

Τὸ Μυστήριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ ἰν Ἐφεσίοις 3

by

David B. Sloan

B.S., The Ohio State University, 1999
M.Div., Ashland Theological Seminary, 2004

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Introduction

In recent biblical scholarship there has been an increased interest in the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, and the question of how Jesus is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies is riddled with interpretive challenges. Among these challenges is the use of the word *μυστήριον* and the related “hidden-revealed” language found throughout the New Testament. If the gospel truths are the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, how can they be said to be a “mystery that was hidden for ages in God” (Eph 3:9; cf. Col 1:26)?¹ Paramount to understanding the *μυστήριον* language of the New Testament is an accurate understanding of Ephesians 3:1-13, a passage that along with its parallel in Colossians 1:24-2:5, uses the word more than any other passage in the New Testament (three times); that clearly spells out the content of the *μυστήριον* (verse 6); and that speaks of former hiddenness (verse 9) and present revelation (verses 3 and 5). Therefore this paper will examine the content and function of *μυστήριον* in Ephesians 3 in order to make conclusions about the use of *μυστήριον* throughout the New Testament and the relationship between the testaments. We will first examine the content of the *μυστήριον* in Ephesians 3. Second, we will briefly consider whether or not the content of the *μυστήριον* is the same for every Pauline use of the word. Third, we will inquire as to the extent to which the mystery was hidden in the Old Testament and revealed in the New. Fourth, we will discuss the comprehensibility of the *μυστήριον*. Finally, we will summarize the conclusions of our study.

¹ All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

*The Content of the Μυστήριον
According to Ephesians 3:6*

On the surface, determining the content of the μυστήριον in Ephesians 3 is simple. Paul spells it out in verse 6: “the Gentiles are fellow heirs [συγκληρονόμα], fellow body members [σύσσωμα], and fellow partakers of the promise [συμμέτοχα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας] in Christ Jesus, through the gospel.” This is not, however, an all-encompassing statement of the content of the mystery of Christ, as will be shown below. To determine the content in more detail, then, we must look closely at what Paul is communicating in verse 6 and then see what other insights we can glean from the rest of the passage as to the content of the μυστήριον in Ephesians 3.

Many scholars have observed the significance of the threefold repetition of the συν- prefix in verse 6. Indeed, the word σύσσωμος is not found in any Greek literature before Ephesians, and συμμέτοχος is very rare.² Paul is intentionally repeating this prefix to emphasize unity between the Gentile believers he is addressing and those with whom they are fellow heirs, fellow body members, and fellow partakers of the promise. He does not mention Jews because it was not a mystery that the Jews were heirs, a body, and partakers of the promise, but it is clear that he is uniting Gentiles to Jews because this is how he used the συν- prefix previously (2:19, 21, 22) and because if the Gentiles are being addressed as the partners of another party, the other is clearly Jewish believers.³ Sigurd Grindheim argues that this prefix is the focus of Eph 3:6, highlighting that the mystery is the very fact that Gentiles share these things with Jews.⁴ Similarly, Frank Thielman says, “The piling up of words compounded with *syn* (‘with’)

² Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 446.

³ So Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 234 n. 39.

shows [that] the mystery is *the equal footing that Gentiles and Jews now have together in the people of God.*⁵

Paul chooses three terms to communicate this “equal footing” between Gentiles and Jews: συγκληρονόμος, σύσσωμος, and συμμετέτοχος. The fact that the Gentiles are heirs with the Jews is fascinating, since the κληρονόμος word group was often used in the LXX to refer to Israel’s inheritance of the promised land!⁶ Galatians 3:29-4:7 and Romans 4:13-14 both use this term (without the prefix) to communicate the idea that Gentile believers are heirs of the promise, of the blessing that was Abraham’s, and of the whole world.⁷ There was a great privilege to being a descendent of Abraham, and the mystery is that it is not the physical descendents or those who obey the law who are heirs, but those who walk by the faith of Abraham.

The σῶμα word group is particularly important in Ephesians. In Eph 1:23, Paul referred to the church as Christ’s σῶμα, with Christ being the head. Then in 2:15-16, where Paul is discussing the bringing near of the Gentiles that has happened in Christ, he says that Christ’s purpose was “that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body

⁴ Sigurd Grindheim, “What the OT Prophets Did Not Know: The Mystery of the Church in Eph 3,2-13,” *Biblica* 84 (2003): 532.

⁵ Frank S. Thielman, “Ephesians,” pages 813-833 in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 819, emphasis added. See also Grindheim, 532; O’Brien, 234 n. 39; and Hoehner, 445. Also see Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul’s Jewish Identity and Ephesians* (SNTSMS 130; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), especially pages 220-221 where Yee claims that perhaps the main issue Ephesians is written to address is the Gentile equality with Jews. While this may be an overstatement, Yee’s work shows the importance of Jewish-Gentile equality in Ephesians.

⁶ Foerster and J. Herrmann, “κληρονόμος,” *TDNT* 3:767-785. So Grindheim, 532.

