this direction, would they meet a dangerous enemy? If they turned that way, would they find themselves in a wasteland in which there was no water and no fodder for the animals to eat? The latest complex question they'd come up with had been about a matter of the inheritance of a family that had had no sons.

Escaping into the Tent

And this tent was the only place that he could go to escape all of that. He knew that no one would ever follow him into this place because they were all too afraid. They knew that he met with God in here – with Yahweh who had first been revealed to him at the burning bush – and they much preferred to let Moses wrestle with their demanding God on their behalf alone.

Moses knew that it was true, that he did indeed meet his God in this sacred space. But it didn't happen in the ways that they all imagined that it did. It wasn't really about spectacular lights and resounding voices. Most of the time, what happened in here was that Moses was able to quiet all of the thoughts that were in his mind. As he eased into a quiet state, pushing aside all of the worries and fears that he struggled with out there, it sometimes happened – by no means always, but sometimes. A word or a phrase or a thought would come into his mind that he knew did not originate from himself. He knew that it was a word from Yahweh.

Uncertainty

But even then, he still struggled with the messages that he received. He was not always sure that he understood them. He was not always certain that he had the interpretation or the application right. And, when God is involved, it seems really important that you should be able to get it right. People think that having some kind of divine experience makes things easier, but Moses knew from long experience now that it usually makes things harder.

And one of the hardest things about it was that people outside of the tent didn't understand that. When he came out of the tent, when he spoke to them of the will of God, they expected him to speak in absolutes. There was no room for doubt or questions out there. There was no room for shades of gray; they wanted it all laid out in black and white. Moses couldn't show himself as a fallible human, but rather as a spokesperson for the divine. And so, when he went out,



it helped that he put on the veil.

How it All Started

There was a bit of a story behind the veil. It went back to the time when Moses had gone up to the top of the holy mountain all alone. There, on top of Mount Sinai, he had had the most extraordinary experience of his life. The encounter he had had with Yahweh up there was unlike anything that had happened to him before or since. Everything had been so clear up there and there had been no room for doubt. He had been given a keen insight into what measures were needed so that this people, who had so recently been freed of a life where everything had been controlled for them, could live together in peace and prosperity. He had been able to distill it all down to a series of laws that he knew would guide the people for generations to come.

It had been so exciting and exhilarating and, in those first few days afterwards, everything had seemed so very clear. But, when he came down and met the people, all of it was frightening to them. It was so clear to them that he had been in the very presence of God that they said that it was as if the skin on his face was putting off this strange radiance. They were afraid that they would die if they came too close to him. And so, Moses realized that he needed to tone it down a bit. He covered his face to put a little distance between himself and the people. It helped them to manage the fear and it helped him to moderate the way he was speaking to them. And so, they had been able to communicate in those heady days.

After the Mountain Top

But in the time since, the veil had come to be deployed differently. The kind of clear experience of the presence of God that Moses had had on that mountain was not repeated. Honestly, Moses was glad of that because it had left him drained and weary. People don't actually manage that well with absolute certainty over the long term. It was replaced now with this seemingly endless struggle in the tent as he sought out the brief flashes of clarity in the midst of all the questions and the doubts.

But the harder the struggle in the tent became, the more important it seemed to hide that struggle from the people outside. If they were expecting him to come out of the tent every time with the same certitude that he had brought down the mountain, that was not going to happen. If they were looking for that same sense of radiance coming from him, they were likely going to be disappointed. But by pre-emptively donning the veil before he went out, he managed to maintain both the illusion of certainty and the inspiration of fear. Both of these things simply made it a whole lot easier for Moses to lead these stubborn people.

Back to Reality

And so, with yet another deep sigh, Moses opened his eyes. The time of quiet meditation was over. He felt as if he had been able to sort out some of the problems and challenges that were facing the people. Somewhere in there, he was pretty sure that he had heard a genuine word from Yahweh. He uttered a prayer of thanks, acknowledging the God who had allowed him to lead these people thus far. As he turned, he plucked the veil from the hook by the door and carefully covered his face. He could see very little through it, mostly just shadows and shapes. He knew that the people would see almost nothing of his own features. That was as it needed to be.

