

ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ IN COLOSSIANS 1:24-2:5

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Introduction

Hidden within Colossians 1:24-2:5 is a wealth of knowledge and wisdom. This passage is important for a number of reasons. First of all, it serves as a transition from the letter's lofty Christocentric introduction to the body of the letter where that heavy Christology is applied to the Colossian problem of a conflicting philosophy. Second, it is here that we find Paul's¹ primary appeal to ethos in addressing the situation. Third, this passage contains one of the most puzzling statements of Paul's role in the New Testament – namely, that Paul is “filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions” (1:24).² Fourth, we find in this passage the most Christocentric depiction of “the word of God, . . . the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to the saints” (1:26). In regard to this last point we should note that this passage and its parallel in Ephesians 3:1-13 contain the more references to the word μυστήριον than any other passage in the New Testament. Studies of the word μυστήριον have been more than fruitful for understanding the relationship between the Old and the New Testaments.³

¹ Recent scholarship has questioned the authenticity of Colossians. In this paper I will assume Pauline authorship, but none of the main points will be based on this assumption.

² All Bible translations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2001).

³ For example, see D. A. Carson's discussion of how the gospel is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy on the one hand, and on the other hand was hidden in times past and only revealed after the coming of Christ in “Mystery and Fulfillment: Toward a More Comprehensive Paradigm of Paul's Understanding of the Old and the New,” pages 393-436 in *Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2: *The Paradoxes of Paul*, D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, Mark A. and Seifrid, eds. (WUNT 181; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004). For other studies of μυστήριον, see G. K. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSup 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 215-272; Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (WUNT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990); Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term “Mystery” in the New*

Nevertheless, this passage has perhaps received too little attention in scholarly discussions of Colossians and of the word *μυστήριον*.

Therefore it is the goal of this paper to determine the meaning and content of *μυστήριον* in Colossians 1:24-2:5. To do this we will first discuss the primary purpose of Colossians, after which we will examine the structure and flow of the letter, with a specific eye toward the function of Colossians 1:24-2:5 in the argumentation of the letter. Then we will look more closely at the language used to introduce the *μυστήριον* to determine its function and meaning in this passage. Finally we will discuss the content of the *μυστήριον* and summarize our conclusions.

The Primary Purpose of Colossians

Most scholars agree that Colossians was written to deal with a competing “philosophy” (*φιλοσοφία*, 2:8) that the Colossian church was in danger of being “taken captive” by.⁴ It is beyond the scope of this paper to address whether the “philosophy” that Paul is opposing is some form of Jewish mysticism,⁵ standard Judaism,⁶ or a

Testament (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968). For a study of the term with a different understanding of the sense of the word than the one expressed in this paper, see C. C. Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mystērion: Meaning and Content* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1977).

⁴ This was questioned by Morna D. Hooker in “Were There False Teachers in Colossae?” *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, edited by Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 315-331, but most scholars continue to argue for a rival teaching.

⁵ Fred O. Francis, “Humility and Angel Worship in Col. 2:18,” pages 163-195 in *Conflict in Colossae: A Problem in the Interpretation of Early Christianity Illustrated by Selected Modern Studies*, edited by F. O. Francis and W. A. Meeks (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1973); repr. from *Studia theologica* 16 (1962): 109-34. See also F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 17-26.

⁶ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 23-35; N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* (TNTC; Leicester, U. K.: Inter-Varsity, 1986), 24-27.

syncretistic mix of multiple religious and philosophical traditions.⁷ What would be helpful for our purpose is to note the explicit claims Paul makes about this philosophy and more importantly, to examine *how* Paul responds to the problem throughout the letter. The place where the opposing philosophy is most clearly articulated is in 2:6-25, where we see that the Colossians are in danger of being taken “captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” (2:8). Apparently there are those who would “pass judgment on [them] in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath” (2:16). The one adhering to this philosophy insists “on asceticism and worship of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind” (2:18). He would also have the Colossians “submit to regulations – ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings” (2:20-22).

Interwoven with these descriptions of the opposing philosophy are depictions of Christ. The first mention of the philosophy says it is “according to human traditions, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have been filled in him, who is the head of all rule and authority” (2:8-10). For seven verses Paul goes on to describe what Christ has done, highlighting the fullness that is available in Christ and the power of Christ over rulers and authorities (2:9-15). After speaking in 2:16 of the questions in which the instigators would pass judgment, Paul says, “These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (2:17). After speaking of the

⁷ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 57-60.

attitudes of the instigators in 2:18, Paul observes that their problem is that they are “not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (2:19). And after pointing out the earthly focus of the regulations in 2:20-22, Paul calls for a focus on Christ in 3:1-4. So we see that the solution to the Colossian problem is a focus on Christ rather than on earthly things.