⁷ The fact that Paul adds the prefix here whereas he does not in Galatians 3 and Romans 4 may suggest that the emphasis there is more on the Gentiles being heirs whereas here it retains that element but places emphasis on the unity with the Jews. Of course, Romans 8:17 adds the prefix and is not speaking of Jews and Gentiles being co-heirs, but is emphasizing that Christians are heirs right alongside Christ.

[σῶμα] through the cross” (ESV). Then repeatedly through the paraenesis of Ephesians (4:1-6:20) he makes reference to the church as Christ’s body (4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30). So the picture Paul is communicating when he says the Gentiles are σύσσωμα in 3:6 is one of Jews and Gentiles together being one body with Christ as the head.⁸

The third term Paul uses to describe what the Gentiles are according to the mystery is συμμετοχα τῆς ἑπαγγελίας. Here the fact that the Gentiles have a share in the promise is emphasized. The idea is not too far from that expressed by συγκληρονόμα earlier, but this term serves to strengthen the push toward *unity between Jews and Gentiles* and also to solidify the thought that *the promise to Abraham is fully given to Gentile believers*. Unity is emphasized by the fact that this word is used in Aristotle to refer to “partners,” such as “heat and cold” and “wet and dry,” which are partners together in the service of plants.⁹ It is also used in Eph 5:7 to communicate the idea of casting one’s lot in with the godless.¹⁰ Therefore the idea of being “in it together” is communicated. But the word also emphasizes an *equal* sharing of the promise. The fact that Gentiles are partakers of the promise is nothing new, since the promise itself in Gen 12:1-3 says that the Gentiles would benefit from it. Here, however, the idea is that the Gentiles share in the promise *to the same extent* as the Jews! Therefore we can conclude from Ephesians 3:6 that the “mystery of Christ” (3:4) is *an unanticipated equality between Jew and Gentile and a full sharing together in the inheritance of the promises given to God’s people*. This happens only “in Christ Jesus”¹¹ and “through the gospel.”

⁸ So C. C. Caragounas, *The Ephesian Mystērion: Meaning and Content* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1977), 103.

⁹ Hoehner, 446, referencing Aristotle *De Plantis* 1.1 β816b.20.

¹⁰ Hoehner, 446.

*The Content of the Μυστήριον According
To the Rest of Ephesians 3:1-13*

Though Paul spells out the content of the mystery of Christ in 3:6, there is more to be said about this mystery, as a study of the surrounding verses will show us. It is worth noting that Paul says in verse 3 that he has already written briefly about the mystery being made known to him. Most scholars agree that Paul is referring to something he wrote earlier in this letter, whether Eph 1:9-10, where he first spoke of the μυστήριον, or Eph 2:11-22, where he speaks of Jews and Gentiles as having been made into one body, or a combination of the two passages.¹² We would expect to find elsewhere in Ephesians, then, the content of the μυστήριον, which we are understanding from 3:6 to be the unexpected equality between Jew and Gentile and the full sharing in the promises to God's people.

Certainly Eph 2:11-22 has a number of close links – the Gentiles were previously “alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise” (2:12; cf. 3:6 – “partakers of the promise”), “but now in Christ Jesus” (2:13, cf. 3:6) the Gentiles have been brought near, and he has made the two (Jew and Gentile) into “one new man” (2:15; cf. 3:6 - σύσσωμα) and reconciled them to God, giving them “access” (2:18, cf. 3:12) to the Father. So we see a number of similarities between what

¹¹ There is a debate over whether “in Christ Jesus” goes with all three ideas or merely the third. This does not have a major impact on how we understand the mystery, but it seems that Paul's teaching throughout Ephesians and elsewhere is that it is in Christ and through the gospel that the Gentiles are heirs and are part of Christ's body.

¹² Grindheim, 535; Hoehner, 428; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* (WBC 42; Nashville: Nelson, 1990), 175; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians: A Commentary* (trans. Helen Heron; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 132; O'Brien, 229; Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 329; Caragounas, 100; Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians* (The NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 160; John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Bible Speaks Today; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979), 117; Francis Foulkes, *The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 92. *Contra* Llynfi Davies, who suggests that it is referring to Rom 16:25-27 (“I wrote afore in few words’ [Eph. iii.3],” *ExpTim* 46 [1935]: 568).

has been done in Christ for the Gentiles in 2:11-22 and what is the content of the *μυστήριον* in 3:6. Presumably, Paul expected the reader (or hearer) upon reading 2:11-22 to understand his insight into the mystery of Christ (3:4), because 2:11-22 is an unpacking of the mystery.¹³

There are also connections in Eph 1:9-10 with our passage of interest. There the mystery is called “the mystery of God’s will,” which is “according to his good pleasure, which he set forth in Christ for the administration [*οἰκονομίαν*; cf. 3:2, 9] of the fullness of time, to unite [*ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι*] all things in Christ [cf. 3:6], things in heaven and things on earth – in him.” We should not think that “the mystery of God’s will” in 1:9 is different from “the mystery of Christ” in 3:4. Ephesians 1:9-10 is also part of what Paul has already written in brief about the mystery of Ephesians 3. Just as in 3:6 (and 2:16) the mystery highlights the unification of Jews and Gentiles in Christ, in 1:10 it highlights the unification of all things in Christ.¹⁴ In fact, Eph 1:10 gives what is in some ways a broader definition of the same mystery spelled out in Eph 3 – not only is the mystery that the gospel unites Jews and Gentiles in Christ, but that all things are united in him. So the three elements of the mystery of Christ in Eph 3:6 are not an exhaustive description of the content of the mystery that Paul has already written about briefly.

