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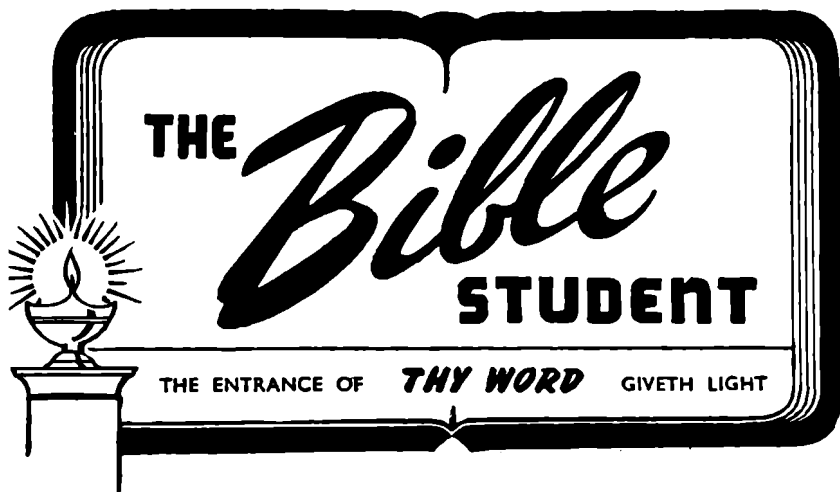
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Editor: A. McDONALD REDWOOD

I have gone into such detail, not merely because the standard English versions make no effort to deal with the word systematically, but also because it helps us to see what a role both age and freedom played in early Hebrew thought. It is significant that the later we reach in Bible history the more seldom is *na'ar* used of the servant. The monarchy gradually taught men to consider it an honour to be the servant ('*ebed*) of the king.

(*To be continued*)

'THE MYSTERY OF GOD, EVEN CHRIST'*

T. NORTON STERRETT, TH.M.

The mysteries of the New Testament are an important part of the New Testament revelation, and yet have been neglected to a great extent by many Bible scholars. The particular phase of the subject which is to be treated in this paper is, like the others, full of difficulty, and yet too important to be ignored. 'The mystery of God, even Christ' is mentioned clearly in Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter two, verse two, and perhaps in other Scriptures. Before turning to the Scriptures, however, some general definitions must be made.

The New Testament word 'mystery' is almost a transliteration of the Greek *μυστήριον*. This Greek term had in classical usage the meaning of religious secrets 'confided only to the initiated, and not to be communicated by them to ordinary mortals'.¹ Such were the Eleusinian and Babylonian mysteries. Adopted into the New Testament, the word is used differently. Thayer lists three main variations of usage. (1) A secret thing, not obvious to the understanding, as in 1 Cor. 13:2; 14:2. These are perhaps the only passages of this usage, and do not at all govern the meaning of the word in most of its occurrences in the New Testament. (2) A hidden purpose or counsel. When used of God, Thayer says, 'In the New Testament, God's plan of pro-

* From *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Dallas Theo. Seminary, U.S. by kind permission.

¹ J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the N.T.*, p. 420.

viding salvation for men through Christ, which was once hidden but now is revealed.¹ Most of the occurrences in the New Testament come under this category. (3) The mystic or hidden sense, as in Eph. 5:32; Rev. 17:5. Some will no doubt question the correctness of Dr Thayer's analysis at this point, but that question is beyond the province of this paper.

Other definitions of the term 'mystery' can be cited. In the note on Matt. 13:11, Dr Scofield defines a mystery as 'a previously hidden truth, now divinely revealed, but in which a supernatural element still remains despite the revelation'. Dr Ironside writes of the New Testament mysteries that they are 'those truths which in Old Testament days were kept in silence, but which are now the common property of all believers'.² Bishop Lightfoot has a helpful word regarding the mysteries. He says, after mentioning the idea of secrecy in the classical usage, 'Thus the idea of *secrecy* or *reserve* disappears when *μυστήριον* is adopted into the Christian vocabulary by St Paul: and the word signifies simply 'a truth which was once hidden but now is revealed,' a 'truth which without special revelation would have been unknown.' Of the nature of the truth itself the word says nothing. It may be transcendental, incomprehensible, mystical, mysterious, in the modern sense of the term: but this idea is quite accidental, and must be gathered from the special circumstances of the case, for it cannot be inferred from the word itself. Hence *μυστήριον* is almost universally found in connection with words denoting revelation or publication'.³

In the Notes of the Eclectic Society, London, Oct. 25, 1802, there is a discussion of this word. Rev. J. Pratt then offered the following suggestions: 'Mystery denotes . . . some sacred thing hidden or secret, which is naturally unknown to human reason, is only known by the revelation of God, nor then always comprehended fully: intelligible as facts, though not as to the mode. It appears, then, to be a great though common mistake, to suppose this word means something absolutely unintelligible and incomprehensible. So un-Scriptural is this sense, that in every passage

¹ *Loc. cit.*

² *The Mysteries of God*, p. 14.