This explains much of chapter 1 as well. The Christ hymn of 1:15-20 places the focus on Jesus, who is to become *πρωτεύων* in all things. And in our pericope Christ himself is presented as “the word of God, . . . the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to the saints” (1:26). Throughout Colossians, Paul’s goal is to magnify Christ.⁸

The Structure and Flow of Colossians

Keeping in mind Paul’s approach to this problem helps us to see the flow of argumentation in Colossians. After a brief introduction (1:1-2), Paul goes into a thanksgiving section (1:3-8) that particularly highlights “the hope laid up for you in heaven” (1:5) as the source of the Colossians’ faith and love. In this passage Paul also presents the gospel as the means through which this hope is discovered. After giving thanks for the Colossians, Paul tells them what he prays for for them (1:1-12) – knowledge of God’s will, which will produce a walk “worthy of the Lord,” and strengthening so that they may endure with joy and thanksgiving. At the end of the

⁸ This is not to suggest that the entire letter is pure Christology. Though one could argue that the household code of 3:18-4:1 finds its basis in Christology (see, for example, Ephesians 5:21-6:9, where the relationship between Christ and the Church is given as the paradigm for understanding household relationships), we do not see explicit the heavy Christology that we find elsewhere in the letter. Colossians has more than one purpose, but in Paul’s response to the main problem – this opposing philosophy – we see a high Christology. This is the focus of chapters 1-2. Note that it is in our pericope that the first reference to the opposing philosophy occurs (2:4).

prayer Paul highlights what has happened in the gospel, transferring believers “from the domain of darkness . . . to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13)

This sets up a discussion of the greatness of Christ, where Christ’s preeminence is highlighted, as is his power over authorities and the reconciliation that comes through him (1:15-20). Paul continues to highlight the greatness of Christ by speaking once again of his effect on believers (1:21-22), at which point Paul reminds them of the importance of continuing in the faith (1:23). Here once again “the hope of the gospel” is given as the object for the Colossians to cling to.

It is at this point that our pericope appears. There seem to be two things happening here, which will become clear shortly. On the one hand Paul describes himself and his relationship with the Colossians in order to establish ethos.⁹ On the other hand Paul lays out what his goal for the Colossians is and what he is willing to suffer for, namely “Christ, . . . the hope of glory,” so that the Colossians are not only motivated to listen to Paul, but also given a response to live out – specifically the treasuring of Christ. By showing what Paul is laboring and suffering for, he is showing the greatness (“the riches of the glory,” “all the treasures”) of that object. Therefore this section gives the Colossians both motivation and focus.

Our pericope ends with Paul giving the reason for saying the things he is saying – “in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments” (2:4). Rather Paul delights to see them in good order and firm in their faith (2:5). At this point there is a shift marked by the οὐ̅ν in 2:6, and the rest of the letter deals with applying the high Christology given in 1:1-2:5. The main application (already alluded to in 2:4) is that the

⁹ Ben Witherington, III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 142-143.

Colossian believers would not be taken captive by worldly philosophy, but would focus on Christ above. This is the thrust of 2:6-3:4. Then in 3:5-17 Paul gives the application in regard to morality, in 3:18-4:1 he applies it specifically to the household, and finally in 4:2-6 he gives some final instructions before closing the letter in 4:7-18 with the greetings of those who are with him.

For this reason Douglas Moo divides Colossians into three main sections:

1. The Letter Opening: “Just as You Have Received Christ Jesus as Lord . . .” (1:1-2:5)
2. The Letter Body: “. . . Continue to Live Your Lives in Him” (2:6-4:7)
3. The Letter Closing, Greetings, Plans, and Instructions (4:7-18)¹⁰

Some of the advantages of Moo’s outline are that it highlights the shift that occurs at 2:6 and that it bases the structure on the central statement in 2:6 – “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him.” Perhaps the biggest weakness is the label “Letter Opening” for 1:1-2:5 as if what precedes 2:6 is mere introduction and what begins at 2:6 is the real “body” of the letter. To be sure, we have the introduction of Paul occurring primarily in 1:24-2:5, and 1:13-23 could rightfully be considered an introduction of Christ, but it seems like 1:1-2:5 are more central to Paul’s argument to not be considered part of the letter body.

An alternative to this outline is proposed by Petr Pokorný, who outlines Colossians as follows:

¹⁰ Moo, vi.