More insight can be gleaned from Ephesians 1:9-10. The word *οἰκονομίαν* occurs there, as it does twice in Ephesians 3. O’Brien has observed that this

¹³ There are some elements of 2:11-22 that go beyond what is expressed in 3:6. For example, in verse 15 Paul says Christ has abolished “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances,” and in verses 21-22 Paul shares that the church is a temple in the Lord. Are these, then, components of the mystery that are not included in chapter 3? Or are they not part of the mystery but merely accompany it as truths that were revealed in the past? Surely Ezekiel speaks to future of the law and the temple, but could it be said that these truths were revealed to him or were they hidden in the past and only now revealed? Because Paul does not list these truths as part of the *μυστήριον* it is beyond the scope of this paper to address these questions, but they do demand further study.

¹⁴ Notice the emphatic repetition of “in him” in 1:10.

word is often linked to the word μυστήριον (Eph 1:10; 3:2, 9; Col 1:25; cf. οἰκονόμος in 1 Cor 4:1).¹⁵ It can have different meanings, referring 1) to God’s administration of the world and of salvation or 2) to the office or task of administration as given to someone such as the Apostle Paul.¹⁶ Colossians 1 clearly has this latter sense in mind when Paul speaks of the οἰκονομίαν of God given to him for the Colossians.¹⁷ Because of the similar language and the many parallels between Eph 3:1-13 and Col 1:24-2:5, many have assumed that Paul is speaking in Eph 3:2 of the role that God has given him. But this is not the way οἰκονομίαν is used seven verses later, nor in connection to the μυστήριον in chapter 1. Furthermore, Paul words Eph 3:2 differently from Col 1:25. Whereas Colossians 1 speaks of the administration of God given to him for them, Ephesians 3 says: τὴν οἰκονομίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ τῆς δοθείσης μοι εἰς ὑμᾶς. In other words, it is the grace that was given to Paul, not the οἰκονομίαν, as in Colossians. Why does Paul choose to word it this way? Perhaps he is highlighting *God’s* administration of the mystery in giving grace to Paul so that he could in turn give it to them. It was then *God’s* administration of things that made it so the mystery was made known to Paul by revelation. Paul is speaking this way because the very purpose for his digression was that the Ephesians would not “lose heart” over Paul’s afflictions (3:13).¹⁸

¹⁵ O’Brien, 227.

¹⁶ John H. P. Reumann, “Oikonomia-Terms in Paul in Comparison with Lucan Heilsgeschichte,” *NTS* 13 (1967): 147-167. *Contra* Caragounas, 97-98.

¹⁷ He may have had both senses in mind in Col 1 (O’Brien, 227-228).

¹⁸ Scholars are pretty much in agreement that Paul was starting to pray in verse 1 and stopped midsentence because he realized he needed to clarify something before he prayed for the Ephesians. It was not that he needed to clarify the mystery; this was spelled out in 1:9-10 and 2:11-22 (though Paul uses the opportunity to spell it out a little more here). Rather, the reason for the digression was Paul’s reference to himself as “the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you Gentiles” (3:1). As Paul is about to pray for God to do for the Ephesians what is humanly impossible (bring them to know the love that surpasses knowledge, etc.), he is faced with the dilemma that some will ask, “How can I know that God will answer your prayer for us if he hasn’t even delivered you from prison?” In fact, many have highlighted the numerous references to “powers and authorities” in Ephesians and that Paul is teaching the

He wants to highlight God’s activity – that God is not aloof or inactive but is doing something unanticipated and unprecedented in disclosing the mystery “that was hidden for ages in God.” Understanding οἰκονομίαν in Ephesians 3:2 this way puts the verse in parallel with 1:9-10 and 3:9, saying that God’s οἰκονομίαν of the fullness of time was a disclosing of the mystery of his will, which is to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth, to sum up¹⁹ all things in Christ, and to bring the Gentiles (those who were far off) near in Christ to experience all the same blessings that have been promised to God’s people.

This leads in to a discussion of 3:8-10 where we see more evidence as to the content of this mystery. Paul says this grace was given: “to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to make visible to all what is the administration of the mystery that was hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that now the manifold wisdom of God might be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies through the church.” There is a logical progression here. By preaching to the Gentiles

superiority of the faithful in Christ to the powers and authorities. The question must be addressed, then, of whether or not God is truly good and powerful when his ambassador is in prison. This leads Paul to highlight the great things that God is doing in this time, in the midst of weakness, and how this plan will be executed to reveal God’s wisdom to the rulers and authorities (3:10). That this is Paul’s intention here is confirmed by how he ends the digression, highlighting the boldness and access with confidence we have through faith in Christ (this is prayer language), and concluding that the Ephesians should not lose heart over Paul’s sufferings. The assumption there is that the Ephesians would have been tempted to lose heart. For more on the purpose of the digression, see Timothy Gombis, “Ephesians 3:2-13: Pointless Digression, or Epite of the Triumph of God in Christ?” *WTJ* 66 (2004): 313-23.

