

rest of Canaan-land, but they did not enter God's eternal rest. How totally tragic! (But the sad fate of Israel was written to warn us of the same danger! Heb. 4:11)

Nonetheless, God did allow the people to be led on by Moses and an angel to the place of which God had spoken (to the promised land). God foreknew they would never make it.

God promised that "My angel shall go before your face" (or presence). Regarding this angel see 33:2; 23:20-24; Num. 20:16.

The statement is 32:35 that "Jehovah smote the people" is indefinite as to when and how the smiting was done. The verb translated "smote" is related to the word translated "plague" (*negeph*) in Ex. 12:13; Num. 16:47. This suggests a deadly smiting. The R.S.V. translates it "The LORD sent a plague upon the people." It has been suggested that this plague was the possible consequence of the potion (the gold-dusted water) that Moses had made them drink.¹⁵ This notion seems untrue. See notes on 32:20.

THE TEXT OF EXODUS TRANSLATION

33 And Je-ho-vah spake unto Mo-ses, Depart, go up hence, thou and the people that thou hast brought up out of the land of E-gypt, unto the land of which I sware unto Abraham, to I-saac, and to Jacob, saying, Unto thy seed will I give it: (2) and I will send an angel before thee; and I will drive out the Ca-naan-ite, the Am-or-ite, and the Hit-tite, and the Per-iz-zite, the Hi-vite, and the Jeb-u-site: (3) unto a land flowing with milk and honey: for I will not go up in the midst of thee; for thou art a stiffnecked people; lest I consume thee in the way. (4) And when the people heard these evil tidings,

¹⁵Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 1 (1969), p. 454.

they mourned: and no man did put on him his ornaments. (5) And Je-ho-vah said unto Mo-ses, Say unto the children of Is-ra-el, Ye are a stiffnecked people; if I go up into the midst of thee for one moment, I shall consume thee: therefore now put off thy ornaments from thee, that I may know what to do unto thee. (6) And the children of Is-ra-el stripped themselves of their ornaments from mount Ho-reb onward.

(7) Now Mo-ses used to take the tent and to pitch it without the camp, afar off from the camp; and he called it, The tent of meeting. And it came to pass, that every one that sought Je-ho-vah went out unto the tent of meeting, which was without the camp. (8) And it came to pass, when Mo-ses went out unto the Tent, that all the people rose up, and stood, every man at his tent door, and looked after Mo-ses, until he was gone into the Tent. (9) And it came to pass, when Mo-ses entered into the Tent, the pillar of cloud descended, and stood at the door of the Tent: and *Je-ho-vah* spake with Mo-ses. (10) And all the people saw the pillar of cloud stand at the door of the Tent: and all the people rose up and worshipped, every man at his tent door. (11) And Je-ho-vah spake unto Mo-ses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend. And he turned again into the camp: but his minister Josh-u-a, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the Tent.

(12) And Mo-ses said unto Je-ho-vah, See, thou sayest unto me, Bring up this people: and thou hast not let me know whom thou wilt send with me. Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found favor in my sight. (13) Now therefore, I pray thee, if I have found favor in thy sight, show me now thy ways, that I may know thee, to the end that I may find favor in thy sight: and consider that this nation is thy people. (14) And he said, My presence shall go *with thee*, and I will give thee rest. (15) And he said unto him, If thy presence go not *with me*, carry us not up hence. (16) For wherein now shall it be known that I have found favor in thy sight, I and thy people? is it not in that thou goest with us, so that we are separated, I and thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth?

(17) And Je-ho-vah said unto Mo-ses, I will do this thing also that thou hast spoken; for thou hast found favor in my sight, and I know thee by name. (18) And he said, Show me, I pray thee, thy glory. (19) And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and will proclaim the name of Je-ho-vah before thee; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. (20) And he said, Thou canst not see my face; for man shall not see me and live. (21) And Je-ho-vah said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon the rock: (22) and it shall come to pass, while my glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with my hand until I have passed by: (23) and I will take away my hand, and thou shalt see my back; but my face shall not be seen.