³ *St Paul's Epistle to the Colossians*, p. 166.

where it is used it is mentioned as something which is revealed, declared, shewn, spoken, or which may be known or understood.'

The above extended presentation of evidence regarding the meaning of the word 'mystery' in the New Testament has been given, because of the popular conception of the word. In popular understanding, and in common usage, the word signifies something which is not understood, which is hidden or unknown. According to Webster's definition it is, 'A profound secret; something wholly unknown, or something kept cautiously concealed, and exciting curiosity or wonder'. Used with this meaning, a mystery is a mystery only when it is unknown. When it is made known it is a mystery no longer. The quotations cited above show that the Biblical sense of the word is quite different, and this fact should be made clear.

Collecting together the various suggestions which have been given, several facts may with reasonable assurance be stated concerning the New Testament mysteries:

(1) They present a phase or phases of, or something connected with, the salvation wrought by Christ, attested in the New Testament, and set forth in the Gospel.

(2) They are truths which are utterly beyond the imagination or thought of men, and which would never have been known had God not chosen to reveal them.

(3) They are truths which had been hidden in the counsels of God, but have now been revealed through His Spirit to believers in Christ.

(4) Since now revealed, these truths are meant for believers to understand and appropriate.

(5) As products of the Divine wisdom, in their completeness they are not entirely within the compass of finite comprehension; there are still some things about them which are not completely understood.

The last two facts may appear to some to contradict each other. But that is not necessarily so. It is true of much of God's revelation and the great doctrines of Scripture that while they are to be known and understood in a sense, yet there is much that cannot be completely understood, at least in the present life.

Is it not to be expected that when God revealed Himself to men there should be some things within, and other things beyond, comprehension?

With this understanding of the mysteries in general we come to the one which is the subject of this paper, 'The Mystery of God in Christ,' or better, 'The Mystery of God, even Christ.' This mystery is set forth in Col. 2:2, particularly, and perhaps in other passages also. Paul opens this chapter of his letter with these words, 'For I would have you know how greatly I strive for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; that their hearts may be comforted, they being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, that they may know the mystery of God, even Christ, in whom are all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge hidden.' The above is quoted from the American Standard Version. The King James Version renders in verse 2, 'the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ.' This difference of rendering has important bearing on the interpretation of this mystery, and is occasioned by the relative uncertainty of the Greek text here.

There are a number of variations in the Greek text. Bishop Lightfoot lists a total of eleven, several of which have so little authority as to be not worth considering. Of the eleven, three only deserve mention, all the others being clearly glosses, introduced in an attempt to clarify the passage. The reading of the received text is τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ χριστοῦ. This is found in ms D (third hand), K, L, and the majority of cursives. It is seen at once that the authority is weak, and it may be dismissed as a supplemented text, not the original.

More important is the shortest of all the readings, which has only τοῦ Θεοῦ. The authority for this reading is ms D (second hand), P, 37, 67**, 71, 80, 116. Alford contends very strongly for this as being the original reading, on the ground that it is the shortest, and the others would arise by simply adding words to identify which of the Divine Persons was meant.

Nevertheless, the reading which is preferred by the majority of expositors is the third, τοῦ Θεοῦ χριστοῦ. The authority

is found in ms B and Hilary of Poitiers. While the external evidence is not overwhelming, yet the reading is preferred by Westcott and Hort, the Revisers, Meyer, Lachmann, Steiger, Ellicott, Lightfoot, and Robertson. With the above array of scholarship as authority, we may with some confidence accept this as the original reading, all the others having been derived from it by processes of corruption.

The problem of the translation of the verse is not settled by adopting the above reading, for there are at least three different possible translations of the phrase τοῦ Θεοῦ χριστοῦ, each of which makes sense. (1) The phrase may be translated 'the mystery of God (who is) Christ,' putting Christ in apposition to God. Apparently no modern expositors adopt this translation, Hilary being the only noteworthy defender. The view is criticized by some on the ground that, even though true, yet it is unusually harsh and abrupt for Paul, and unnecessary here. (2) Meyer's view is that it is to be rendered, 'the mystery of the God of Christ', on the ground that any other reading would be ambiguous. Peake objects to such a translation because 'here it would emphasize the subordination of Christ which is precisely what is out of place in a passage setting forth His all-sufficiency, and against a doctrine the special peril of which lay in its tendency to under-estimate both the Person and the Work of Christ'¹. (3) The translation adopted by Ellicott, Lightfoot, Peake, and Robertson is 'the mystery of God, even Christ.' On this view, Christ is in apposition with mystery.*

Ellicott adopts this translation, as mentioned above, for the following grounds. He says of the three that (1) 'though dogmatically true, seems here to be an unnecessary specification'; (2) 'seems hopelessly hard and artificial'. Both of these are inferior to (3) 'which stands in harmony with the preceding expression'² in 1:27.

It has taken the above extended discussion to establish the grammatical and syntactical basis for the investigation of this

¹ *The Epistle to the Colossians*, p. 519.

* The R.V. adopts this reading.