For a similar way of seeing the purpose of the digression, see Nils Alstrup Dahl, “Das Geheimnis der Kirche nach Epheser 3,8-10” in *Studies in Ephesians: Introductory Questions, Text- & Edition-Critical Issues, Interpretation of Texts and Themes* (WUNT 131; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 349-363; repr. from E. Schlink and A. Peters, eds, *Zur Aufbauung des Leibes Christi. Festgabe für Peter Brunner zum 65. Geburtstag* (Kassel: Stauda, 1965). Dahl argues that the purpose of Ephesians is to give the recipients hope and that when Paul comes to chapter 3 he wants them to see what he is through the grace of God just as he has shown them what they are through the grace of God (“Wie der Apostel seine Leser daran erinnert hat, was sie aus Gottes Gnade geworden sind, so erinnert er sie auch daran, was er durch Gottes Gnade ist” [350]).

¹⁹ The word ἀνακεφαλαιῶ that I have translated “unite” in 1:10 has a wide range of meaning from “sum up” to “gather together” to “head up.” For a good discussion of the meaning here as encompassing aspects of all these definitions, see Hoehner, 219-221.

the unfathomable riches of Christ, Paul is making visible to everyone God's administration of the hidden mystery, and by doing this the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies are coming to know the manifold wisdom of God.²⁰ Most scholars agree that verse 10 is not suggesting that the church will preach to rulers and authorities, but rather that when the rulers and authorities see Jews and Gentiles living together in full unity and together sharing the full promise of God, they will finally see the manifold wisdom of God.²¹ But the progression goes deeper than that. Preaching to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ causes all to see how God has administered the mystery, because the mystery includes the riches of Christ being preached to the Gentiles.

This further links Eph 3:1-13 with Col 1:24-2:5, which many have claimed to be parallel passages. In Colossians 1:24-25, "the mystery of God" is Christ himself, "in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (2:3). It is also said to be "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27). The mystery, then, is not merely a unity between Jew and Gentile but an experiencing of all the riches of Christ. Therefore we can modify our description of the content of μυστήριον in Ephesians 3 by saying it is an unanticipated equality between Jew and Gentile and a full sharing together in *all the unfathomable riches of Christ according to God's manifold wisdom!*

Μυστήριον: A Terminus Technicus?

Our study of Ephesians 3 has shown that the mystery of Christ has various elements, some of which may be highlighted in a given passage while others are not particularly referenced. We have seen the links between "the mystery of Christ" in Eph 3

²⁰ Gombis, 320.

²¹ Grindheim, 548. So Dahl: "Die Kirche ist demnach die Manifestation of der Weisheit Gottes" (translation: "The church is therefore the manifestation of the wisdom of God"; Dahl, 351).

and “the mystery of God’s will” in Eph 1 and “the mystery of God” in Col 1:24-2:5. These are not speaking of various “mysteries,” but of one univocal idea. Can we conclude from this that the referent of μυστήριον is this same mystery in every Pauline usage? A detailed look at each Pauline use is beyond the scope of this paper, but a preliminary investigation can be made.

It is interesting to note that of the twenty times Paul uses the word μυστήριον, fifteen times it is singular and accompanied by a definite article.²² In fact, this is true of every occurrence of the word outside of 1 Corinthians. Often there is a genitive phrase attached to give more specificity, but these phrases are not usually set in contrast to one another. So in Eph 3 we see Paul speaking of “the mystery” – as if just that word by itself communicates a particular mystery and no more specificity is needed – before he ever calls it “the mystery of Christ” (3:4). Therefore it is not surprising that the various mystery passages have so much overlap. “The mystery” without any modifier (Eph 3:3; Col 1:26; and Rom 16:25-27) always refers to the same thing in Paul. And at the end of Ephesians when Paul asks for prayer that he may boldly proclaim “the mystery of the gospel” without describing it more, it is likely that this too is the same mystery he has spoken of throughout Ephesians. This is further evidenced by the fact that in Eph 6:20 he says he is an ambassador “in chains” for the gospel (cf. “prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles” in 3:1).

If these four phrases (“the mystery,” “the mystery of his will,” “the mystery of Christ,” and “the mystery of the gospel”) always have the same referent (and there is nothing in the context of these passage that goes against this claim), that accounts for nine of the twenty occurrences of μυστήριον in Paul. To this we could add the phrase

²² Sixteen out of twenty-one if we include 1 Cor 2:1, where there is textual uncertainty.