EXPLORING EXODUS: CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE
QUESTIONS ANSWERABLE FROM THE BIBLE

1. After careful reading, propose a brief title or topic for the chapter.
2. Where was Moses directed to go? Who was to accompany him? (33:1, 12; 32:34)
3. What change does the command of 33:1 indicate had taken place in God's feelings toward Israel? (Compare 32:10.)
4. Who was to be sent before Moses and Israel? Why? (33:2; Compare 23:20-23.)
5. What was the land where they were going like? (33:3)
6. Why would God not personally go up with Israel? (33:3, 5)
7. What made the people mourn? (33:4) What did the people do that showed their sorrow? (33:4)
8. Why did God tell the Israelites to put off their ornaments? (33:5)
9. At what place did the Israelites strip off their ornaments? How long did this non-wearing of ornaments continue? (33:6)

10. Where did Moses take the "tent"? (33:7) What did he do with it? What did he call it? (Compare 27:21.) Was this removal of the tent done just one time? Was this the same "Tent" that is referred to in 26:36, 7?
11. What did the removal of the Tent from out of the camp symbolize or indicate?
12. Who went out to the Tent? (33:7)
13. What did the people do when Moses went out to the Tent? Where did they do this? (33:8, 10)
14. What happened when Moses entered the Tent? What did this symbolize or indicate? (33:9-10)
15. What was remarkable about the way the LORD spoke to Moses? (33:11; Compare Num. 12:6-7.)
16. Who remained at the Tent (possibly as a guard)? (33:11)
17. Where did the conversation of 33:12-23 occur?
18. What did Moses desire more information from God about? (33:12)
19. What had God said to Moses about Moses? (33:12, 17)
20. What did Moses want God to show him? (33:13)
21. For what two purposes did Moses want God to show him His way(s)? (33:13)
22. How did Moses want God to consider (or look upon) the nation (Israel)? (33:13)
23. Who would go with Israel? (33:14) What change in God's intentions does this indicate? (Compare 33:3, 5, 12.)
24. What is the "rest" of 33:14? (Joshua 21:44; 22:4; 23:1; Psalm 95:10-11; Deut. 12:9)
25. How strongly did Moses desire God's presence? (33:15)
26. How could it be known that Moses and Israel had found favor in God's sight? (33:16)
27. How was Israel "separated" from all other peoples? (33:16; Compare Num. 23:9.)
28. What is the "thing that thou (God) hast spoken"? (33:17; Compare 33:14-16.)
29. What is the significance of God's knowing Moses by *name*? (33:17)
30. How many times do forms of the word *know* occur in

33:12-17?

31. What did Moses request God to show him? (33:18)
 32. With what is God's "goodness" made synonymous? (33:19, 22)
 33. What would God proclaim to Moses? (33:19)
 34. What is the significance of "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious" in the setting (context) in which it was uttered? (33:19)
 35. What can man not see and yet live? (33:20, 23; Compare I Timothy 6:15-16; John 1:18. Compare Ex. 24:10.)
 36. What was the "place by me" (God)? (33:21; 34:2, 6)
 37. How would God "cover" Moses as He passed by? (33:21-22)
 38. What would Moses see of God? (33:23)
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EXODUS THIRTY-THREE: GOD AND ISRAEL IN TENSION!

1. God's presence withdrawn; (33:1-3).
 2. The people in mourning; (33:4-6).
 3. The meeting-tent removed from camp; (33:7-11).
 4. The mediator in prayer; (33:12-23).
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WHEN GOD WITHDRAWS HIS FACE! (33:1-7)

1. We journey without Him; (33:1-7).
 2. We confront Him with danger; (33:3, 5).
 3. We mourn; (33:4, 6).
 4. We seek Him at the distant place; (33:7).
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THE FAR-OFF TENT OF GOD (33:7-11)

1. Placed afar-off because of sin; (33:7-8).
 2. Sought by men in need; (33:7).
 3. Fully accessible to the chosen mediator; (33:8-11).
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GOD'S ABOUNDING GRACE (33:12-17)

Grace, the source of hope . . .

1. To remove uncertainties; (33:12).
 2. To learn God's way; (33:13).
 3. To know God; (33:13).
 4. To have God's presence; (33:14-17).
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SEEING GOD'S GLORY (Ex. 33:18-23)

1. Man's desire to see God's glory; (33:18).
 2. Man's limitations in seeing God's glory; (33:20, 23).
 3. God's grace in showing His glory; (33:19).
 4. God's assistance in revealing His glory; (33:21-22).
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EXPLORING EXODUS: NOTES ON CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

1. *What is in Exodus thirty-three?*

The chapter tells of the tense period between Moses' prayer for Israel (32:31-34) and God's re-acceptance of Israel (33:14, 17). The early part of the chapter tells of God and Israel in tension, but it ends with the tension relieved and Moses asking God to show him His very glory.

