

THE MYSTERY IN EPHESIANS 3

Charles C. Ryrie

The mystery of Ephesians 3:1-12 is a touchstone of interpretations. Amillennial eschatology is quite certain that in this passage Paul is not saying that the mystery is something that was not revealed until New Testament times but is a further revelation of the covenant promises made with Abraham. Oswald T. Allis, for instance, says: ". . . it was new and unknown in a relative sense only, being in its essentials an important theme of prophecy from the time of Abraham . . ."¹ A more recent writer

¹ O. T. Allis, Prophecy and the Church, p. 97.

speaks in the same vein. "What he /Paul/ does mean is that this mystery truth, although known and written in kernel form in the text of the Old Testament, was not fully comprehended nor understood until the times of the New Testament, and so can be spoken of, relatively speaking, as being hidden."²

² W. Harold Mare, "Paul's Mystery in Ephesians 3," Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society, Spring 1965, p. 83.

Covenant premillennialists hold essentially the same interpretation. Payne, for instance, writes: "Second, the Greek noun musterion, "mystery," does not necessarily imply discontinuity. . . . A "mystery" need not even have been unknown or unappreciated previously, except perhaps relatively so . . ."³

³ J. Barton Payne, The Imminent Appearing of Christ, p. 126. See also J. Oliver Buswell, A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion, II, 448-49.

The purpose of this sort of interpretation is to obviate the necessity of recognizing the distinctiveness of the church, the body of Christ, by attempting to show that the church was revealed, at least partially, in the Old Testament. This idea also implies, of course, that the church as spiritual Israel is the

continuation of God's redemptive program through Old Testament Israel.

On the other hand, dispensational premillennialism has insisted that the mystery is something unrevealed in the Old Testament (though now revealed) in order to demonstrate the distinctiveness of the church from Israel and to emphasize its unique place in God's program for this age. Pentecost, for instance, writes as follows: "Paul, then, is explaining, not limiting the mystery there set forth. The concept must stand that this whole age with its program was not revealed in the Old Testament, but constitutes a new program and a new line of revelation in this present age."⁴

⁴ J. Dwight Pentecost, Things To Come, p. 137.

Ultradispensationalists enter and further complicate the interpretative picture by insisting not only on the distinctiveness of the body church but on the fact that this was not revealed until sometime in the ministry of the apostle Paul. The extreme ultradispensationalist believes that the mystery was made known by Paul during his first Roman imprisonment, while the moderate ultradispensationalist holds that it was revealed earlier in his ministry--either at the time of his conversion or during the first missionary journey. Ultradispensationalists are agreed on the fact that Paul was the initial revelator of the mystery but they cannot agree among themselves as to when he first revealed it.

What is a mystery? What is this mystery in Ephesians 3? Is the church distinct to this age or were Old Testament saints in the body too? Did the Old Testament reveal this mystery? What was Paul's relation to its revelation? These are some of the questions germane to an understanding of the mystery in Ephesians 3.

THE CONCEPT OF A MYSTERY

In classical Greek the meaning of musterion is something hidden or secret.

In the plural the word was used to designate the sacred rites of the Greek mystery religions--secrets which only the initiated shared. In the Old Testament the Aramaic equivalent appears only in Daniel 2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47; 4:9. In the second chapter of Daniel the mystery was the dream and its interpretation; in the fourth chapter, the mystery was apparently only the interpretation, for the king remembered the dream. The secret (mystery) which the king wanted revealed was the interpretation; thus, this was the content of the mystery. It seems to be an unwarranted conclusion to say that in 4:9 "the musterion is not something unknown (Nebudhadnezzar knows the facts of the dream) but is only something which the king does not understand."⁵

⁵ Mare, p. 79.

Just because the mystery in chapter 2 was the dream and the interpretation does not require that this be the case in chapter 3. After all, the content of the various mysteries in the New Testament must be determined from the passages in which the word is used, and the content is not the same in each occurrence. Thus we may conclude that in the Old Testament a mystery was something unknown until revealed.

In the Dead Sea Scrolls the same Old Testament word, raz, plus a synonym, pele', are used in a number of references to indicate not so much something unknown but wisdom that is far above finite understanding.