“the mystery of God,” which occurs in Colossians 2:3 and in the context there is referring to the same thing as “the mystery” of Col 1:26 that we have already seen is parallel to Eph 3. This brings us to the one or two other passages that modify μυστήριον with the “of God” genitive. Both are problematic.

First Corinthians 2:1 is problematic because there is a textual variant. Scholars are almost equally divided as to whether μυστήριον or μαρτύριον is the better reading, therefore we did not count this above when we spoke of twenty occurrences of μυστήριον in Paul, but this reference is worth looking at. The referent in 1 Cor 2, though not as clearly spelled out as in Eph 3, is closely related to the idea expressed in the following verse, namely, “Christ and him crucified.” While some may argue that this has more of a christological focus whereas our passage has more of an ecclesiological focus, this view is unwarranted, since the two have so much overlap, as can be seen by the heavy christology of Eph 1 and Col 1:24-2:5 and the reference to “in Christ” in Eph 3:6. This passage, if μυστήριον is the better reading, highlights the christocentric nature of the same mystery of God.

First Corinthians 4:1 is problematic in that it does not speak of “the mystery of God” as Col 2:3 does, but “the mysteries of God” (plural). Could there be more than one mystery that fits in the “mysteries of God” category? Perhaps it is best to see this as a way of emphasizing the multi-faceted nature of the mystery of God that we have already been establishing a picture of. Paul does not in 1 Corinthians seem to be teaching many mysteries, but the application of the one mystery of Christ to all of life. Therefore it may be that “the mysteries of God” and “the mystery of God” have the same referent, just with the former focusing on the many components of that same mystery.

Other passages are unique for various reasons: speaking of plural “mysteries” (1 Cor 13:2 and 14:2), having a genitive phrase that may represent a contrast to the mystery of *Christ* (“the mystery of lawlessness” in 2 Thess 2:7), or by speaking of “this mystery” (Rom 11:25-27; Eph 5:32) or “a mystery” (1 Cor 15:51) followed by a description of the mystery being referred to. In addition to these are the two occurrences in 1 Tim 3 (“the mystery of faith” in 3:9 and “the mystery of godliness” in 3:16). These passages require a deeper analysis than can be broached here, but our definition of the mystery of Christ based on Eph 3 and the many parallels gives a standard to which these passages can be compared to determine if μυστήριον is a terminus technicus in the New Testament. Before leaving this question to further research, however, we will examine one of Paul’s unique uses of μυστήριον, because it is of particular interest due to its proximity to Eph 3.

The occurrence of μυστήριον in Ephesians 5:25-33 is interesting because it is the only one out of the ten occurrences of the word in Ephesians-Colossians that does not clearly have the same referent. In Eph 5, Paul urges husbands to love their wives as Christ loved the church. We should particularly notice that Paul continues his use of σῶμα language here, saying that just as Christ loved the church (his body), “so husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies [σώματα].” In verse 30 he makes the link explicit, “For we are members of his body.” Then he quotes Genesis 2:24 to give the basis for thinking of the husband and wife as “one flesh” and therefore one body, and he says, “This mystery is great, but I am speaking about Christ and the church.” If we keep in mind how closely related the σῶμα language is to mystery of Christ, we move closer to the possibility that the referent of the μυστήριον of Ephesians 5 is not the relationship

between a husband and a wife or how that reflects the relationship between Christ and the church, but the very fact that just as a husband and wife are one flesh, Christ and his church are one body. This, then, is very similar language to Ephesians 1, where all things are summed up in Christ, who is later said to be the head over the church, which is his body. And it is also similar to the *μυστήριον* in Ephesians 3, which says in Christ the Gentiles will be one body together with the Jews.

Again, this question demands more study, but our analysis of Eph 3 and the multifaceted nature of the mystery of Christ opens up the possibility that every reference to *μυστήριον* in Paul (perhaps in the NT?) refers to the same thing, namely Christ as the summing up of all things, uniting all things in himself, and giving Gentiles in equal proportion to the Jews all the riches of the inheritance that is in him. Karl Prümm has similarly argued that *μυστήριον* is the word Paul uses to refer to “the divine salvation enterprise” (*das göttliche Heilsunternehmen*) and says this is the meaning of *μυστήριον* in Paul wherever the context is related to God’s salvation enterprise. Then he makes the following statement that this study has suggested:

Bei Licht besehen lassen sich aber sämtliche *mysterion*-Vorkommen bei Paulus auf solche soteriologische Zusammenhänge zurückführen oder doch irgendwie mit ihnen in Verbindung bringen. Für die bekannten fünf (oder, bei Doppelzählung des umfangreichen Zusammenhangs von Eph, sechs) grossen soteriologischen Mysterientexte ist das unmittelbar einleuchtend, ebenso für das ‘Geheimnis des Glaubens’ von 1 Tim 3, 9. Aber es gilt auch für das *mysterion* der Judenbekehrung von Röm 11, 25, für das eschatologische *Mysterium* sowohl in 1 Kor 15, 51 wie in 2 Thess 2, 7; selbst die pluralischen Nennungen in 1 Kor 13, 2 und 14, 2 dürften darauf beziehbar sein.²³