The theme of the Lord's presence pervades all of chapter 33. How can a sinful people continue to experience God's presence at all? How can Israel survive without God's presence among them?¹

2. *What are the critical theories about chapter thirty-three?*

Some critical scholars have expressed the view that this chapter consists of material from several sources. M. Noth considers 33:1-6 to be mostly of "Deuteronomistic origin" (sixth century) and not to be from just one source. He

¹Cole, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

feels 33:7-11 is an old pre-priestly, pre-deuteronomistic tradition possibly "taken up" by J.²

On the other hand *Broadman Bible Commentary* (1969) attributes 33:7-11 to E (supposedly *after* J), and 33:12-16 to J (tenth century).³ Obviously there is not a unity of opinion about the "sources."

A view much more in harmony with the scripture itself and with the archaeological evidences is that of Cassuto:

For two consecutive passages [like 32:34-35 and 33:1-4] to treat of the same theme, with a few variations, was a common feature of [ancient] epic poetry. It will suffice, for instance, to point out that in the Ugaritic epic of Aqhat [fifteenth century B.C.] Daniel's action in a year of dearth is recounted in two successive paragraphs, which are identical except for the change of a few synonyms.⁴

Thus it appears that Moses wrote in the literary style of his time, and that suspicions about sources and additions are not based on solid evidence.

3. *Where was Moses directed to go?* (33:1)

He was directed to go up with the people into the land God had sworn to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

God's wrath of 32:10 had been softened by Moses' intercession. Compare 32:31. God was now allowing them to go up to the land. This broadens slightly the promise of 32:34. But still God was not Himself going up with them, lest he consume them. God refers to the people as "the people" rather than as "thy people" (as in 32:7). But God still had not called them "my people." Compare 33:13.

4. *Who would go before Israel?* (33:2-3)

An angel would be sent. See 32:34. Ex. 23:20-23 also refers to an "angel" who would be sent before them. But

²*Op. cit.*, p. 255.

³P. 456.

⁴*Op. cit.*, p. 425.

the "angel" of 23:20-21 was one like God Himself, if not actually God himself. On the other hand, the angel of 32:2 and 32:34 seems to refer to an ordinary angel, and the verse is a virtual refusal of the direct presence of God. Moses appealed to God in 33:12-16 to reverse this threat.

Regarding the Canaanite tribes, see 3:17. Regarding the "land flowing with milk and honey," see 3:8.

The reason for God's refusal to accompany Israel was "lest I consume thee in the way." God's anger toward Israel was such that if he did go up with Israel, He might destroy her because of her apostasy. Regarding "stiff-necked," see 32:9. God's presence with them would be a danger to them rather than a blessing. For in their state God would be a consuming fire in their midst (Deut. 4:24).

Israel was to be put on a level with other nations. It would lose its character as the people have a special covenant connection with Yahweh. See 33:16.

5. *How did the Israelites show their sorrow and mourning?* (33:4-6)

As a sign of mourning over the lost presence of God among them, the Israelites did not put on their ornaments. More than that, God commanded them to strip off the ones they were wearing. This practice of not wearing ornaments became a permanent custom in Israel thereafter. Israel must have seemed like a nation of ascetics and puritans in the ancient world. Putting off luxurious clothing and jewelry is a sign of mourning. Compare Ezek. 26:16.

Israel's mourning is the first real evidence of repentance in them. "Blessed are they that mourn" (Matt. 5:4). When the Lord is not in the midst of His people, it is a time to mourn! See James 4:9-10. Christians might well strip off some ornaments sometimes and mourn.

The "evil tidings" (literally, "this evil word") was the news that God would not go up in the midst of them. The tidings were "evil" in the sense of being painful, but certainly not morally evil. Actually, God was being very long-suffering to let them live at all.

The translation "If I go up into the midst of thee, . . ." is preferable to the King James reading, "I will come up into the midst of thee." The "if" is implied, if not actually in the Hebrew text.

