

PAUL'S MYSTERY IN EPHESIANS 3

W. HAROLD MARE, Ph.D.

The book of Ephesians presents to us a glorious list of doctrines concerning God's salvation and its application to His people. One of these great topics is the mystery revealed to Paul "that the Gentiles should be fellowheirs and of the same body and partakers of his promise in Christ by the Gospel" (Ephesians 3:3-6). That the saved Gentiles became fellowheirs with saved Jews, and were united then in Christ through the Gospel is the obvious teaching of Paul in Ephesians 3, a proposition upon which all will agree. But as we probe into the text deeper, certain questions arise. Are these fellowheirs distinct from the heirs of the Old Testament body of Christ, both Jews and Gentile proselytes? Is this body completely different from that to which the Old Testament saints belonged? Are these promises different from those upon which salvation was based in the Old Testament?

In relation to these questions, some time ago I was confronted with the question as to whether the *μυστηριον* teaching of Ephesians 3 was in conflict with the scriptural concept of the unity of the covenant of grace and the unity and oneness of the invisible church of Jesus Christ existing throughout the ages as presented in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapters 7 and 25, respectively.

That there is a conflict of viewpoint based, at least in part, on this doctrine of the *μυστηριον* is seen in comparing the concepts of the following writers:

1. "Passages referring to the fact that the mystery was not explained until Christ came are the following: Romans 16:25, 26; I Corinthians 2:7-10; Ephesians 3:3-13; Colossians 1:26, 27. These passages do not deny the prophecy by which Christ and His working in redeeming His church were foretold in type and symbol and literal prediction. What these Scriptures teach is that the mystery was not known then as it is now known (Ephesians 3:5)."¹
2. "Paul then [in the use of the word 'as' in Ephesians 3:5], 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."² The same second author goes on to say: ". . . the concept [is] given to us in the New Testament that the church is a mystery. It was no mystery that God was go-

1. James Oliver Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, Vol. II (Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan Pub. House, 1963), p. 448.
2. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham Pub. Co., 1959), p. 137.

ing to provide salvation for the Jews, nor that Gentiles would be blessed in salvation. The fact that God was going to form Jews and Gentiles alike into one body was never revealed in the Old Testament and forms the mystery of which Paul speaks in Ephesians 3:1-7; Romans 16:25-27; Colossians 1:26-29. This whole mystery program was not revealed until after the rejection of Christ by Israel The church is manifestly an interruption of God's program for Israel, which was not brought into being until Israel's rejection of the offer of the kingdom. It must logically follow that this mystery program must itself be brought to a conclusion before God can resume His dealing with the nation Israel The mystery program, which was so distinctive in its inception, will certainly be separate at its conclusion."³

It is to this problem which I address myself: Does Paul's teaching in Ephesians 3 conflict with the unity of the covenant of grace set forth in the Old and New Testaments, and with the unity and oneness of the invisible church of Jesus Christ throughout the ages?

It is my purpose in this paper:

1. To survey the meaning of the word *μυστηριον* in secular and Jewish literature including the Dead Sea Scrolls and in Pauline writings; and,
2. To relate and apply the *μυστηριον* teaching of Ephesians 3:5, 6 to the biblical context of Paul's thought and of the whole Bible: that is, to interpret the *μυστηριον* of Ephesians 3:5, 6 in relation to the teaching of Old Testament, New Testament, and to Paul's own teaching in Ephesians and elsewhere as to the time and completeness of its unfolding, and as to implications which may be properly derived as to the nature and temporal limits of that spiritual body of believers called the Church.

The concept of *μυστηριον* is to be found in literature both Greek and Jewish in the centuries before the Christian era. In Greek literature of the classical times *μυστηριον* (derived from the basic words *μυστης*- one initiated, *ηνεω* initiate into the mysteries) is used with the meaning of "mystery" or "secret rite" and is to be found usually in the plural with the article *τα μυστηρια*, to indicate the religious rites called the mysteries, such as those of the Cabiri in Samothrace (Herodotus 2.51) and especially those of Demeter at Eleusis (Euripides, *Suppliants* 173; Aristophanes, *Frogs* 887; Andokides 1.11; etc.). Sometimes it was used of mystic implements, such as those sacred objects carried to Eleusis in connection with the celebration of the Eleusinian mysteries (Euripides, *Suppliants* 470; Aristophanes, *Frogs* 159). Plato uses it in the *Theaetetus* 156a in the general sense of "mystery" or "secret;"⁴ and it is this latter meaning which is conveyed in the occurrences of *μυστηριον* in pre-Christian Jewish literature.

3. Pentecost, *Ibid.*, pp. 200, 201.

4. H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, revised by H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie (a new edition; Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1940, reprinted 1953), "*μυστηριον*."