²³ Translation: “In the cold light of day, however, all of the occurrences of *mysterion* in Paul can be traced back to such soteriological connections or at least be associated with them in some way. For the known five (or, with the double counting of the extensive context of Eph, six) big soteriological mystery texts, that is immediately clear, also for the ‘secret of the faith’ of 1 Tim 3:9. But it is also true for the *mysterion* of the conversion of the Jews in Rom 11:25 and for the eschatological mystery in 1 Cor 15:51

The Former Hiddenness of the Μυστήριον

Having determined the content of the mystery of Christ, we now address the question of its former hiddenness – specifically, “Was this mystery revealed at all before the time of Christ?” In Ephesians 3:5, Paul says the mystery “was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit.” Some scholars interpret the comparative conjunction “as” (ὥς) as a comparison of degree, meaning the μυστήριον was previously not made known *to the extent that* it has now been made known. On the other hand, many scholars take ὥς to be an absolute comparison, meaning the μυστήριον was previously not made known at all, *whereas* it has now been revealed.²⁴ Beale and Caragounas argue for the former interpretation, pointing out that this is the usual use of the word and that this makes more sense of fact that the Old Testament background can be seen behind the mystery of Ephesians 3.²⁵ Hoehner, on the other hand, gives five reasons for reading ὥς as an absolute comparative here: 1) though less common, this is used elsewhere in the New Testament; 2) verse 9 speaks of the mystery having been “hidden for ages in God”; 3) “the verb ἀπεκαλύφθη in verse 5 means ‘to uncover, unveil’ something that has previously been completely covered or hidden”; 4) the parallel passage in Col 1:26 uses the adversative conjunction δέ instead of ὥς (cf. also Rom 16:25-26); and 5) “the emphatic position of the temporal adverb νῦν, ‘now’” supports this reading.²⁶ In other and 2 Thess 2:7, and even the plural entries in 1 Cor 13:2 and 14:2 could be connected to it.” Karl Prümm, “Zur Phänomenologie des paulinischen Mysterion und dessen seelischer Aufnahme: Eine Übersicht,” *Biblica* 37 (1956): 136.

²⁴ Hoehner, 439-440; Lincoln, 177; Barth, 333-334; Bruce, 313-15; Stott, 117-118; etc.

²⁵ G. K. Beale, *John’s Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSup 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 245 n. 256; Caragounas, 102 n. 24.

²⁶ Hoehner, 439-440. See also Grindheim, 534; O’Brien, 231; and Thielman, 818-819. Thielman, 819, further notes the similar language between Eph 3 and Dan 2 and the fact that in Daniel the

words, the language throughout the passage is language of total hiddenness and stark contrast, and other passages on the mystery explain it to be entirely hidden.

Caragounas defends his view against the objection from Colossians 1:26 by saying that in Colossians Paul is speaking of the mystery being revealed (by the apostles) to the saints, whereas here it is referring to God's revelation to the apostles. In Caragounas' understanding, the mystery is made known by the Holy Spirit and because the Holy Spirit was not given to all God's people in the old covenant, few would have known the mystery. But now it is made known more broadly because the Holy Spirit is given more broadly.²⁷ A few objections can be made to this. First, the contrast between Colossians and Ephesians on this point is not as strong as Caragounas makes it to be. While verse 25 does focus on Paul's making the mystery known, in verse 27 the focus is on God's making the mystery known to his saints. Second, as O'Brien has suggested, the οἰκονομίαν from God in Colossians hints at God's own administration of the mystery as well as Paul's,²⁸ which we have seen in Eph 1 is an administration of the fullness of time, referring to the messianic era. Third, we have already noted the language of total hiddenness and the then-now contrast in Eph 3. Fourth, Paul has elsewhere said that not even the "rulers of this age" understood the mystery (1 Cor 2:8). Therefore it is more likely that Hoehner is correct and the mystery was absolutely hidden in the past and revealed only after the resurrection.

Much of Beale's and Caragounas' hesitation to read this passage this way comes from their understanding that the Old Testament contains teachings of the

mystery was "utterly inaccessible" before God's revelation of it.

²⁷ Caragounas, 102 n. 24.

²⁸ O'Brien, 227-228.

μυστήριον.²⁹ But is it really a contradiction to say that the mystery was not made known to previous generations and then to show how the mystery is revealed through writings of former generations (cf. Rom 16:25-26)? There are three reasons for questioning this assumption.

First of all, just because a human author prophesies a later event doesn't mean he understands it. We see this in John 11:49-52 where Caiaphas "prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation" but did not understand the meaning of what he was saying. In that regard it could be said that Jesus' death for the nation was not made known to Caiaphas. Beale, of course, acknowledges this and even observes that for the Qumran community, the word μυστήριον is often used to connote that the interpreters have "specially given insight into the meaning of the prophecies *which the Old Testament prophets themselves did not have*."³⁰ Could Paul not be using μυστήριον in the same way, so that he is able to see the meaning of the Old Testament texts even though that meaning was not made known to the original human authors?³¹

Second, we have already observed that the content of the μυστήριον can be very multifaceted. If there are Old Testament prophecies that teach some of the components of the μυστήριον, does that prevent us from saying that the μυστήριον was not made known to them? If we can say that, suddenly there is not as much of a chasm

²⁹ Caragounas says to understand ὡς as an absolute comparative is to "stick your head in the sand" because there are obviously so many places the Old Testament reveals part of the mystery (pg. 102 n. 24).

