

Life and Teachings of Paul

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The Mystery of the Gospel

In Paul's first letter to Corinth he writes:

*We speak of **God's secret wisdom**, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. **8** None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. **9** However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" **10** but **God has revealed it to us** by his Spirit (1 Cor 2:7-10).*

The word "wisdom" is of major significance in the writings of Paul. In Judaism it carried a number of meanings, but the meaning for Paul is that of knowledge that can only be known through revelation from God; it is the revelation of a mystery or hidden knowledge of God.

The Meaning of "Mystery" in OT

The meaning of the term "mystery," as used in the OT and the literature of Judaism in the first century, is of major importance to a study of Paul's theology. The concept of mystery in Jewish thought is found primarily in the apocalyptic and wisdom literature. There are two terms for the concept of "mystery" in the Hebrew Scriptures. The first is "*sod*," meaning knowledge that is "secret" or hidden; the second is "*raz*," which also means hidden knowledge and is more often translated by the Greek *muste'riion*, the term used by Paul in his writings.

The root of the concept of God's revelation of hidden

knowledge may be seen in the apocalyptic book of Daniel, where we read of the revelation given to Daniel concerning the interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream:

*During the night **the mystery** [LXX, *muste'ion*] **was revealed** to Daniel in a vision. Then Daniel praised the God of heaven **20** and said: "Praise be to the name of God for ever and ever; wisdom and power are his. **21** He changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them. He gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning. **22** **He reveals deep and hidden things**; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him (Daniel 2:19-22).*

Moses said of the things God had made known to him,

*The **secret things** belong to the LORD our God, **but the things revealed belong to us** and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law (Deut 29:29).*

Isaiah gives God's word on his revelation of hidden things, "I foretold the former things long ago, my mouth announced them and I made them known; then suddenly I acted, and they came to pass," (Isaiah 48:3). In verse 6, God says,

*From now on I will tell you of new things, **of hidden things unknown to you**. 7 They are created now, and not long ago; you have not heard of them before today. So you cannot say, 'Yes, I knew of them.' 8 You have neither heard nor understood; from of old your ear has not been open," (Isaiah 48:3-8).*

Daniel informed the King of Babylon concerning the knowledge God had given him concerning the meaning of his dream,

*As for me, this mystery [LXX, *muster'ion*] has been revealed to me, not because I have greater wisdom than other living men, but so that you, O king, may know the interpretation and that you may understand what went through your mind (Daniel 2:30).*

The Meaning of “Mystery” in First Century Judaism

The concept of secret or hidden knowledge of God is very present in the Jewish literature of the first century. It is seen in texts having to do with the decisions of God kept hidden from man but are revealed by messengers or angels close to God. These “mysteries” are revealed to chosen men by angels or messengers sent from God. The revelation of these mysteries stored in the secret chambers of heaven make up the content of the books known as “Apocalyptic Literature” written in the first centuries BC and AD. These writings are Daniel and Ezekiel of the OT, and the non-cannonical writings, 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, or the Slavonic Enoch, or the Book of the Secrets of Enoch, the Testaments of the XII Patriarchs, the Apocalypse of Baruch, the Psalms of Solomon, 4 Ezra, and the Sibylline Oracles, to mention the some of the best examples.

Because the concept of “revealed mystery” is so prevalent in the letters of Paul, it is important for us to know how this concept was understood by the Jewish culture of the first century, both in Palestine and in the Diaspora of the Mediterranean world. Raymond Brown, renowned NT scholar in biblical backgrounds, has written one of the most definitive studies on this subject, *The Semetic Background of the Term “Mystery” in the New Testament*.

His research shows that the concept of divine mysteries was not new to the people to whom Paul addressed his letters. Brown shows that the Hebrew terms “*sod*” and “*raz*,” and the Greek “*muste'riion*” (mystery) and “*kriptos*” (hidden), were terms used to support the belief that God had plans for Israel that had been hidden in the language and imagery of the Hebrew Scriptures. Such was the case with the imagery associated with the Messiah and his role in the salvation of Israel and the nations (*goeim* or gentiles).

From the Intertestamental Literature we can see many of the concepts that were “in the air” in Diaspora Judaism, and even in the

Dead Sea Scrolls in Palestine proper. Raymond Brown says of this term:

Thus the future of Israel was hidden in prophecies; but, that one might read it, it was necessary that God reveal the secrets of these prophecies. The commentator [the Dead Sea scholar giving the interpretation of the Habakkuk text-MWL] goes on to tell us that the coming of the end has been delayed beyond all prophetic expectation, "for the mysteries of God are to be marvelous (1QpHab 7:8). All things are to come in due time "as He has ordained for them in the mysteries of his wisdom (7:13-14). A final example of "mystery" applied to God's plan for the future is found in 1QS 11:3-4, "From the well of his knowledge he has enlightened me; and made my eye contemplate his wonders; and the light of my heart, the mystery to be [raz], (Brown, "Mystery," p 24).