In the canonical Old Testament the only book where the Septuagint translates the original by *μυστηριον* is in the Aramaic section of Daniel. The Aramaic word so translated is *raz* which according to the Brown, Driver and Briggs Lexicon is a Persian loan word and is to be translated "secret."⁵ The word and its Greek translation is used in Daniel 2 (verses 18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47 (2)) and once in Daniel 4 in verse 9 (6).⁶ In Daniel 2 the secret or mystery is something which Nebuchadnezzar has known but now has forgotten, but it is also something, when known, he did not understand. Daniel is to reveal (*εκφαινω* or *αποκαλυπτω*) the facts of the dream and the interpretation. In the Daniel 4:9(6) reference the situation is different: the *μυστηριον* is not something unknown (Nebuchadnezzar knows the facts of the dream) but is only something which the king does not understand.

Thus in these passages in Daniel *μυστηριον* or *raz* can be used to indicate that which is factually known but not understood; or they can be used to designate that which is both unknown (or rather, forgotten) factually and also not understood.

The word *raz* occurs also a number of times in the Dead Sea Scrolls material in such as the Commentary on Habakkuk, The Manual of Discipline, The War of the Sons of Light and the Sons of Darkness, The Book of Hymns, etc., with frequent reference to the mysterious secrets and ways of God (as in the Commentary on Habakkuk 7, 8; Book of Hymns 4:27; 7:27; 12:20; 13: 2; Manual 9:18; 11:5; War 16:16); and with reference to His inscrutable wisdom (as in the Commentary on Habakkuk 7:14; Manual 4:6; Book of Hymns 9:23).⁷ It is to be noted that the word *pele'*, a synonym, is used with *raz* in a number of these references.⁸ As in the case of the Daniel passages, in a number of these references just cited the concept is not necessarily that the basic fact of God's ways and wisdom are not known in some respect but that these ways and this wisdom exceed finite human understanding.

5. F. Brown, S. R. Driver and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1907), "*raz*."

6. Actually the Greek of Daniel 4:9 is from the second century A.D. translation of Theodotion, as set forth in Rahlfs' *Septuagint*. Rahlfs says, "Theodotion did not provide an entirely new translation, but, taking the LXX as his basis, he corrected it according to the original text." Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta*, Vol. I (3rd edition; Stuttgart: Privilege. Wurt. Bibelanstalt, for the American Bible Society, New York, 1949), p. XXVII.

7. For details see Karl Georg Kuhn, ed., *Konkordanz zu den Qumrantexten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1960, "*raz*," and T. H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scriptures*, in English Translation (revised and enlarged edition; New York: Doubleday and Company, 1964).

8. *Pele'*, according to Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *op. cit.*, means "wonder, extraordinary, hard to understand," used concerning God's dealings with his people (Isaiah 29:14), the wondrous character of God's law (Psalm 119:29), the marvel of the Messiah as counsellor (Isaiah 9:6), and the wonder of God's acts in salvation and judgment (Psalm 77:12, etc.).

In turning to the New Testament we observe that of the 27 times⁹ the word *μυστηριον* is used, 20 of those occurrences are to be found in the epistles of Paul. Of the seven remaining instances three occur in parallel accounts in the synoptic Gospels (Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; and Luke 8:10) where *μυστηριον* carries the thought of the deeper spiritual meaning of the things of the kingdom of God which the disciples understand in contrast to others who hear the basic facts presented in the parables but do not understand the spiritual intent.

The other four extra-Pauline references are to be found in Revelation. In three of these the *μυστηριον* refers to symbols (or symbolic pictures) which have been graphically described but whose underlying meanings are still in question (*i.e.*, the seven stars and candlesticks of Revelation 1:20 and the mystery of the woman of Revelation 17:5, 7). In their immediate contexts the mysteries are then explained more fully so that their deeper, more basic meaning might be understood.

In the last Revelation reference (10:7) we read of the mystery of God being finished "as he hath declared it to his servants the prophets," which *μυστηριον* speaks of God's detailed eschatological plan which though known to some of his own is a mystery to the world of men — that mystery plan of God which includes the rapture of His saints (Revelation 11) and His subjection of His enemies (Revelation 15-20).

The Pauline references to *μυστηριον* are 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; and 1 Timothy 3:9, 16.

Before we analyze these passages, let us examine the general context of Ephesians 1-3 in which our word, *μυστηριον* (occurring in 3:3, 4, 9) finds its setting.

Paul in Ephesians has set forth before the saints who are basically Gentiles (2:1, 2, 11) God's grace in providing the great spiritual blessings of salvation (Ephesians 1), God's power and mercy in forgiving their sins, changing their lives and giving them new life in Christ (Ephesians 2:1-10), and a charge to remember the fact that, although far from God's promises of salvation given in the Old Testament through His people Israel, they have now been brought nigh to salvation through the blood of Christ and have become a part of God's spiritual organism of the saved (the Church) (Ephesians 2:11-22).