³⁰ Beale, 218, emphasis added.

³¹ Markus Bockmuehl, in his study of Paul's concept of revelation, remarked, "Paul (not unlike some of his Jewish contemporaries) believes that the interpretation of the Scriptures is sealed and concealed until the time of their prophetic realization, i.e. (in his case) in Christ and the gospel. For the Christian interpreter the true meaning of the OT has only now been uncovered in Christ (2 Cor 3:12-18, etc)." (*Revelation and Mystery in Ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity* [WUNT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1990], 155-156)

between Caragounas' and Beale's view on the one hand and Hoehner's on the other, for it merely becomes an issue of semantics. Beale has done well to recognize the Old Testament links behind each occurrence of μυστήριον (to which we could add the allusion to Isa 57 in Paul's discussion of peace being preached to "you who were far off" and "those who were near" in 2:13).³² But we should not assume that saying that the mystery was hidden for ages past precludes the idea that some component of it was recognized to an extent and prophesied.

Third, while Paul was heavily influenced by Isaiah, we must remember that Paul had other influences, such as the remainder of the Old Testament canon and the Damascus road experience. These influences together rightfully led Paul to his new understanding of the μυστήριον, but that does not mean that any one of them fully contained the μυστήριον in and of itself. Beale highlights the role of Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 49 in the development of Paul's thinking on the mystery, but the fact that other texts were needed (such as Genesis 15 and the insight into it that Paul shares in Romans 4) implies that Paul saw a bigger picture than Isaiah (or anyone before the time of Christ), and therefore it is quite possible that he could see the μυστήριον revealed in Isaiah and elsewhere, even if Isaiah himself could not have seen it.

Finally we must remember that not every facet of the μυστήριον is taught from the Old Testament. John Stott puts it well with regard to our passage:

[The Old Testament] promised, for example, that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's posterity; that the Messiah would receive the nations as his inheritance; that Israel would be given as a light to the nations; and that one day the nations would make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and even 'flow to it' like a mighty

³² For a lengthier discussion of the relationship between Eph 2:11-22 and Isa 55-57, see Thielman, 817-818.

river. Jesus also spoke of the inclusion of the Gentiles and commissioned his followers to go and make them his disciples. But what neither the Old Testament nor Jesus revealed was the radical nature of God's plan, which was that the theocracy (the Jewish nation under God's rule) would be terminated, and replaced by a new international community, the church; that this church would be 'the body of Christ', organically united to him; and that Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into Christ and his church on equal terms without any distinction. It was this complete union of Jews, Gentiles and Christ which was radically new, and which God revealed to Paul, overcoming his entrenched Jewish prejudice.³³

Therefore we can say with Paul that the mystery was hidden for ages in God and yet it was prophesied in the Old Testament. No one (not even the rulers and authorities) understood it before Christ, though many of its components were given to prophets in time past, whether they understood them or not. As we look back upon Old Testament revelation we can see the mystery hidden there, but no one saw it before it was revealed in Christ – it was hidden, but it was there.³⁴

The Comprehensibility of the Mystery

This leads to the final question: In what sense, if at all, is the mystery incomprehensible? We have argued that elements of the mystery were present in Old Testament revelation, and yet 1 Corinthians tells us that “none of the rulers of this age

³³ Stott, 118. See also Thielman, 819: “It is true that many OT texts, particularly in Isaiah, speak of the inclusion of Gentiles in the worship of God during the days of Israel's eschatological restoration (e.g., Isa. 2:2-4; 25:6-10; 56:6-8). It is also true that some Jews during the Second Temple period valued this hope (Tob. 13:11; *1 En.* 90:33; *2 Bar.* 72:4). It is not clear from these texts, however, that Gentiles would occupy a place of equal importance with Jews in those days (*pace* Donaldson 1997:69-74), and this is precisely what Paul implies in 3:6 (cf. Grindheim 2003).”

³⁴ D. A. Carson, 427, offers the helpful phrase “hidden in plain view.” Carson argues that much of the Old Testament promise was expressed typologically in Paul's mind and that the original author and recipients may not have had a sense of the ultimate fulfillment in the original prophecies (“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*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid [WUNT 181. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004], 427).

understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8, ESV). This raises the question of whether *μυστήριον* should be translated “mystery” and taken to imply something that is unable to be understood by the human mind, or if it should be translated “secret” and taken to mean something that is fully comprehensible once proclaimed but merely needs to be revealed. Ephesians 3 addresses this question well and in a balanced manner. We will first look at the components of our study that point to an “incomprehensible mystery” and then look at the components that point to a “comprehensible secret.”