The "one moment" is the time of a wink, or an instant. Ex. 33:5 could be translated: "(If) I go up in your midst (for) one instant (wink), I will finish you off! And now put off your ornament(s) from you, that I may know what I should do to you."

The wearing of ornaments might indicate a joyous defiance of God or an indifference to Him. Even in their humiliation God was uncertain what to do with them.

The "onward" of 33:6 is not actually in the text. It just reads "from Mt. Horeb." Horeb is the same as Sinai. See 3:1; 17:6.

The word "stripped" in 33:6 is from the same verb (*natsal*) that is translated "spoil" in 12:36: "they despoiled (or plundered) the Egyptians." The people who were once victorious and adorned are now themselves stripped of their ornaments by their sin.

The ornaments that had been partly used to make a golden calf were now available to make God's sanctuary. Ex. 35:22 makes plain that such trinkets were a major source of the offering of gold from the people. Some have suggested that the ornaments were religious medallions of some sort, and were associated with foreign gods. There is no real evidence of this.

6. *Where did Moses pitch the Tent?* (33:7-8)

He pitched it outside of the camp, quite a ways from the camp. (The "camp" of the Israelites had definite boundaries and "gates." See 32:27.) Moses called this tent the "Tent of meeting," the same name that was given to the tabernacle room called the Holy Place. See 27:21; 29:42.

The exact reason for removing the tent from the midst of the camp is not stated. It is natural to assume that the separation was brought about by God's anger toward and

alienation from Israel. Or it may have been a means to keep a distance between God's "glory" and the people. (33:10)

Although the tent was moved from the midst of the camp, God had not withdrawn His presence altogether from them.

As far as we can tell, the removal of the tent was not done by any command of God, but was an act of spiritual discernment by Moses, in faith that God would not totally and finally reject them. (Pink)

When the Israelites now came to seek Jehovah, they had to depend on Moses. Moses had a very direct communication with God, more so than any other prophet ever. See 33:11; Num. 12:8. He did not commune with God in a trance or ecstasy, but as directly as one speaking to a friend.

In the Christian church we do not require such a prophet or direct revelation; for the faith has "once for all been revealed to the saints" (Jude 3); and we may gain a true understanding by reading. (Eph. 3:4)

What is the Tent referred to in 33:7? Probably it was a tent specially designated as the place for talking with God before the more elaborate Tabernacle was built. Certainly it was not the Tabernacle-tent itself. It probably was not Moses' own tent, for Moses left this Tent after communing with God, and returned to the camp, presumably to his own dwelling. Compare 18:7.

The verb "take" (or "took") in 33:7 is in the imperfect form, which usually indicates incomplete, repeated, or future action. This is the reason for the translation "Moses used to take. . . ." Most interpreters therefore feel that Moses' action of taking the tent out from the camp was not a single event, but one repeated many times.⁵ The same imperfect "tense" form is used with the other verbs in 33:7.

However, in this instance the text clearly indicates that

⁵Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 293.

the Tent was not moved back and forth, but remained in one spot outside the camp, while Joshua stayed there constantly. Moses came back and forth, but the Tent stayed. The imperfect therefore does not here have the meaning of repeated action, as it usually does. Ex. 8:24 (Heb., 8:20) is another example of an imperfect form which does not express unfinished action, and is translated "The land was corrupted."

7. *What indicated God's presence at the Tent? (33:9-11)*

The pillar of cloud over the tent indicated God's presence there, like a flag-pole over a royal palace would point it out.

When Moses entered the Tent, the pillar of cloud descended, and Jehovah spoke to Moses. See Num. 14:14 and Ex. 13:21-22 concerning the cloud. Ex. 40:34-35 describes a pillar of cloud that covered the completed tabernacle. This surely was the same cloud as that of 33:9.

The subject of the verb "spake" in 33:9 is not stated, but obviously it is Jehovah.

When the cloud descended, the people would rise up and worship (bow down), each man at his own tent door.

The mention of Joshua stresses his closeness to Moses and to the sacred Tent, and therefore to God. Compare 17:9; 24:13; 32:17. Joshua received a befitting preparatory exposure to the people before he became the successor to Moses. He was a constant guard at the Tent.

It appears from Numbers 11:26 and possibly 12:4 that the Tent where Moses met God outside the camp was preserved even after the tabernacle was constructed; and that on some occasions of rebellion, unbelief, and murmuring among the people that God would appear in the cloud over this out-of-camp tent. This would surely dramatize Israel's estrangement from God at such times.