Opening (Inscriptio), 1:1-2
 Part One: Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession – The
 Premise of Salvation in Christ, 1:3-23
 Part Two: The Authority of the Apostle – Connecting
 Salvation with the Apostolic Proclamation, 1:24-2:5
 Part Three: Debate with the Opponents (Propositio and
 Probatio) – True and False Appropriation of Salvation,
 2:6-23
 Part Four: Paraenesis for the New Life (Exhortatio), 3:1-4:6
 Conclusion of the Letter: Personal Notes and Greetings,
 4:7-18¹¹

This outline reveals a different understanding of the role of 1:24-2:5 than Moo's. In fact, Petr Pokorný calls this passage “a digression” written primarily to demonstrate “the dependence of the community addressed – and actually the whole church – upon the apostle Paul and the tradition of teaching issuing from him.”¹² The problem with this view – and it is not insignificant for our purposes – is that it misses the importance of 1:24-2:5 in the flow of Colossians. The author is not merely arguing for obedience to Paul. As has been mentioned already, there is an interweaving in this passage of appeal to ethos and lofty description of the goal. There is a dual nature of this passage so that it is not mere introduction to Paul, but a carefully crafted image given to the Colossians of Jesus as “the hope of glory” and the source of “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Reducing 1:24-2:5 to a defense of Pauline authority or a mere introduction to Paul obscures the role this passage has in the argumentation of Colossians.¹³

¹¹ Petr Pokorný, *Colossians: A Commentary*, translated by Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), vi.

¹² Pokorný, 95.

¹³ Pokorný is not the only commentator who sees the emphasis of Colossians 1:24-2:5 as not being on the heavy Christology that is prevalent in 1:1-2:5. Eduard Lohse (*Colossians and Philemon*, [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971], 68) describes this pericope very similarly as “explain[ing] the significance of the apostle for the whole church and thus also for the community at Colossae.” Somewhat similarly, Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke (*Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, translated by Astrid B. Beck [AB; New York: Doubleday, 1994], 252) argue that this passage

The Structure and Function of Colossians 1:24-2:5

One challenge to the thesis that Colossians 1:24-2:5 has a dual purpose is the chiastic structure. Although a number of commentators have not argued for a chiastic structure to this passage¹⁴ and some have presented a different chiastic arrangement from others,¹⁵ it seems likely that Paul intended to arrange this passage chiastically, as follows:

- A χαίρω, σάρξ (1:24)
- B ἀποκρύπτω (1:26)
- C γνωρίζω, πλοῦτος, μυστήριον, Χριστός (1:27)
- D ἀγωνίζομαι (1:29)
- D' ἀγών (2:1)
- C πλοῦτος, ἐπίγνωσις, μυστήριον, Χριστός (2:2)
- B' ἀπόκρυφος (2:3)
- A' σάρξ, χαίρω (2:5)¹⁶

Because at the center of this chiasm is Paul's struggle, it can be argued that the main point of this passage is to highlight Paul's character. This hypothesis is also supported by the heavy concentration of first-person singular language.

A number of observations, however, lead to the conclusion that Paul is doing much more than this. First, in 2:4 Paul says the reason for saying these things is "in order that no one may delude you with plausible arguments." The reference to the Colossians' good order and firmness of their faith in 2:5 also shows that though Paul

functions to underline "how important this out-of-the-way community of Colossae is to" Paul.

¹⁴ Surprisingly neither Lohse nor Barth and Blanke mention the chiastic structure.

¹⁵ David Garland, *Colossians and Philemon* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 117, arranges the passage into two separate chiasms, focusing on A) the apostle's sufferings/struggle/presence (1:24, 29; 2:1, 5); B) the apostle's commission (1:25a-c, 28; 2:2a, 4); and C) the apostle's message (1:25d-27; 2:2b-3). The advantage of this outline is it makes the message – the mystery – the center of both chiasms. The problem with this structure is that there are no significant words in common between the verses he lines up in each chiasm, and the parallelism between 2:1 and 2:5 seems to be forced.

¹⁶ For similar chiastic arrangements, see Dunn, 128; Pokorný, 108; and Moo, 148.

begins the pericope with his sufferings, he is not ending there, but is moving to the goal that he has for the Colossians.

Second, Jerry Sumney has observed that when Paul appeals to his sufferings to establish ethos, he usually does this to “support the main point of the letter by giving an illustration.”¹⁷ That Paul is doing this here is confirmed by the amount of space that is devoted in the passage to teach further on the centrality of Christ rather than to continue establishing ethos (1:26-27; 2:2b-3). Notice also that both times Paul speaks of struggling (1:29; 2:1), he gives the reason for struggling, as if to communicate to the Colossians not only the fact that Paul struggles for them, but also that they too should struggle for the same thing that Paul does. In 1:28 we see that Paul toils and struggles to “present everyone mature in Christ.”¹⁸ In 2:2 we see that he struggles “that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery.”