First of all, the fact that Paul needs to spell out the content of the *μυστήριον* here, though the Ephesians have “surely” heard about the revelation, implies that their understanding is incomplete.³⁵ Karl Prümm observes, “Das Gleiche, was der Apostel im Eingangshymnus des Eph als einen bei den Lesern aufgrund seiner vorgängigen Mitteilung schon erreichten geistigen Besitz genannt hat, nämlich die Kenntnis des Geheimnisses (1, 8.9), wünscht er ihnen.”³⁶ And so Paul teaches about the *μυστήριον* and prays that God may give them “a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of [their] hearts enlightened, that [they] may know what is the hope to which he has called [them], what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe” (Eph 1:17-19, ESV). The mystery Paul is making known to readers is to some extent beyond comprehension.

³⁵ One could object that Paul may have been spelling things out for those who hadn’t heard of the things the rest of the congregation(s) had “surely” heard about, or that the word “surely” is a poor translation of *ἔτι γε* (though see Eph 4:21), but, as the rest of my argument shows, Paul throughout Ephesians is attempting to further clarify the mystery because it is not intrinsically entirely clear.

³⁶ Prümm, 153-154. Translation: “The same thing that the apostle mentioned in the opening hymn of Ephesians as an already acquired spiritual possession based on his previous communication with the reader, namely the knowledge of the secret (1:8-9), he desires for them.”

This is further supported by the use of the word ἀνεξιχνίαστος (“untraceable,” “unsearchable,” “unfathomable”) in verse 8 and the use of the word πολυποίκιλος (“manifold,” “multi-colored,” “multifaceted”) in verse 10. We argued earlier that there is a train of thought – by preaching the unsearchable riches of Christ to the Gentiles (how do you preach something that is unsearchable?), everyone is enlightened as to the administration of the mystery, and thereby the manifold wisdom of God is made known. In this way, the administration of the mystery includes the preaching to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. Part of the content of this mystery, then, is unsearchable.

Also in support of this view is the fact that the churches Paul worked with (not to mention our churches today) repeatedly dealt with issues of division. Paul’s response to this problem was to give his readers a deeper knowledge of the hope laid up for them in heaven, which they heard of in the gospel (cf. Col 1:5-6), that hope being Christ in them, the mystery hidden for ages (Col 1:27). If this mystery were fully known and embraced and “the unsearchable riches of Christ” were found, God’s people would have no problem maintaining “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). For these reasons one is led to believe that the μυστήριον of Eph 3 is an incomprehensible mystery.

But there are also strong reasons to think of it as an easy-to-understand secret that only needs revealed. First, notice that Paul never speaks of wanting to go deeper into the mystery. In fact, when he speaks of the mystery being made known to him in 3:4 and being revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in 3:5, he uses aorist indicative verbs. Nowhere do we see Paul using imperfect or present or future tense

verbs to refer to God revealing the mystery to him! This suggests that the revelation to Paul of the mystery is complete.

Also notice that in the places where Paul prays for a spirit of revelation to come to the Ephesians, he never uses the word μυστήριον there. Rather μυστήριον is used throughout Ephesians to refer to revelation of previously unknown gospel truths that the Ephesian believers now know and that need to be proclaimed to the nations. So while one could argue that there is such depth to the idea of all things being summed up in Christ or the Gentiles and Jews being a body together that no one could fully comprehend it, we must see that the core content of the μυστήριον is clear and known and revealed. The basic content of the μυστήριον, though deep and multi-faceted is not mysterious or incomprehensible or ineffable, but clear and revealed to God's people.

At the same time there are those who do not know the mystery and those who have rejected it, so the Ephesians are urged to pray for Paul that he may boldly proclaim the mystery of the gospel (Eph 6:19). Though the secret is out and Paul has been boldly proclaiming it, it has made him a prisoner of Christ Jesus (Eph 3:1; 4:1; cf. 6:20). If this message of the love of God and the riches that are in Christ and the inheritance and bodyhood and partaking of the promise is so clear in its fundamental content, why would anyone reject it, let alone imprison Paul because of it? This is not due to any intrinsic ineffability in the message but to the hardness of the human heart. Therefore Jesus says, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26, ESV).

Conclusion

So in this study we saw that the mystery of Eph 3 is that the Gentiles are on equal footing with the Jews and receive all that has been promised to the Jews in the Old Testament and more. We also saw that the mystery is multi-faceted but unified across Pauline usage of the terms: “the mystery of God,” “the mystery of Christ,” “the mystery of his will,” “the mystery of the gospel,” or simply, “the mystery.” We also saw that what makes it a mystery is that the content was “hidden in God for ages past,” even though various components of that content are found in the Old Testament scriptures. And we saw that the mystery, though deep and rich, is at its core comprehensible and effable, but at the same time it will be rejected by hard human hearts and therefore we need God to break through and open eyes. This is the mystery of Christ that has put Paul in chains but for which he gladly fills up in his flesh what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. May this same mystery unite the church of God today so that all will know what is the οἰκονομία of the mystery and that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. Amen.

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