8. *What information, revelation, and consideration did Moses want from God?*

(1) He wanted to know the identity and status of the angel that God said He would send with them (33:2).

(2) He wanted to know God's "way," and (3) to know God

himself. (4) He wanted God to consider that the Israelites were HIS people.

Moses was fearful (rightly so!) that Israel would never make it through their journeys without God's own presence with them. Who was this "angel" that god said he would send with them? Moses was uneasy, even after the promise of 33:1-2.

The conversation between Moses and God in 33:12-23 seems to have taken place in the Tent of meeting (33:8-9): M. Noth writes that beginning with 33:12 Moses is "once again imagined" as being present on the mountain.⁶ But this is hardly so.

The conversation of 33:12-14 is an illustration of the intimate way Moses was able to talk with God.

The command to "Bring up this people" was that which was spoken in 32:34.

We do not know when God had spoken the words of 33:12, "I know thee by name, and thou hast also found favor in my sight." Compare 33:17.

Moses asked God, "Show me now thy way." The Hebrew word for "way" is spelled as a singular word (as in K.J.V.), although most translations render it as "ways." We prefer the singular translation. The Greek O.T. translated (or paraphrased) the expression very perceptively: "Reveal thyself to me." That is really what Moses wanted. To know God's "way" is to know God himself.

Possibly the "way" could refer to the route through the desert that God would lead them over. (We doubt this view.)

The purpose for which Moses requested to know God's way was that he might "know thee, so that I may find favor and grace in thy sight." One act of grace (33:13a) would lead to obtaining even greater grace. One revelation of God's way would lead to an even deeper knowledge of God.

⁶*Op. cit.*, p. 256.

Finally Moses wanted God to "look upon this nation as THY people." Compare Deut. 9:29! God had spared their lives, and agreed to let them go to the promised land. But Moses wanted God to accept them again as His own people.

9. *Did God agree to go up personally with Israel to the promised land? (33:14-16)*

Yes. God pledged, "My presence shall go with thee." This may mean that the same divine "angel of his presence" promised in 23:20-22 would continue to accompany Israel. Compare Isa. 63:9. This angel's presence was God's own presence. That was guarantee enough that they would attain their goal.

"Presence" (literally, "face") may refer to God's literal presence, or to His gracious care (Ps. 24:6), or to His personal activity. "My presence" could mean "my person," as in II Sam. 17:11.

The "rest" promised was the secure possession of the promised land. See Deut. 3:20; 12:10; Josh. 1:13, 15; 21:44; 22:4; Heb. 4:8. Rest is always the longed-for goal of those on a journey.

Moses was glad for the promise of God's presence. How otherwise could it be known that Moses and the people had found favor in God's sight, except that God was in their midst? Observe Moses' stress in 33:16 on "thy people" (stated twice).

Israel's distinctiveness lay in their fellowship with God. This made them separate from all other nations. Num. 23:9; II Sam. 7:22-24; I Kings 8:53.

- Moses seemed to have a fear, even after the reassurance of 33:14, that the evil root of the people's rebelliousness might yet cause God's presence to depart from them. See 34:9. He wanted God's presence to be guaranteed by God's irreversible commitment, and not on the people's future faithful conduct. He sought guaranteed grace!
10. *Did God agree to accept again the people as His? (33:17)*

Yes! The acceptance was complete. God's acceptance of the people was based upon His acceptance of Moses.

God said, "I know you by name." Compare 33:12. What an illustration this is of our acceptance by God because of *Christ's* merit and His intercession for us! Rom. 8:34; Isa. 53:12.

11. *What all-surpassing thing did Moses ask God to show him?* (33:18-19)

He asked to see God's own glory. He wanted a revelation surpassing all former revelations (such as those of 16:7, 10; 24:16-17). There had been an obvious withholding of full revelation of God's glory in the former revelations, as wonderful as they had been.

We do not know exactly why Moses made this request. Possibly his sense of competency as a leader had been shaken by the events associated with the golden calf. Perhaps he just desired the closest association with God that could be had.