Finally, we should note both the heavy Christocentric thrust of this passage (nowhere else is the mystery of God simply described as “Christ”) and the strong emphasis on “knowledge and wisdom” language (“make known,” 1:27; “wisdom,” 1:28 and 2:3; “understanding,” 2:2; “knowledge,” 2:2 and 2:3).¹⁹ This suggests that the passage is not merely about appreciating Paul, but also about desiring knowledge and wisdom, which Paul centers in Christ. Therefore there seems to be a dual purpose of this

¹⁷ Jerry L. Sumney, “The Function of Ethos in Colossians,” pages 301-315 in *Rhetoric, Ethic, and Moral Persuasion in Biblical Discourse*, ed. Thomas H. Olbricht and Anders Eriksson (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 310.

¹⁸ He does this by “warning [νουθετοῦντες] everyone and teaching [διδάσκοντες] everyone with all wisdom [ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ].” Later in Colossians Paul will encourage the Colossians to do the same, “teaching [διδάσκοντες] and admonishing [νουθετοῦντες] one another in all wisdom [ἐν πάσῃ σοφίᾳ]” (3:16).

¹⁹ Moo, 148.

passage – 1) to inspire the Colossians to listen to Paul through ethos, and 2) to teach what this inspiration should lead the Colossians to: a Christ-centered quest for wisdom and knowledge.²⁰ This understanding of the purpose of Colossians 1:24-2:5 will assist us in determining the meaning and function of μυστήριον in the passage while also being reinforced by our examination of the mystery.

The Meaning and Function of Μυστήριον in Colossians 1:24-2:5

Recent scholarship is largely in agreement that the word μυστήριον has its roots not in the Greco-Roman mystery cults, but in Jewish literature, beginning with its use in Daniel 2, translating the Aramaic word ܩܕܝܫ.²¹ The word came to have eschatological overtones, often related “to the defeat of the evil kingdom or establishment of the divine kingdom” or to other concepts in Daniel.²² G. K. Beale argues that the Qumran community used this word to speak of fulfillment of prophecy because they “believed that they had specially given insight into the meaning of prophecies which the Old Testament prophets themselves did not have.”²³ Μυστήριον, then, became a key term to refer to the gospel message, particularly to the elements of the gospel that were “hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to [God’s] saints” (Col 1:26; cf. Eph 3:4; Rom 16:25-26). With this background in mind we will explore the sense of the word in

²⁰ Jerry Sumney, 314, similarly argues that the two functions of ethos in Colossians are: 1) to “build goodwill with the recipients. . . . So Paul has their best interest at heart as he opposes the visionaries’ teaching and exhorts the readers to the proper manner of life” and 2) “Paul’s sufferings serve a mimetic function; they provide an example to follow, not directly by enduring persecution but by faithful obedience to the commands given in the letter and more generally in the gospel Paul preached.”

²¹ Karl Prümm, “Zur Phänomenologie des paulinischen Myssterion und dessen seelischer Aufnahme: Eine Übersicht,” *Biblica* 37 (1956): 135–161; Carson, 413. But see Caragounis, *ibid.*

²² Beale, *John’s Use*, 216.

²³ Beale, *John’s Use*, 218.

Colossians 1:24-2:5 and determine why Paul chose to use the word three times in this passage.

In 1:26, τὸ μυστήριον is in apposition with τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ and is the object of the verb πληρῶσαι. Most scholars understand ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ to refer here to the gospel message, as it commonly does in Paul.²⁴ Πληρῶσαι τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ would then mean “to bring the gospel to completion [by proclaiming it to all].”²⁵ This seems to be the sense of the expression πεπληρωκέναι τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ in Romans 15:19.

Alternatively, G. K. Beale suggests that we understand ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ to refer here to the Old Testament,²⁶ in which case the phrase would mean “to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies.” Perhaps Beale’s interpretation of this verse stems from his understanding that μυστήριον is typically used in the New Testament to indicate “(1) that Old Testament prophecy is beginning fulfillment, and (2) that this fulfillment is unexpected from the former Old Testament vantage point.”²⁷ But even with this understanding of μυστήριον some difficulties arise. Nowhere in the New Testament is the Old Testament equated with μυστήριον, and it seems that Beale would say that the

²⁴ For example, see 1 Cor 14:36; 2 Cor 2:17; 4:2; 1 Thess 2:13; 2 Tim 2:9; Titus 2:5; etc.