Brown reveals a similar concept in the Enoch literature,

We hear that the Son of Man (so named before creation), the staff of righteousness, and the light of the nations, "was chosen and hidden in His presence before the world was yet made until eternity" [48:6; 62:7 - "From the beginning the Son of Man was hidden, and the Most High kept him in the presence of His might; and revealed him to elect"]. But on the Day of Judgment God shall reveal the hidden Son of Man to the elect (48:7; 62:1). He has been guarding the future inheritance of the elect, and now he shall judge them. "His mouth shall pour forth all the secrets of wisdom and counsel, for the Lord of spirit ha given (them) to him and glorified him," (51:3, 62:2), (Brown, "Mystery," p 18).

Use of the Term "Mystery" in the Theology of Paul

God's keeps hidden events he has determined to occur in the fullness of time. When the appointed time comes the mystery is revealed. Paul believed he was the recipient of the revelation of such

a mystery, “the mystery of the Gospel.” In his letter to Ephesus he writes, “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known **the mystery of the gospel,**” (Eph 6:19).

That God’s was revealing such a mystery in the ministry of Jesus is suggested by him on several occasions. In Matt 11, Jesus says in a prayer,

*I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because **you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children,** 26 Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure. 27 All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him,” (Matt 11:25-27).*

Later, in Matt 13, Jesus says to the twelve,

***The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.** 12 Whoever has will be given more, and he will have abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables: “Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. 14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. 15 For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them [Isa 6:9-10]. 16 **But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.** 17 For I tell you the truth, **many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it,** (Matt 13:11-17).*

In verse 13:34, Matthew tells us,

Jesus spoke all these things to the crowd in parables; he did not say anything to them without using a parable. 35 So was fulfilled what was spoken through the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter things hidden since the creation of the world," (Matt 13:34-35).

There is something being said by Jesus that is very esoteric and cannot be understood by the casual reader of the NT. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus utters similar words of an esoteric flavor. His statement seems clear enough, but there is meaning beneath the surface, especially in verse 17,

*No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. 17 **For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open.** 18 Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him (Luke 8:16-18)."*

All of this gives us insight concerning Paul's intended meaning in his references to the mystery that had been revealed to him. To the Christians in Rome he writes, "I do not want you to be ignorant of this **mystery**, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in," (Rom 11:25). The Gentiles (*ethnoi* – nations) would become one with the Jews, something that seemed impossible at the time of Paul's letter. This would occur through the new creation that occurred in their conversion; both Gentile and Jew alike would bury their old adamic existence in the waters of baptism and would be raised out of the watery grave into new existence. In the conclusion of the letter he writes, "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to **the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past**," (Rom 16:25).

As an apostle of Christ, Paul was a herald or messenger of a message God had sent to the human race. He saw himself as, a servant of Christ and one entrusted with the secret things of God (1

Cor 4:1). In his first Corinthian letter he says of his preaching and those things revealed in his letters,

We speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" 10 but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit (1 Cor 2:7).

The most extensive discussion on what Paul calls the *muste'riou* is found in his letter to the Ephesians,

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace 8 that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. 9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, 10 to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ, (Eph 1:7-10).

Further, in 3:2-13, he writes,

Surely you have heard about the stewardship (oikono'mos) of God's grace that was given to me for you, 3 that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. 4 In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. 6 This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, [through new creation in Christ-MWL] members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. 7 I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. 8 Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, 9 and to make plain to everyone the stewardship

(oikono'mos) of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. 10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, 11 according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. 12 In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Paul also gives must pen and ink this theme in his letter to the Colossians. He feels a special responsibility as a trustee of this revelation for God,

I have become its [i.e. the church] servant by the stewardship (oikono'mos – an entrustment) God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness, 26 the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. 27 To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Col 1:25-27).

Conclusion

Raymond Brown (quoted above) sees Paul as confident that the concept he was presenting was something his readers would not have found hard to follow in that similar concepts were “in the air” within the Judaism of the time. Commenting on Paul’s language in 1 Corinthians, he says:

What is this hidden wisdom that Paul speaks of en myste'rio? It is clearly wisdom that stems from divine insight as opposed to worldly wisdom. And it is more than mere knowledge, for it is a reality predestined from all time. As the succeeding verses make clear, it is the economy of salvation prepared beforehand for those whom God loves, and now at last revealed (Brown, “Mystery,” p 41).

Brown’s understanding of Paul’s words in 1 Cor 2, concerning the plan God had revealed for the salvation of the human race,

supports the view we have presented in the above series of Pauline references to this theme.

In 1 Corinthians 2:7 we had the divine wisdom *en muste'rio* [in a mystery-MWL] which God had predetermined before all ages, revealed to us through the Spirit. Here it is the *muste'rion* itself, which was secret and is now brought to light. Moreover, the revelation of the mystery is in parallelism with the preaching of Christ (objective genitive). In other words, for Paul, Christ's life and role in the salvation of men are the revelation of God's mysterious plan hidden from ages past (Brown, "Mystery," p 51).

Making this divine mystery known was Paul's understanding of his role as an apostle of Christ,

*My purpose is that they [the church in Laodicea] may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have **the full riches of complete understanding**, in order that they may **know the mystery of God, namely, Christ**. 3 in whom are hidden all **the treasures of wisdom and knowledge** (Col 2:2-3).*

More will be said on Paul's use of the language and ideology of the Mystery Religions in a later lesson: "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some," (1 Cor 9:22).

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