

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

Part I

by Thomas Ice

Recently after speaking at a church on a prophecy topic a young college-age girl ask me a great question. She wanted to know “what is the greatest obstacle when talking with a fellow Christian who does not agree with our view of Bible prophecy?” Since we had been talking about hermeneutics, I told her, “Other than one’s approach to biblical interpretation, the thing that who disagree with our views is that they do not factor in the role of the mystery doctrines taught by Jesus and Paul. They act like those portions of Scripture are not even in the New Testament. They attempt to build their eschatology as if these passages were not in the Bible.” This is why I am starting a series on the importance of the New Testament mysteries.

WHAT IS A MYSTERY?

When one checks the lexicons and dictionaries for the meaning of the term “mystery” in a biblical context, most scholars pretty much agree that it refers to a secret which has been revealed. An older Bible dictionary says, “In so far as revelation has taken place, the ‘mystery’ is a knowledge of that which had been secret but is so no longer.”¹ An older encyclopedia declares, “A most unscriptural and dangerous sense is too often put upon the word, as if it meant something absolutely unintelligible and incomprehensible; whereas in every instance in which it occurs in the Septuagint or New Testament it is applied to something which is revealed, declared explained, spoken, or which may be known or understood.”² More recently Harold Hoehner defines a mystery as used in the Bible, as “something in ages past, hidden in God (Eph. 3:9) and unable to unraveled or understood by human ingenuity or study.”³

It is clear, as I will demonstrate throughout this series, that the meaning of the biblical term mystery is very similar to our English word “secret.” In the Bible mystery does not carry the connotation that it is mysterious and thus something that can be figured out by human cunning. The mysteries of God cannot be reasoned to by logic, since it speaks of information from God that can only be learned if He reveals such. Neither does the biblical use of mystery relate to being initiated into a secret group, as some have suggested. In the Bible it refers to information that God had previously not revealed or kept hidden from mankind but now He is revealing it or making it known. This is why we will be studying biblical mysteries, especially for the purpose to find out what the new revelation is that makes the church and its dispensation different from previous ages.

OLD TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

We begin our investigation where most biblical research almost always originates—The Old Testament. The book of Deuteronomy is a Greek term from which the title of the fifth book of Moses is named because it means, “second giving of the Law.” The first time was a few months after the exodus from Egypt on Mount Sinai as recorded in Exodus 19—24. This covenant was immediately broken by the nation of Israel. Thus, the Lord had them wonder in the wilderness in the Sinai for forty years in order to kill off the adults of that generation. Now after the forty-year lesson, Israel was ready, under Joshua, to enter the Promised Land, conquer it, and dwell in it. It is at this time that Moses delivered the Book of Deuteronomy to Israel.

Deuteronomy 4:25–31 provides a prophetic overview of Israel’s history in a few sentences. Later, an expanded narrative of Israel future history is provided in Deuteronomy 28—32. “The last seven chapters of Deuteronomy (28–34),” says David Larsen, “are really the matrix out of which the great prophecies of the Old Testament regarding Israel emerge.”¹ Dr. Larsen provides the following breakdown of Israel’s future history:

26:3–13; 28:1–14	The conditions of blessing to follow obedience
31:16–21	The coming apostasy
28:15–60	The affliction that God would bring upon Israel, while still in the land, because of her apostasy
28:32–39, 48–57	Israel will be taken captive
27; 32	The enemies of Israel will possess her land for a time
28:38–42; 29:23	The land itself will remain desolate
28:63–67; 32:26	Israel will be scattered among the nations
28:62	The time will come when Israel will be “few in number”
28:44–45	Though punished, Israel will not be destroyed if she repents
28:40–41; 30:1–2	Israel will repent in her tribulation
30:3–10	Israel will be gathered from the nations and brought back to her divinely given land ²

Exodus 23 and Leviticus 26 present similar material as that found above. Leviticus 26 evidences a striking similarity with that of Deuteronomy 28—30, except Leviticus 26 presents the cursings (26:14–39) within the framework of five progressive stages to the covenantal curse. Each stage was to increase by a factor of seven (26:18, 21, 24, 28) resulting in the fifth stage, which would be devastation and deportation from the land. However, the chapter ends with hope that if Israel repented of their sin, while in exile, they would be returned to the land and receive blessing (26:40–46). There are many significant parallels between Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28—30.

The Lord was laying out a prophetic outline for the nation of Israel before they ever entered the land of Canaan. This overview of one’s history before it happens could only be provided by a sovereign God, who not just knows, but also determines Israel’s destiny. The prophetic outline in Deuteronomy of Israel’s future was later expanded upon by her prophets, as they greatly expanded upon the prophetic themes with greater detail. Deuteronomy in many senses becomes the anchor from which much of the rest of the Old Testament is oriented.

Deuteronomy 28 contains the famous blessing and cursing section of this second giving of the Law. The Lord says, if you obey Me then I will bless you; but if you disobey Me then I will curse you. At this point the Lord says, “Yet to this day the Lord has not given you a heart to know, nor eyes to see, nor ears to hear” (Deut. 29:4). The nation had promised earlier to keep God’s Law and now the Lord is telling them that it

¹David Larsen, *Jews, Gentiles, & The Church* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1995), p. 23.

²Larsen, *Jews, Gentiles*, pp. 23-24.

will be impossible for them to do since they new a new heart, instead of the heart of stone they had. The purpose for this statement is to prepare them to realize that they need God’s grace in their lives, they need a new heart, which the New Covenant later promises (Jer. 31:31).

Chapter 29 ends with, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29). Here the Lord speaks of the “secret things” which are the same as the mysteries in the New Testament. In this context “the secret things” refer to the hidden things in God’s plan for history. The passage also lets us know that the only way humans can ever learn about God is if He reveals Himself to us, if He tells us about “the secret things” that are part of His plan. This the Lord does in the context of the Mosaic Law. These are the things that God has revealed for the purpose of Israel obeying His laws. In fact, a few verses later the Lord says, “Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live” (Deut. 30:6). This is a prediction of the New Covenant that will end Israel’s rebellion and lead to their actual keeping of God’s Law.

“For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it? Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?’ But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it” (Deut. 30:11–14). This passage, which is referred to by the Apostle Paul in Romans 10, picks up the notion of God’s revelation of Himself through the Mosaic books, to which Deuteronomy belongs. The blessing and cursing section of Deuteronomy is some of the secret things that the Lord has revealed and therefore something that the nation will be held accountable for. They cannot use the excuse that they did not know that God required these things from them since the Lord has clearly revealed them to them. In fact the Lord says that these things that He expects the nation to obey are “very near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (Deut. 30:14). This Hebrew idiom means that if something is in your mouth and heart, that an individual knows and understands what is being said. The mouth reference relates to knowing something well enough to be able to articulate to another. The heart reference means that someone understands what is being said. Therefore, Israel cannot say that they did not know what to do because they did not understand what the Lord said. That was not going to be a valid excuse. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ Alexander Stewart, “Mystery,” in James Hastings, editor, *The Dictionary of the Bible*, 5 vols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1900), vol. III; p. 466.

² “Mystery” in John McClintock and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 12 vols (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1867–1887), vol. VI; p. 793.

³ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), p. 214.