²⁵ Dellling, “πληρῶω,” *TDNT* 6:286-298; Dunn, 118f.

²⁶ G. K. Beale, “Colossians,” pages 841-870 in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old*, edited by G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 857. Πληρῶω is often used to speak of “fulfilling” OT prophecies in the Gospels and Acts, but not as much so in Paul’s letters. Some uses of πληρῶω in this sense in Paul are Rom 8:4 (τὸ δικαίωμα τοῦ νόμου πληρωθῆ); Rom 13:8 (ὁ γὰρ ἀγαπῶν τὸν ἕτερον νόμον πεπλήρωκεν); and Gal 5:14 (ὁ γὰρ πᾶς νόμος ἐν ἐνὶ λόγῳ πεπλήρωται). All of these occurrences speak of the law or the righteous requirement of the law being fulfilled, but it is not a far stretch from there to argue that Paul could be using πληρῶω in this sense with the prophetic Scriptures, especially considering the wide use of this meaning elsewhere in the New Testament (Mt 1:22; 2:15, 17, 23; 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; 13:35; 21:4; 26:54, 56; 27:9; Mk 14:49; Lk 4:21; 24:44; Jn 12:38; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12; 19:24, 36; Ac 1:16; 3:18; 13:27; Rom 8:4; 13:8; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:23; etc.). For more on the uses of πληρῶω, see Dellling, *TDNT* 6:286-298.

²⁷ Beale, *John’s Use*, 220.

mystery is not the Old Testament prophecies themselves, but the unexpected fulfillment of those prophecies. And yet, here we find the two ideas equated if ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ refers to the Old Testament. The mystery is not something that needs fulfilled, but it is the fulfillment of prophecies that previously needed fulfilled. Therefore it is unlikely that Paul is saying that the οἰκονομία that was given to him was “to fulfill the Old Testament prophecies, which are the mystery.” Rather we should, along with most interpreters, understand the οἰκονομία to be “to make the word of God – the mystery – fully known.”

At this point we should examine more closely the word οἰκονομία. Peter O’Brien notes that this word is often used in conjunction with μυστήριον, and he therefore suggests that μυστήριον is important for understanding the meaning of οἰκονομία in Paul.²⁸ Most scholars understand οἰκονομία here to refer to an office that was given to Paul or to the task that goes along with that office, but elsewhere οἰκονομία can refer not only to human administration, but also to “God’s administration of the world and salvation.”²⁹ O’Brien believes there are three reasons to understand God’s administration as being intended here: “(a) οἰκονομία τοῦ θεοῦ had this general sense in the Hellenistic world; (b) the genitive τοῦ θεοῦ which is subjective supports this interpretation; and (c) κατὰ (“according to”) suggests the notion of a plan in this context.”³⁰ Others refute this interpretation on the basis that it would be awkward to speak of God’s administration or plan being given to Paul; rather it would be an office or

²⁸ O’Brien, 81.

²⁹ O’Brien, 81. See also John H. P. Reumann, “Oikonomia-Terms in Paul in Comparison with Lucan Heilsgeschichte,” *New Testament Studies* 13 (1967): 147-167, and Michel, “οἰκονομία,” *TDNT* 5:151-153.

³⁰ O’Brien, 81. See also Reumann, 163; Bruce, 84; and C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (CGTC; Cambridge University Press, 1968), 80.

task that is given to him.³¹ But if we consider the content of the οἰκονομία – bringing the mystery of God to its completion – we can see how the two meanings are more closely linked together. Part of God’s administration of things (his οἰκονομία) has been to keep the μυστήριον hidden until the fullness of time (the eschatological νῦν), at which time he would hand that administration over to his servant (διάκονος) to fulfill (πληρῶσαι) it. Therefore O’Brien is probably correct to see a dual meaning here.

This means that what Paul is highlighting here is that God’s management of the world involves bringing this mystery to its fulfillment (complete proclamation). This is reinforced in 1:27, where Paul says ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεὸς γνωρίσαι τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν. The use of θέλω further demonstrates God’s desire to communicate this message (as does the reference to God’s power working in Paul in 1:29). Then the piling on of words to underscore the greatness of the mystery draws more attention to it. Paul could have simply said, “God chose to make known this mystery,” but he added the interrogative pronoun and the words τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης³² to increase the Colossians’ excitement about the mystery. The mystery is what God has long planned and worked out through his sovereign administration of history.