² *St Paul's Epistle to the Colossians*, p. 149.

mystery. And the conclusion, ascertained with reasonable assurance, is that Christ is the mystery. The sacred, revealed secret of which Paul is speaking is bound up in the person of Christ. Nevertheless the problem is far from solved yet. The identification is far too broad. In what sense is Christ the mystery of God: Are we to suppose that every fact revealed in the New Testament concerning Christ is part of this mystery? This seems scarcely likely, and in fact cannot be true.

In the discussion of the definition of the mystery, one of the features which several of the quotations mentioned is the fact that the New Testament mystery is something which has *not* been revealed before. It hardly seems necessary to point out that many things were revealed concerning Christ in Messianic prophecy, which by this principle could not be part of this mystery. The coming of Messiah was revealed, His humanity, His deity, His atoning work, His resurrection, His return to the earth in power and glory, and His Millennial reign. These are some of the facts concerning Messiah which were made known to men through the Old Testament prophets. Therefore the mystery cannot possibly consist of all the facts concerning Christ. Paul must have in mind some phase of the glories of Christ's person, or of His relations to believers.

What, then, is the mystery? This question is hard to answer. Various interpreters have adopted different views, and one is perplexed as to know how to choose between them. The mention of the mystery here in Colossians is so brief as not to settle the matter positively. Perhaps the matter cannot be settled from this passage alone. The approach to the Scripture will be considered later. First it may be well to present some of the various opinions of interpreters, trying to analyze their strength and their weakness. Six of these will come before us. Of the six, four interpret the mystery as some phase of the person of Christ, and two go outside Christ Himself to include something else.

The first view to consider is that of Professor Eadie, as expressed in his Commentary on the Epistle to the Colossians. His view is a little hard to state, but it seems to be that the mystery is the Gospel, as preached to the Gentiles and incorporating them into

the Church. Perhaps a few quotations will help to make clear his position. Commenting on Col. 2:2. the passage under discussion, he says, 'The idea of a mystery is taken from verses 26 and 27 of the former chapter.' Turning back to his comments on the preceding chapter, verse 25, we read, 'Now, we regard the following verse as explanatory—the *Logos* being the mystery hid from ages and generations—not the gospel in itself, but that gospel in its adaptation to the Gentiles, and its reception by them.' And again he says on the next verse, 'The mystery is not the gospel generally, as Calvin and Davenant erroneously suppose; but the preaching of it to the Gentiles, and their incorporation into the church, or, as the apostle here describes it—"Christ in you, the hope of glory." Nay, so little was it understood, that it required a special revelation to make it known to the reluctant mind of the apostle Peter.'

That the gospel was a mystery to the Old Testament believers, and not clearly revealed before, is a truth. Therefore this view of Professor Eadie is true to Scripture teaching. And elsewhere in the New Testament, particularly in the second chapter of the Ephesian letter, the admission of the Gentiles on equal terms with the Jews is called a mystery. Thus this view of the mystery has confirmation from other Scriptures. Nevertheless, that of itself does not prove that it is the right interpretation of the present passage. And there are objections which arise against Professor Eadie's opinion. One is that the syntax of Col. 2:2 rather definitely requires us to understand the mystery as Christ. Indeed there is no mention of the Gospel there. Eadie finds an implicit reference by translating verse 3, 'in which are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,' making the antecedent of the relative to be the mystery, not Christ, and thus finding there a reference to the Gospel. But this translation and consequent reference are quite doubtful. Another objection is found in Professor Eadie's interpretation of the phrase 'Christ in you, the hope of glory,' in Col. 1:27. One is inclined to feel that this is a strong statement of the truth of the indwelling Christ in the believer, whether Jew

¹ *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Colossians*, p. 113.

or Gentile, and that the mystery here mentioned consists in that great truth and that alone.

A second view of the mystery, related to that just discussed, is that of Dr Ironside. Near the end of his discussion of this mystery he says, 'The mystery of God is Christ;—Christ mystical, Head and Body! As man He sits on God's throne, the Head of the church. His members on earth are those redeemed by His blood and baptized by the Holy Spirit into one Body. Thus the great secret has two parts; one, relating to the Head; the other, to the Body.'¹ It will be seen at once that Dr Ironside includes both Christ and the Church in one mystery. However, he sees that there are two parts to the mystery. Nevertheless, his view is not supported by other expositors and seems somewhat doubtful. Why is it necessary to include both Christ and the Church in one mystery? Why can there not be several, if necessary, to contain the wonders of the person of Christ, and His relationship to His people? Such seems to be the more accurate analysis of the Scripture teaching on the subject. The passage in Col. 1:26, 27 and 2:2, 3 would bear this out, for in each of them the mystery is expressly stated to be Christ. It is Christ indwelling or to be understood by the Christian, but still it is Christ. In Ephesians the emphasis of the apostle is on the one body, the Church, but in Colossians his emphasis is on the Head of the body, the Lord of the Church. It is to be expected that the presentation of the mystery in the two epistles should follow this difference.

(To be concluded in next issue.)

¹ *The Mysteries of God*, p. 60.