Now in Ephesians 3 he elaborates on his position as Apostle to the Gentiles and how that he is God's instrument in bringing to the Gentiles this message of the unsearchable riches of Christ (3:8). That the mystery of which he speaks in verses 3 and 4 is the fact that the Gentiles are included

9. There is one other possible use in I Corinthians 2:1, where there is a textual problem. The Nestle text prefers *μαρτυριον* there.

in God's plan of redemption (verse 6) is clear. But the questions arise: Does Paul, as he presents this truth, set forth a brand new message unknown and unrevealed before, and does this mystery message indicate that the organism in which the Gentiles are made fellowheirs with the Jews is an entirely new one which has no spiritual connection nor continuity with God's body of believers in the Old Testament? In examination of the evidence we answer in the negative to both of these questions for the following reasons.

Paul held a view of the mystery of the Gospel as God's total plan of salvation which to him as a Jew must have found much of its explanation in the Scripture of the Old Testament. It is obvious that Paul, as he discusses the narrower aspect of the mystery of the Gentiles in Ephesians 3, has also in his thinking the larger concept of *μυστηριον* as including the various parts of God's plan of salvation such as he describes: in Ephesians 6:19 as the "mystery of the Gospel" (that mystery of the supernatural grace of God set forth in the Gospel); in Colossians 2:2 as the "mystery of God, of Christ" (Nestle text)¹⁰ (that is, the mystery involving the wonder of God and the wisdom and salvation of Christ elaborated in Colossians 1 and 2 as set over against the incipient gnosticism of Colossians 2); in 1 Timothy 3:16 as that "mystery of godliness" (which concerns the incarnation and work of Christ); and in 1 Timothy 3:9 as that "mystery of faith" (which, setting forth the great salvation in Christ, cannot be fathomed by human reasoning and understanding). To Paul the mystery of God's salvation was a large subject covering many different aspects.

In the light of our doctrine of the verbal inspiration of all the Scripture, it can be concluded that Paul in speaking in Ephesians 3 of the mystery as it applies to the Gentiles does not mean that the basic facts of this truth were not included in at least elementary form in the Scripture of the Old Testament, because of two basic truths. First, there are indications in both Testaments that the Gentiles were to be partakers of the same salvation in which the covenant people of God of the Old Testament participated. Take, for example, the promise to Abraham that "in *thy* seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 28:14; compare also, Genesis 12:3 and 17:5) and its New Testament application in Galatians 3:7, 8, "Know ye therefore that they which be of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the Scripture foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the Gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed;" and also Galatians 3:29, "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye *Abraham's seed* and heirs according to the promise." Note also the prophecy of Isaiah where the Lord speaks of giving Christ "for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles" (Isaiah 42:6, 7 and 49:6) and the counterpart in Luke 2:32 where Simeon declares and interprets these statements by saying of Christ, "A light to lighten the Gentiles *and* the glory of thy people Israel."

10. There are a number of minor variations in the words here as witnessed by the manuscripts, but the Nestle text supported by P46 and B seems best.

But, secondly, Paul, himself, in using *μυστηριον* of the Gentiles in Ephesians 3, does not mean to deny the fact of the inclusion of this truth in the writings of the Old Testament. For in a similar passage in Romans 16:25, 26, he speaks of his Gospel as being a mystery revealed by revelation which mystery was "kept secret since the world began, but is now made manifest and by (*δία*, through) the scriptures of the prophets . . . made known to all nations." What Paul is saying here is that, although this mystery of the Gospel with the Gentiles being partakers of it was not generally understood in its deeper implications in ages past and to that extent was actually hidden, yet the elementary facts of the mystery were included in the scriptures of the prophets, which scriptures are now being expounded and explained to the Gentiles.¹¹ In further substantiation of the fact that this is what Paul means, observe his practice in Acts of going to the Jewish synagogues and explaining from the Old Testament Scripture the Gospel and its common application to both Jews and Gentiles in attendance there, as, for example, in Acts 13:14-41 (see especially verse 26); Acts 17:1-12; and Acts 18:1-11. Compare also how Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:51-55, in referring to the mystery of the resurrection body (also a part of God's total plan of redemption and which concerns the fact that the change of verse 51 will involve the making of the Christian's body incorruptible and immortal (verses 53, 54)), indicates that a portion of that mystery truth (*i.e.*, that the change will result in victory over death) had already been included in the Old Testament in the factual statement of verses 54 and 55 taken from Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"¹²

