

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT MYSTERIES

Part XII

by Thomas Ice

“For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in;” —Romans 11:25

As we continue our study of “mystery” in the Bible, our next New Testament passage is Romans 11:25–27. This passage occurs toward the end of Paul’s section on Israel in Roman 9–11. The “Israel section” appears to answer a question raised by the protagonist in light of the end of chapter 8, which argues nothing can separate a chosen one from the love of God (8:31–39). Paul states in 9:6, “it is not as though the word of God has failed.” More precisely he declares in 11:1, “I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be!” He continues in 11:2, “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew.” Paul argues that Israel’s rejection is only partial since in the current church age He has a remnant of Jewish believers (11:1–10). Then Paul speaks of the purpose of Israel’s partial rejection during the current church age (11:11–24). Another new section begins in 11:25 with the revelation of a mystery, which is that national Israel rejection is temporary “until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in.” H. P. Liddon summarizes this section by noting, “A bright future is yet in store for Israel.”¹

WHAT IS ISRAEL’S MYSTERY?

Paul’s first statement in verse 25, “I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed” is governed by a verb in the subjunctive mood, which has the sense of “you are uninformed, stop being uninformed by what I am about to tell you.” This phrase is used multiple times by Paul in the New Testament (Rom. 1:13; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8; 1 Thess. 4:13). “It is a formula which Paul uses when he wishes to bring home to his readers with emphasis something which he regards as of special importance,”² notes C. E. B. Cranfield.

What does Paul want his Roman readers to learn? He wants them to learn a “mystery” relating to Israel’s future. “Since nothing is revealed regarding the present Church age in the Old Testament,” contends Ernest Campbell, “and what Paul is saying here pertains to Israel during this Church age, it was naturally a mystery or secret until revealed here by Paul.”³ We are reminded that mystery as used in this passage is “a divine secret, something that may be known only by divine revelation.”⁴ Paul is warning his fellow believers in Rome to take into consideration this mystery, “lest you be wise in your own estimation.” Ernst Kasemann says, “Those who are wise on their own are those who trust in themselves and boast.”⁵ The mystery is composed specifically of two primary points: “first, that blindness is happened to Israel in part only.” Secondly, “that this blindness should continue till the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.”⁶ “The *mystery* of this passage is not that of Israel’s national salvation, for that was revealed in the Old Testament,” explains Arnold Fruchtenbaum. “The *mystery* is that of a partial, temporary hardening of Israel until the full number of Gentiles is reached.”⁷

Down through the history of the church there have been too many Gentiles in the church who have not heeded Paul’s warning here about the mystery relating to Israel’s

future. This certainly includes the stained history of Gentile Christians who have taught that the church has forever replaced Israel and national Israel has no future in the plan of God. Paul is saying, as Kasemann has noted, those who are wise in their own eyes do not take into account what God has revealed to Paul concerning Israel's national future in this passage. They are thinking their own thoughts instead of thinking in light of God's revelation, in this case, as a result of new revelation through a mystery.

Paul teaches "three successive stages in the divine plan of salvation,"⁸ as noted by Canfield. Stage 1: "that a partial hardening has happened to Israel;" stage 2 "until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in;" stage 3: "and thus all Israel will be saved." The first stage began when the church was founded after the nation of Israel rejected Jesus as their Messiah and continues down to our present day until God is finished focusing on the Gentiles while only a remnant are Jews are included down through the history of the church. James said at the Jerusalem Council concerning the church age: "Simeon has related how God first concerned Himself about taking from among the Gentiles a people for His name" (Acts 15:14). Paul teaches that the current church age is a time when God is taking saved Jews and Gentiles and forming them into one new man, known as the body of Christ (Eph. 2:11–22; Col. 1:24–29). Stage 2 is when the full number of Gentiles has come into the church,⁹ which likely means the rapture will then occur, paving the way for stage 3 when national Israel will be saved at some point in the tribulation resulting in the millennial kingdom on earth for a thousand years. Liddon defines "the fulness of the Gentiles has come in" as "that by which completeness is secured."¹⁰ Canfield further explains:

Israel's hardening will last until the fullness of the Gentiles come in, it is in fact for the benefit of the Gentiles—a good reason for their not feeling superior; or, alternatively, Israel's hardening will *only* last till the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, the point being that Israel's hardening is temporally limited—and therefore the Gentiles must not be puffed up with self-importance by the thought that the Jews are cast off for ever.¹¹

Therefore, the mystery taught by Paul is that Israel's current church age unbelief is temporary, not permanent. In fact, at some point in the future, all Israel will be saved. Liddon expands upon this truth as follows:

Practically the New Testament use of the word agrees with this; since *mysterion* means in the New Testament that which having been from all eternity known only to GOD, and hidden from all created intelligences, and so inaccessible to man's natural reason, is now graciously disclosed to the Apostles, and through them to Christians, while it is still withheld from all outside this circle,—from the world and the worldly wise.¹²

ALL ISRAEL WILL BE SAVED

It is clear that during the current church age that only a remnant of Jews are saved and added to the church (Rom. 11:1–5, 14, 23–24). In the future there will come a time when "all Israel will be saved." I do not think anyone would attempt to say this has already happened, since no one can cite a time in the history of Israel when this could have taken place. Therefore it must be future, even to our own day. Liddon insists "But the *context* requires the *literal* Israel."¹³ The phrase "all Israel" is used a few other

times in the Old Testament (1 Sam. 7:5; 25:1; 1 Kings 12:1; 2 Chron. 12:1; Dan. 9:11). I believe “Israel” in this context means “ethnic Israel” or “national Israel,” since that has been the contrast found in the ten other uses in Romans 9—11. “The word occurs about eleven times in chapters 9—11, and in the other ten (all outside this instance) it refers to ethnic Israel.”¹⁴ Robert Haldane explains: “Such expressions as that ‘all Israel shall be saved,’ are no doubt, in certain situations, capable of limitation; but as no Scripture demands any limitation of this expression, and as the opposition here stated is between a *part* and *all*, there is no warrant to make any exception, and with God this, like all other things, is possible.”¹⁵

When one surveys the many passages throughout Scripture relating to the salvation of national Israel, it becomes evident that: “Most of that earthly nation will perish under Divine judgments, and the Antichrist: but *the Remnant* will be ‘accounted as a generation,’”¹⁶ says William Newell. Fruchtenbaum provides an excellent explanation of how the salvation of nation Israel is going to occur as he harmonizes a number of biblical passages:

According to Romans 11:25–27, all Israel will be saved. According to Isaiah 10:20–23, only the Remnant will be saved. This is not a contradiction if it is understood in the context of Israel’s national salvation. As Zechariah 13:8–9 has pointed out, two-thirds of the Jewish population will be destroyed in the persecutions of the Tribulation. This will include the entire non-Remnant so that only the Remnant will survive, the *escaped* of Isaiah 4:2; 10:20; 37:31–32; Joel 2:32; and Obadiah 17.

Since all of the remaining one-third become believers, at that point, *all Israel* and the Remnant of Israel become one and the same. This is made clear in Micah 2:12–13:

I will surely assemble, O Jacob, all of you; I will surely gather the remnant of Israel; I will put them together as the sheep of Bozrah, as a flock in the midst of their pasture; they shall make great noise by reason of the multitude of men. The breaker has gone up before them: they have broken forth and passed on to the gate, and are gone out thereat: and their king is passed on before them, and Jehovah at the head of them.

This is expressed in the parallelism of Hebrew poetry. The first parallel is in verse 12a in that *all of you* and *the remnant of Israel* are one and the same, for with Israel’s national salvation, the whole nation now becomes part of the Remnant. Because of Israel’s national salvation, Messiah returns to rescue them in verse 13.¹⁷

Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ H. P. Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (London, Longmans, Green, and Co., 1899), p. 214.

² C. E. B. Cranfield, *The International Critical Commentary, Romans*, 2 vols (Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1979), vol. 2, p. 573

³ Ernest R. Campbell, *A Commentary of Romans*, 2 vols (Silverton, OR: Canyonview Press, 1988), vol. 2, p. 85.

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- ⁴ S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., adapted by Mike Abendroth, *Discovering Romans: Spiritual Revival for the Soul* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), p. 184.
- ⁵ Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 312.
- ⁶ Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of Romans* (Mac Dill AFB, FL: Mac Donald Publishing Company, [1839] 1958), p. 540.
- ⁷ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 2003), p. 797. (emphasis original)
- ⁸ Canfield, *Romans*, vol. 2, p. 575.
- ⁹ This does not mean Gentiles will not be saved during the tribulation and millennium. It means that God has saved the last individual planned for the church age.
- ¹⁰ Liddon, *Romans*, p. 217.
- ¹¹ Canfield, *Romans*, vol. 2, p. 574–75. (emphasis original)
- ¹² Liddon, *Romans*, p. 215.
- ¹³ Liddon, *Romans*, p. 217. (emphasis original)
- ¹⁴ Johnson, *Discovering Romans*, p. 186.
- ¹⁵ Haldane, *Romans*, p. 541. (emphasis original)
- ¹⁶ William R. Newell, *Romans Verse by Verse* (Chicago: Grace Publications, 1938), p. 433.
- ¹⁷ Fruchtenbaum, *Footsteps of the Messiah*, pp. 799–800. (emphasis original)