The word mystery therefore means a secret containing high智deep truth. In the New Testament the word musterion occurs 27 times with both ideas of something secret and something deep. The idea of supernatural wisdom in a mystery is found in the only uses of the word in the Gospels in relation to the mysteries of the kingdom (Matt. 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10). The idea of a mystery being something secret in Old Testament times but revealed in the New Testament is clearly seen

in a passage like Colossians 1:26. Four occurrences are found in the Revelation (1:20; 10:7; 17:5,7) and the other 20 are in the writings of Paul.⁶ All seem

⁶ Romans 11:25; 16:25; 1 Corinthians 2:7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Ephesians 1:9; 3:3; 4, 9; 5:32; 6:19; Colossians 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Thessalonians 2:7; 1 Timothy 3:9, 16. There is one other occurrence in certain texts of 1 Corinthians 2:1.

to involve some higher wisdom which God reveals.

Thus the concept of a mystery is basically a secret which only the initiated share. This includes two ideas: (1) a time when the secret was not known followed by a time when it became known; and (2) deeper or higher wisdom which is revealed to the one initiated into an understanding of the mystery.

THE CONTENT OF THE MYSTERY IN EPHESIANS 3

The content of the mystery is expressly stated in Ephesians 3:6: "That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel." In other words, the mystery concerns Jews and Gentiles as joint-heirs, in a joint-body, and joint-sharers of the promise of Christ. That the mystery contains the fact that Gentiles are included in God's plan of redemption is clear, and most nondispensational writers stop at this point. But is this all there is to the mystery? If so, there is little mystery in that, for the Old Testament made this clear (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 42:6-7). If this is the mystery then Paul was wrong to label it a mystery, for it is neither something new nor some higher truth. The heart of the mystery is that there would be a "joint-body" for Jews and Gentiles. Thus the crux of the interpretation of the mystery in this passage is whether or not the one body for Jews and Gentiles is an Old Testament revelation.

A concordance examination of the use of the word body will reveal very quickly and conclusively that the idea of the body of Christ or of any body into

which the redeemed were placed is nowhere found in the Old Testament. Indeed, almost all the uses of the word body are of the physical body. The first occurrence of the word body in connection with the body of Christ is in the extended discussion of that concept in 1 Corinthians 12:12-25. The next occurrence is in Romans 12:5, and the remainder occur in Ephesians and Colossians. The concept of one body or of any body was unknown in the Old Testament.

Ephesians 3 cannot be dealt with accurately without considering some features in the extended discussion of the body in 1 Corinthians 12. Two important features of the body of Christ are detailed in verse 13. First, Jew and Gentile are not distinguished in the body of Christ. This is the emphasis of the mystery of Ephesians 3. Second, entrance into that body is effected by the baptism of the Spirit. That baptizing work did not occur in the Old Testament nor during the earthly ministry of Christ. Even after the resurrection the Lord said that it was still future (Acts 1:5). It did take place for the first time in the history of the world on the day of Pentecost (Acts 11:15-16). Therefore the inescapable conclusion is that the body of Christ did not come into existence until the day of Pentecost when the first members of that body were joined to the risen Head.

If by stretch of the interpretative imagination the body could be said to have existed before Pentecost, then it was without a head, for it was not until after the resurrection and ascension of Christ that He was made head of the body which is the church (Eph. 1:22). In His capacity as risen Head, He gives gifts (Eph. 4:9-11) which further underscores the distinctiveness of the body to this age. That body-church is called a "new man" (Eph. 2:15), not a continuation or remaking of Israel, but something new and distinct from the Israel of the Old Testament.

There is certainly continuity of the body of Christ with the redeemed of all ages simply because those in the body are redeemed people. But there is also discontinuity in that the redeemed today are in the body of Christ and not some sort of Israel. Just as the redeemed before Abraham's day (like Enoch and Noah) were not a part of Israel, so the redeemed of this age are not either. Enoch and Noah and other pre-Abrahamic saints belong to the family of God's redeemed, but they never belonged to the commonwealth of Israel. So today redeemed Jew and Gentile belong to God's family of saints, without being members of any kind of Israel. They are members of the body of Christ, a new man, entered by the baptizing work of the Spirit, and all, whether Jew or Gentile, of equal standing. This is the content of the mystery of Ephesians 3:6.

THE RELATION OF THE MYSTERY TO OLD TESTAMENT REVELATION

Was this mystery revealed in the Old Testament? The covenant theologian responds in the affirmative, but the dispensationalists in the negative. What does Paul say? In this passage he declares that the mystery "in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit" (Eph. 3:5). Covenant theologians have seized on the word "as" as proving the validity of their contention that the church was in the Old Testament, while dispensationalists have sought to explain the verse otherwise.