It is also noteworthy that Paul spells out in 1:26 what would be plain merely from the use of the word μυστήριον. It goes without saying in other places in the

³¹ Michel, *TDNT* 5:152 n. 3. Barth and Blanke (259) add that the genitive could be “a genitive *auctoris*, which elevates God as the one who gave Paul his office,” and suggest that the meaning “plan of redemption/decision” is only clearly attested in later literature, so they prefer to understand οἰκονομία as referring to Paul’s office.

³² Lohse, 75, notes that the phrase τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης is a common Pauline expression (Rom 9:23; Eph 1:18; 3:16; Phil 4:19; cf. Rev 5:12) that probably stems from the tendency in the Old Testament for the two ideas to be combined. For example, see LXX Gen 31:16; 3 Kg 3:13; 1 Chr 29:28; Esth 1:4; 10:2; Ps 111:3; Pr 3:16; 8:18; 22:4; Sir 24:17; Ps Sol 1:4.

New Testament that the mystery was previously hidden but has now been revealed. For Paul to make that explicit here, it must have been a significant point for what Paul was trying to accomplish. Perhaps this too increases the Colossians' longing for the mystery, because they see it as something that was unavailable for so long but has now been freely given. Therefore the mystery language is being utilized to communicate the idea of the immediacy of the gospel – now (νῦν) is the fullness of time.

That Paul is highlighting the mystery as something for the Colossians to pursue is further supported by his comment that he rejoices in his sufferings and fills up in his flesh “what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” (1:24). This is a heavily debated verse, so we would not want to rest too much weight on one possible interpretation of it, but it is interesting to note that many scholars see here a reference to the “messianic woes” that were expected in apocalyptic literature to come at the end times.³³ If this interpretation is correct, then already in verse 24 Paul is giving a sense that now is the long-awaited fullness of time. And regardless of the interpretation of this phrase, we can see a sense of the extraordinariness of Christ and the gospel message in that they are worth suffering for.

Paul returns to the topic of mystery in 2:2-3, and once again he introduces it with language that will motivate the hearers. The ultimate goal of Paul’s struggling is that the people he is struggling for would “reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God’s mystery.” The two εἰς phrases are parallel and they represent the goal of the encouragement and the uniting in love that flow out of Paul’s struggles.³⁴ The first phrase underscores the greatness of the understanding that

³³ O’Brien, 78-80; Lohse, 70-72; Dunn, 114-117; Moo, 151-153; Moule, 76; etc.

³⁴ So O’Brien, 94.

Paul wants the Colossians to have, and the second phrase gives the content of what he wants them to know – “God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

The description of Christ as the one “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” is interesting. Clearly Paul is inspiring the readers to want to get knowledge, and then he is saying this treasure is found in Christ. Many have seen an allusion to Proverbs 2 in this passage.³⁵ What few have noticed is the similarity in function between Proverbs 2 and Colossians 1:24-2:5. Proverbs 2 urges the hearer to “hide” (κρύπτω, cf. ἀπόκρυφος in Col 2:3) the speaker’s commands within him, turning his hear to wisdom (σοφία, cf. Col 2:3) and applying his heart (καρδία, cf. Col 2:2) to understanding (σύνεσις, cf. Col 2:2). The hearer is told that if he searches for wisdom and understanding as for treasure (θησαυρός, cf. Col 2:3), he will find wisdom (σοφία again), knowledge (ἐπίγνωσις, cf. Col 2:2), and understanding (σύνεσις again) and be delivered “from the way of evil, from men of perverted speech, who forsake the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness, who rejoice in doing evil and delight in the perverseness of evil, men whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways.” (Prov 2:12-15). Interestingly, this is exactly what Paul is looking for. If, as we have argued, Paul is wrestling in Colossians with how to prevent his readers from being convinced by men of perverted speech, it makes sense that Paul would turn to Proverbs 2 for the answer. The solution in Proverbs is to treasure wisdom and knowledge, and Paul knows that in Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, so he echoes the language of Proverbs 2 to inspire the Colossians to treasure Jesus in a way that will protect them from the deceptive men around them.

³⁵ So Beale, “Colossians,” 859; Moo, 170.

The function, then, of μυστήριον in Colossians 1:24-2:5 is to highlight the immediacy and the extraordinariness of the gospel message – that it is so rich, and at the same time, that it is something that has never been available before. Paul emphasizes this to motivate the Colossian believers to cling to Christ rather than embrace deceptive philosophy. The fact that this is an unprecedented time in history demands for a decisive response. The fact that it is worth suffering for helps the Colossians put things in perspective. The fact that it is the source of all wisdom and knowledge gives them the desire to seek Christ more fully. And the fact that it is God’s plan from the beginning reveals the extraordinariness of the gospel and specifically of Christ.