Again, in the Ephesians context itself the Apostle Paul, in referring to the mystery concerning the Gentiles, is not teaching that this doctrine was completely unknown in the Old Testament. For, observe in Ephesians 3:1, in the words, *τουτου χαριν* that the apostle is connecting the mystery truth of chapter 3 with the great concepts of chapter 2:11-22 where he indicates that the Gentiles of this age have now been brought nigh and made a part of the spiritual blessings of the commonwealth (*η κολιτεια*) of Israel (cf. Philippians 3:20, *οτ πολυτερα*) and of the covenants of promise (without which there is no hope, nor salvation, Ephesians 2:12) of Old Testament Israel, and that through the work of Christ on the cross. There

11. Hodge says on Romans 16:26, "that is, 'this gospel or mystery hidden from eternity, is now revealed, not now for the first time indeed, since there are so many intimations of it in the prophecies of the Old Testament.' It is evident that the apostle adds the words, *and by the Scriptures of the prophets*, to avoid having it supposed that he overlooked the fact that the plan of redemption was taught in the Old Testament; compare chap. 1:2; 3:21." Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New Edition, revised; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), p. 452.
12. Actually, the quotations are a somewhat free rendering of the Old Testament statements, with the first part (verse 54b) from Isaiah 25:8 and the rest (verse 55) from Hosea 13:14.

has come through the Old Testament promises, he implies, the enlarging of the spiritual body of redeemed Jews to include Gentiles who are not now strangers to the spiritual commonwealth and promises but fellow-citizens in this enlarged organism, the household of God, the Church of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:19-22).

Therefore, we conclude on the basis of these comparisons that Paul in speaking of the mystery concerning the Gentiles in Ephesians 3 is not intending to convey the thought that the basic facts of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the plan of salvation and in the spiritual body of the redeemed (the terms used to indicate this organism being differently expressed at different times by different writers such as the terms, "children of Abraham," "seed of Abraham," "assembly," "congregation," "church,"¹³ etc.) is excluded from the text of the Old Testament. What he 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.

This agrees with the usage of *μυστηριον* and *raz* seen in Daniel 2 and 4; in the use of *raz* in some of the passages in the Dead Sea scrolls; and in the extra-Pauline passages in the New Testament, where the basic facts of the mystery are known (or have been known) and yet their deeper meaning is unknown or hidden to some.

This brings us to one final consideration. How do the words, *ως νυν* ("as now"), in Ephesians 3:5 fit into the above proposition? It is true, as Robertson notes¹⁴ that *ως* can be used in comparative, declarative, causal, temporal, final, consecutive, indirect interrogative, and exclamatory ways. However, Robertson also says "*ως* is more often comparative than anything else,"¹⁵ and a look at the concordance will verify this. In the light of our conclusions drawn as to the usage of *μυστηριον* and its equivalent in Old Testament and other Jewish literature, as well as in the New Testament, and in the light of the fact that *ως* is more often to be taken in a comparative sense, we are justified in interpreting *ως* in Ephesians 3:5 not as restrict-

13. For the concept of the spiritual oneness of the church of the Old and New Testaments see the use of *εκκλησια* (Hatch and Redpath) to translate the Hebrew word *kahal* (assembly) in such places as Deut. 4:10; 9:10 (cf. Acts 7:38, the Church in the wilderness) and Joshua 9:2 (the Church in the land), etc.; see how *εκκλησια* and *συναγωγη*, which often translate *kahal* and *edah* (congregation) respectively, overlap in meaning in Judges 20:1, 2 and Proverbs 5:14; and see Heb. 2:12, a quote of Ps. 22:22, which passage with the Hebrew translated in the LXX as *εκκλησια*, in prophetic view is talking about the future New Testament Church. The conclusion to be drawn is that the Old Testament *kahal* and *edah* are the same in spiritual nature as the *εκκλησια* in the New Testament, although the outward physical organizations are obviously different. In this conclusion just made we take into consideration the difference between the concepts of the invisible church and the visible church, which concepts, however, cannot be divorced from one another inasmuch as the true visible Church on earth (whether Old or New Testament) is (and was) to be filled, as far as possible, with members of the redeemed invisible Church.
14. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (5th ed.; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1923), p. 980.
15. Robertson *Ibid.*, pp. 967,8.

ing the truth of the *μυστηριον* to the New Testament age, but simply as helping to convey the comparative idea that what was alluded to, but not fully understood, by men in ages past is now in this age being revealed as to its deeper spiritual meaning and truth.

We thank God for the progressive revelation of His Word, for His plan of redemption conceived by Him in ages and made known in and through the Scriptures. We thank Him, too, that we Gentiles have been included with all the saints in all the ages in the promises of salvation and have been made fellow-citizens of that spiritual commonwealth and a part of that spiritual body, called the household of God (Ephesians 2:19), the Church (Ephesians 3:10).

Covenant Theological Seminary

St. Louis, Missouri