Before investigating the possible meaning of the "as" phrase, it is important to notice that in the parallel passage in Colossians 1:26 there is no "as." There statement there is unequivocal--the mystery was not known at all in Old Testament times. It is also rather significant that nondispensational writers on this subject never mention the Colossians passage in connection with their discussions of Ephesians 3, for it would obviously damage their position.⁷

⁷ This is true of both Allis and Mare in their works previously cited.

But exactly what is Paul saying in Ephesians 3:5? First of all let it be said that even if the "as" clause means that there was some revelation of the church in the Old Testament, it does not necessarily follow that the church was in existence in those days. The second coming of Christ is revealed in a number of Old Testament passages but it hasn't come to pass yet. In fact the considerations given above concerning the body of Christ prove that the church was not operative in Old Testament times.

Causal. use of as

Jn 19:35

Mt. 6:12 (cf. Lk 11:4 -

*Kai yap shmn tis
not partial forgive-*

Second, let it be noted that the Greek word "as" has several meanings. Undoubtedly the most frequently used sense is a comparative one. If this is the use in Ephesians 3:5 then Paul is saying that the mystery was not revealed in the Old Testament to the extent that it is in the New, but it was revealed in the Old. Such an interpretation would stand in contradiction to Colossians 1:25 and the use of the word body (meaning the church) in the Scriptures.

But "as" has another meaning which would not impose a contradiction. It may express an adjectival or declarative force which simply means that the "as" clause merely adds additional information. For instance, "as ye suppose" in Acts 2:15 adds additional information to the sentence and can in no way be understood as a comparative. Furthermore, with a negative in the preceding clause (as in Eph. 3:5) "as" may have the meaning of "but." A clear example of this is found in 1 Corinthians 7:31. Thus Paul may very well be saying in Ephesians 3:5 that the mystery "was not made known unto the sons of men in other ages, but it is now revealed. Of course this would be in harmony with the clear passage, Colossians 1:25.

It is true that the Old Testament testifies to the coming of Christ which is involved in the mystery since the church is His body. That the Old Testament witnesses to Him is what is meant in a passage like Romans 16:24-25, but this witness was not comprehended until the mystery had been revealed in the New Testament (cf. 1 Pet. 1:11-12). Dispensationalists do not deny that the

Old Testament predicted the coming of Messiah and blessing on Gentiles, but one looks in vain to find a revelation in the Old Testament of the body of Christ, the church, and of equality of Jews and Gentiles. Even in the millennial kingdom there will not be equality.⁸ Covenant theologians

⁸ For elaboration of this point see John F. Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom, p. 236).

seem to imply that since the Old Testament foretold the coming of Christ it also revealed these other truths. The mystery in Ephesians 3 is not that Messiah would come and that Gentiles would be blessed, but it is that Jews and Gentiles would find an equal position in the new and unique body of Christ.

THE RELATION OF THE MYSTERY TO THE APOSTLE PAUL

This is a favorite passage of ultradispensationalists (followers of the teachings of Bullinger, O'Hair, Stam), for in it they believe they have proof that Paul was the first to reveal the mystery of the body church to the world. Three considerations in this passage alone disallow such a conclusion.

First, Paul explicitly states that the mystery was revealed to "his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit." In other words, others (plural) understood the mystery and that not through the agency of Paul but through the ministry of the Spirit. Paul did not receive it first and then reveal it to the others. They received it, as he did, from the Spirit. The ultradispensationalist's point would be proved if the text said that the mystery was revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets "by me." But it does not say that.

Second, the verb "revealed" in verse 5 is in the aorist tense. This in conjunction with the word now indicates that the revelation of the mystery was "made definitely at a former period in these /New Testament/ times."⁹

⁹ S.D.F. Salmond, "The Epistle to the Ephesians," The Expositor's Greek Testament, III, 304.

This definitely contradicts the extreme type of ultradispensationalism which teaches that the mystery was not revealed to Paul until the time of this imprisonment during which Ephesians was written.

Third, in declaring that he had received this revelation, Paul gives himself no priority (v. 3). "To me" is an unemphatic form (moi) and it does not stand in a place of emphasis in the sentence. In verse 8 when he writes of his proclaiming the mystery he does use the emphatic form and places it in the emphatic position at the beginning of the sentence. Thus, when speaking of receiving the mystery he gives himself no priority, while in the matter of preaching it he emphasizes the prominent part he played. The constructions ought to be reversed if the claims of the ultradispensationalists were correct.

The mystery of Ephesians 3 is the equality of Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ. This equality and this body were not revealed in the Old Testament. They were made known only after the coming of Christ by the Spirit to the apostles and prophets including Paul but not excluding others.