The Content of the Mystery

Having established the meaning and function of the word μυστήριον in Colossians 1:24-2:5, we now turn to its content. The occurrences of μυστήριον in this passage are fascinating because, unlike a number of the other occurrences in the New Testament, these ones explicitly state the content of the mystery, and more specifically because they sum up the mystery simply in the person of Christ.

The first thing to note here is the words ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν. This phrase could either be modifying the verb, so that God has chosen “to make known *among the Gentiles* what is the richness of the glory of this mystery,”³⁶ or it could be taken as further modifying μυστήριον, so that God has chosen “to make known what is the richness of the glory of *this mystery that is among the Gentiles.*” Of these two views, the first one seems more problematic. First, there is already an indirect object with the main verb that expresses *to whom* the richness of the glory of this mystery is made known, so adding

³⁶ So O’Brien, 86; Moo, 158; Dunn, 121.

“among the Gentiles” to that verb would be redundant. One could respond that the latter clarifies which saints are being referred to, but it does not seem like Paul would say God wanted to make known the greatness of the mystery only to whichever saints were Gentiles. Another alternative would be to understand that it is *through* the Gentiles that the saints learn the richness of the glory of the mystery, but the wording would still be awkward. Furthermore, the phrase is far removed from the main verb and placed in a position between μυστήριον and the relative pronoun. It is unlikely that Paul would place a prepositional phrase that modifies the verb between a relative pronoun and the referent for that pronoun. Instead, this phrase must be there because it modifies the word right before it, μυστήριον.

This also makes sense in light of how often the μυστήριον refers to some aspect of the Gentile inclusion. In Ephesians 3:1-13, which has strong parallels with Colossians 1:24-2:5, the μυστήριον is “that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” G. K. Beale further notes parallels between Eph 2:14-18 and Col 2:16-22, where “the former ethnic markers of God’s people [are] replaced” with Christ.³⁷ According to Beale, then, the mystery in Colossians is the same as the mystery in Ephesians: “that Gentiles could become a part of latter-day Israel by not submitting to the identification marks of the old theocracy but only submitting to and having the Messiah as their sole identification.”³⁸ The fact that the mystery is “this mystery among the Gentiles” also highlights the unprecedented nature of the gospel, especially as it applies to the Gentile believers in

³⁷ Beale, *John’s Use*, 248.

³⁸ Beale, *John’s Use*, 248.

Colossae – what no one knew would be fully available to the Gentiles (inclusion apart from identification with Israel) is now available.

At the same time, the mystery is not limited to the fact that Christ is among the Gentiles. *Christ himself* is the mystery (2:3). Who he is – his very nature – was hidden for ages and generations. Many Old Testament prophecies predicted the Christ and various aspects of his life, but it is a mystery that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden in him (not in Torah). It is a mystery that he would be “in” the Gentiles. The fact that Christ is all and is in all (3:11) is a secret that was hidden until the New Testament proclamation.

Interestingly, most scholars who adopt the view that ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν modifies μυστήριον, making it “the mystery among the Gentiles,” also understand Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν as referring to “Christ among you [Gentiles],” as if the mystery here is merely the Gentile inclusion in Christ. For example, Eduard Lohse says, “Doubtless this does not mean the pneumatic indwelling of the Lord in the hearts of believers, but rather the Christ preached among the nations, the Lord proclaimed in the community’s midst.”³⁹ But the fact that it is a “mystery among the Gentiles” does not mean that the content of the mystery is merely Christ’s presence among the Gentiles. On the contrary there are a number of reasons to see the mystery as being the indwelling of Christ in believers.

First of all, we have already seen that Paul is highlighting Christ in this passage as superior to all other philosophies and that Paul is using the μυστήριον language to draw attention to Christ. It is Christ who is the mystery, not merely the access that Gentiles have. This is why in 2:3 there is no reference to the Gentiles, but the

³⁹ Lohse, 76. See also Pokorný, 103; Joachim Gnilka. *Der Kolosserbrief* (HTKNT; Freiburg: Herder, 1980), 102.

mystery is simply “Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (2:3). In fact, the Gentile inclusion is not a theme at all in Colossians, as this is the only reference in the entire letter to the Gentiles.⁴⁰

The second problem with Lohse’s view is that it makes the wording redundant. Why say, “This mystery that is in the Gentiles, which is Christ in you [Gentiles]”? If what Paul meant by ἐν ὑμῖν was merely that Christ is available to the Gentiles, he could have said τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο, ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν. Rather, he says, “this mystery among the Gentiles, which is *Christ in you*.” The ἐν ὑμῖν phrase has its own significance in the sentence apart from the idea of Christ being “among the Gentiles.”