God granted Moses' request, not totally, but in a very large degree. God declared He would make all his "goodness" (Heb., "good") to pass before Moses, and would proclaim the name of Jehovah before him. Proclaiming the "name" of Jehovah seems to mean proclaiming His nature and person. See 34:6-7.

The "I" at the start of 33:19 is emphatic.

Observe that God's goodness and God's glory are equated in 33:19, 22. God's glory is *goodness*. "Goodness" (Heb., *tov*) means "excellence" (Ps. 119:66), "fairness," "beauty" (Hosea 10:11), "joy" (Isa. 65:14), "prosperity," "fortune," etc. "Goodness" here probably refers both to the brilliancy that strikes the senses; and also to the spiritual and ethical goodness of the divine being. See Ps. 31:19. Goodness is beautiful and glorious!

God declared in 33:19, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy." Possibly God added this declaration here because Moses had repeatedly appealed to God on the basis of grace (or favor). See 33:12, 13, 16. God's words in 33:19b seem like a gentle reminder that although He would grant

Moses' request, pleas based on grace alone have limitations. God was not less gracious than Moses was, but God Himself would determine how far grace and mercy would be extended. Moses could not expect an unregulated supply of grace. Perhaps also God's words hint that it was an act of grace for God to show Moses his "goodness."

Observe that grace and mercy are among the most prominent attributes of God. In God's great self-proclamation He declared Himself merciful and gracious (34:6). "Man is never nearer to the Divine than in his compassionate moments." (J. H. Hertz)

Paul quoted part of Ex. 33:19 in Romans 9:15 to justify God's choice of Jacob over Esau and the temporary fall of the Jews from God's favor. God is above man's power to defy Him or even question Him when He makes a choice as to how grace is to be dispensed.

12. *Can man see God?* (33:20)

"Man shall not see me and live." Therefore God would not allow Moses to see His "face." Seeing "me" refers to the same act as seeing "my face." This meant seeing God in His limitless glory.

Numerous scriptures affirm that man cannot see God, and that no man has seen God. I Tim. 6:16; John 1:18; 6:46; I John 4:12. There was an awareness in the ancient world that seeing God was dangerous. (Judges 6:22; 13:22; Isaiah 6:6)

Nonetheless, some people have seen God! (1) the elders (Ex. 24:10); (2) Jacob (Gen. 32:30); (3) Abraham (Gen. 18:1); (4) Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1); Isaiah (Isa. 6:1); etc. There is NO contradiction in this fact with the truth that "man shall not see me and live." Those who saw God either saw a partially concealed view of Him, or saw that God-one called the WORD, through whom God has always communicated Himself, and who later came into the world as Jesus. Compare Isaiah 6:1-10 and John 12:41.

13. *Where would Jehovah "pass by" Moses:* (33:21-23)

He would pass by a cleft in the rock, in which Moses

would be covered.

The "place by me" where Moses was to stand "upon the rock" was at the "top of the mount" (34:2).

The passing-by of God's glory (33:22) seems to be the act related in 34:6. God "passed by" Elijah at Mt. Horeb somewhat as He passed by Moses. (I Kings 19:11)

The "glory" of 33:22 is called "goodness" in 33:19.

The "cleft of the rock" may refer to a cave. Elijah was in a cave when God passed by (I Kings 19:9, 13). "Cleft" (Heb. *nigrah*) simply means a hole or dug-out place.

God's "hand" would cover Moses in the cleft while His unviewable glory passed over. Then God would take away His hand and Moses would see his "back" or "back part." It would be like seeing the sun by seeing its afterglow just after it set; or like seeing a ship by the magnitude of the wake it left behind it. There is no other way that man can behold God.

"Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Grace hath hid me safe in thee!" (Toplady/Pink)

"He hideth my soul in the cleft of the rock,
Where rivers of pleasure I see." (Fanny J. Crosby)

Commentators almost unanimously have written that the references to God's "hand," "face," and "back parts" must be understood as human terms used to describe the indescribable aspects of God's being in terms as definite as we can comprehend them. There is surely much truth in this, because God fills heaven and earth (Jer. 23:24) and inhabits eternity (Isa. 57:15). However, we must remember that we cannot improve upon the description of the event that is given. It is easy to explain away the specific reality of the event by trying to explain it abstractly. It is better to have the child-like faith that visualizes Moses in the cleft of the rock, covered by the hand of God, than to utter abstractions that make God unreal.