He stepped outside and all over the camp he saw the people turn towards him. All noise and

conversation fell away as they waited to hear a word from Yahweh. And so Moses began to speak through the veil regarding the difficult question that had been posed to him. **“This is what Yahweh commands concerning the daughters of Zelophehad,”** he cried. **“Let them marry whom they think best; only it must be into a clan of their father’s tribe that they are married, so that no inheritance of the Israelites shall be transferred from one tribe to another; for all Israelites shall retain the inheritance of their ancestral tribes.”** (Number 36:6-7)

An Ancient Religious Practice

The story of Moses and the veil in the Book of Exodus is one that has always struck people for its strangeness. It has long been thought that, somewhere behind this story, are ancient religious practices that may stretch back to prehistoric times. The idea was that the ancient priest or shaman would put on some kind of mask or face covering and, in so doing, be able to impersonate and speak for the god.

Such an ancient practice may indeed lie somewhere behind this story in the Bible, but I’m a little less interested with how it may have contributed to the creation of this story than I am in what such a practice tells us about it what it means to be human beings trying to relate to the divine. I see two key forces at play. On the one hand, we have the experience of the divine and on the other we have the practice of religion.

Religious Experience

There is a simple reality and it that is that people have been experiencing God for a long time. There are varying experiences, of course. And the God that people experience can be wildly different. But the reality that people have such experiences cannot be denied. I know we often are tempted to dismiss such things because personal experiences, almost by definition, cannot be independently verified. You cannot scientifically prove that somebody experienced God. Nor can you really disprove it.

But people have been having such experiences for centuries and they have sometimes had huge impacts on historical events. I have also had such experiences in my life, and I know a number of other people who have as well.

Fear and Authority

And there are two big problems that arise because people have such supernatural experiences. One is fear. People have a very natural reaction to be very afraid of such experiences and the people who have them. The other problem is the question of authority. How do we tell if someone’s experience of God is something that we should trust and listen to?

We see both of these problems being addressed in this story of Moses and the veil. We are told, first of all, that the veil is placed there to create a kind of distance between Moses’ powerful experience and the people because they are afraid. And we are also told that when Moses speaks through the veil, it becomes a sign that he is speaking for God and that, therefore, everything he says is authoritative.

The Function of Religion

In many ways, I would say, this veil is a symbol of the function of religion. Human religion is there

in order to accomplish two things, to manage our human fear in the face of the experience of God and to sort out which pronouncements have authority. We don't use symbols like a mask or a veil anymore to manage these things, but that does not mean that they are no longer important aspects of our religion.

Because here is what is at stake. No matter what happens to religion and the state of religion (and I realize that religion has been going through some rough times lately) these are issues that are not going to go away. People are going to continue to have experiences of God along with all of the fear and the difficult questions of authority that come with such experiences. It seems to be something that is built into our human nature.

Why we Need Religious Tools

And religion in all its various forms has been something that we have developed to help us manage those very problems. And I know that the history of religion has had its horrible moments. All kinds of terrible things have been justified by religious belief down through history. But I honestly do not think that just getting rid of all religious structure is the solution.

I believe that religion, done well, can give us the tools to manage and interpret these very frightening and powerful experiences in helpful ways. I believe that that is what Moses and other figures like him managed to do, not perfectly, but they at least tried to direct these powerful impulses in more productive ways.

What Paul has to Add

There is one other aspect to this story that is added in the New Testament. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul makes reference to this story of Moses and the veil and he says that in Christ, the veil is set aside. The point he seems to be making is that because Christ revealed to us the very nature of God in human form, the old constraints of fear, authority and religion are no longer necessary.

I do have some reason to wonder whether Paul got that completely right. There is no question that Christianity has never stopped setting up religious systems to manage those very things throughout its long history. But Paul's point is still rather helpful. So long as we are ruled in our religious practices by our need to manage fear and our desire to project authority, I don't think we will fulfill our fullest potential as human beings seeking to relate to the divine.

The Problem with Religious Authority

In particular, that desire to project absolute authority from our religious experience has been particularly problematic throughout our history. The fact of the matter is that our experiences of God are rarely absolute. Oh yes, very occasionally, someone will have that top of Mount Sinai experience when everything is absolutely made crystal clear. But most of our experiences of God come when we are in the midst of our doubts and questions. That need to put on a veil and project absolute certainty means that we often hide the true nature of our encounters with God. And that is a problem.

I think that if we were truly honest, we would admit that much of our struggle to work out our relationship with the divine is in there, with Moses as I have imagined him, in the tent. We are often consumed with more questions and doubts than we would like to admit. But I do think it's time to lay aside that temptation to hide that struggle behind a veil in order to project absolute certainty about

our beliefs to the world. That doesn't serve us, and it doesn't serve the world. And it actually serves to obscure the real power of religious experience that I believe is our heritage as the children of God.