The third problem with Lohse’s view is that it does not account for the fact that in other Pauline literature the *indwelling* of Christ in believers is given as the source of hope. We see this most clearly in Ephesians 3:17, which is part of the prayer that follows the parallel mystery passage in Ephesians. There Paul prays for the Ephesians to be strengthened “so that Christ may dwell in [their] hearts through faith,” and that thereby they may “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge.” If in Ephesians the route to comprehending the depths and knowing the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge is having Christ in one’s heart, it is not surprising that the mystery in Colossians would be Christ *in* the believer, the hope of glory and the source of “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Similarly, in Romans 8:10, it is “if Christ is in you” that you have hope that “he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life

⁴⁰ Moo, 158. Moo also notes that Colossians omits all of the material about the inclusion of the Gentiles that is contained in Ephesians. To this we could add the observation that there is almost no overlap in wording between the content of the mystery given in Ephesians 3 and the content of the mystery given in Colossians 1-2. This is not to suggest that they are different mysteries, but clearly Paul is highlighting entirely different elements of the mystery in Colossians versus Ephesians.

to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” Also in Galatians, when Paul speaks of his death to the law, he says, “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but *Christ who lives in me*” (2:20). So the idea of Christ indwelling in believers is important to Paul and that is what is being expressed here as the mystery.⁴¹

A fourth reason to understand Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν as a reference to the indwelling of Christ is the presence of this concept elsewhere in Colossians. Already two verses after this one Paul speaks of Christ’s energy powerfully working “in” (ἐν) him. This also seems to be the implication of 2:9-10, where it says “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily [in Christ], and you *have been filled* in him.” Just as Christ’s body is filled with the deity, so are the bodies of those who are in him. Paul continues in that passage to speak of the mystical connection between believers and Christ in circumcision and baptism. For these reasons it is preferable to understand Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν as a reference to the indwelling of Christ in believers.⁴² This is the hope of glory.

A final observation about the content of the mystery comes from the phrase ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης. Hope is a significant term in Colossians. In 1:5, Paul cites hope as the source of the faith and love that is in the Colossians. Then in 1:22-23, which sets the stage for our pericope, Paul says the Colossians will be presented “holy and blameless and above reproach” before Christ, “if indeed [they] continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the *hope* of the gospel.” We see here Paul’s view that the Colossians’ *hope* is what will keep them on the right course. They will only stay

⁴¹ To this we could add the many instances of the Spirit being said to dwell in the believer. Eduard Schweizer has noted that Colossians often speaks of “Christ” using language that elsewhere would be used of “the Spirit,” so it is not surprising that Colossians would speak of Christ dwelling within a believer. See “Christus und Geist im Kolosserbrief,” *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, edited by Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 297-313, though Schweizer takes a different view from this paper on the meaning of this phrase.

⁴² For another refutation of Lohse’s view, see Dunn, 122.

“stable and steadfast” if they do not shift from the hope they have in Christ. This is why in Paul’s big conclusion to the exhortation to resist the opponents’ teaching he says,

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

The mystery is that Christ would dwell *within* the Colossians. This was unanticipated for ages and generations. The fact that Christ was *in* them gave them hope that when Christ returns, they would receive the long-awaited glory of God. The *imago Dei* will once again fully be upon humans. The Colossians had hope for this because the one in whom the fullness of Deity dwells was in them already. This is what would help the Colossians take their minds off of earthly things – including the “philosophy and empty deceit” of “human tradition” and “the elemental spirits of the world”; the Jewish festivals, new moons, and Sabbaths; asceticism and the worship of angels; and the regulations of this world – and set their minds on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

For these reasons we should understand the mystery as being the very person of Christ in all the unexpectedness of who he is – that *in him* alone is wisdom and knowledge, that *in him* is the hope of glory, that he is in the Gentiles as fully as in the Jews, and not just dwelling among them, but in their very hearts, strengthening them as he strengthened Paul to be able to struggle on their behalf (1:29).

Conclusion

In Colossians 1:24-2:5 Paul equips the Colossians to stand firm in their faith and reject all other philosophy by portraying Christ as the source of all wisdom and knowledge. He uses ethos and pathos to depict Christ as the long-awaited and yet unexpected hope, who is immeasurably more than all we could ask for or imagine. He uses mystery language to highlight the immediacy and the extraordinariness of the gospel so that the Colossians will be motivated to pursue Christ all the more. This pericope is not about Paul, but about the one who called him, whom he serves, and as quickly as Paul builds ethos with the Colossians he turns their eyes to things above so that they can walk in the one on whom is their focus, with all his energy working in them in power.

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