

# THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH AS A MYSTERY

Gary W. Derickson

WHEN PAUL USED THE WORD “MYSTERY,” he often described it in terms of the revelation of a plan that God kept secret from eternity past and chose not to reveal until the church age. The church itself—its existence, nature, and place in God’s program—is such a mystery. It is not revealed in the Old Testament but is introduced and described in the New. Dispensational theologians recognize that this is based on a literal understanding of Old Testament prophecy. When the church is removed from Old Testament revelation, all that remains is to take the promises made to Israel literally and await their fulfillment.

## BIBLICAL CONCEPT OF MYSTERY

Though the term “mystery” (μυστήριον) has a range of meanings, including the common English concept of something “mysterious” that cannot be understood,<sup>1</sup> this article uses the term with the New Testament meaning of something kept secret but later revealed. Certain previously unrevealed truths were kept within the counsels of God alone until He chose to reveal them to His apostles and prophets in the church age.<sup>2</sup> It is not something especially “myste-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th ed. (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003) details a range of meanings including “a religious truth that one can know only by revelation and cannot fully understand,” “something not understood or beyond understanding,” and a “profound, inexplicable, or secretive quality or character.”

<sup>2</sup> Willard M. Aldrich, “How Long, Lord?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 94 (April–June 1937): 220; Ron J. Bigalke Jr., “The Triumph of the Resurrection: An Examination of 1 Corinthians 5:51–58,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 12 (spring 2006): 33; Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, “Israelology: Part 2 of 6,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 5 (July 1999): 36; Ralph R. Hawthorne, “Jobine Theology: Part 3,” *Biblio-*

rious," because once made known it is understandable. But until God chose to reveal His secret plan it remained unknown and unknowable.<sup>3</sup>

Jesus referred to His parables in Matthew 13:11 as "mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" that were being "given" to His apostles and disciples by Him while being kept from the nation ("them"). When Jesus said that "many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (v. 17), He indicated that the Old Testament prophets were not recipients of the truths He was revealing to His disciples at that time. What Jesus was describing in the parables the Old Testament prophets would like to have seen and heard, but they had not and could not.

Paul described "mystery" in this same sense. "In other generations [it] was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (Eph. 3:5). Further it was also kept "hidden" in past ages and generations and only in Paul's day was it "manifested to His saints," the church (Col. 1:26). Remaining unrevealed "for ages," it had "been hidden in God" (Eph. 3:9). This mystery was something He did not want His prophets or people to know before its outworking in history. It was unknowable, not because it could not be understood, but because its information was unavailable for analysis.

### THE CHURCH AS A MYSTERY

Replacement theology, also known as supersessionism, affirms that the church has replaced Israel in God's program and that there is no future for Israel in His plans. In this view there will be no earthly millennial kingdom with Israel in the land as a nation and with Jesus reigning in Jerusalem. In replacement theology the promises made to Israel apply spiritually to the people of God, now populated by the church, and those promises are expressed in the Spirit-indwelt church under the New Covenant. This doctrine was promoted by certain church fathers and the Reformers, and it is

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*thea Sacra* 101 (July–September 1944): 301; William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), comments on Colossians 1:26; and David J. MacLeod, "Christology in Six Lines: An Exposition of 1 Timothy 3:16," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (July–September 2002): 336.

<sup>3</sup> Thus it is distinct from the "mysteries" of the mystery religions and Gnosticism. The concept arose in intertestamental literature in relation to eschatological revelation. Some of its occurrences in the New Testament may reflect aspects of rabbinic and Hellenistic concepts.

characteristic of covenant theologians today.<sup>4</sup> Calvin says this about this concept: “But by this public call, the Gentiles were not only made equal to the Jews, but seemed to be substituted into their place, as if the Jews had been dead. We may add, that any strangers whom God had formerly admitted into the body of the Church, had never been put on the same footing with the Jews. Wherefore, it is not without cause that Paul describes it as the mystery which has been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints (Col. 1:26).”<sup>5</sup>

Prior to Israel’s return to the land in 1948, Charles Hodge said Israel and the church are a single entity in God’s program with no need for national Israel to return to the land. He said believing Israel was included in the body of Christ with believing Gentiles who shared equally in Him.<sup>6</sup> Strong affirmed that “the church of Christ, in its largest signification, is the whole company of regenerate persons in all times and ages, in heaven and on earth. . . . In this sense, the church is identical with the spiritual kingdom of God; both signify that redeemed humanity in which God in Christ exercises actual spiritual dominion.”<sup>7</sup> More recently this view has been defended by Carson. “In this context, therefore, this poetic language appropriately refers to the great changes which were about to take place in the world, when Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed. It speaks of the *Son of Man* entering into his kingship,

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 699; Christopher M. Leighton and Charles Arian, “Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity*, ed. E. Fahlbusch and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 3:55.

A classic work on supersessionism is R. K. Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996). For a cogent analysis of this view see Craig Blaising, “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (September 2001): 435–37. Regarding the church fathers M. A. Seifrid notes, “For most second-century writers, as a divine revelation, the cross marks the supersession of Judaism by Christianity. This idea is present in Ignatius and prominent in *Barnabas*, the *Epistle to Diognetus* and Melito, among others. Christ brings a new law and a new covenant for Christians, since by disobedience Israel long ago had forfeited the old covenant. Generally this new covenant represents a spiritualization of the sacrificial system of the law. Borrowing on the prophetic critique, cultic practices are replaced by Christian obedience” (*Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 285.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845–1846; reprint, Bellingham, WA: Logos, 1997, II. xi. 12).

<sup>6</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1872; reprint, Oak Harbor, WA: Logos, 1997), 3:791–811.

<sup>7</sup> A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1907; reprint, Bellingham, WA: Logos, 2002), 3:887.

and *his angels* gathering in his new people from all the earth. The fall of the temple is thus presented, in highly allusive language, as the end of the old order, to be replaced by the new régime of Jesus, the Son of Man, and the international growth of his church, the new people of God.”<sup>8</sup>

Also Merkle argues against a future for national Israel. He says that Romans 11:26 refers to believing Jews throughout history rather than a future generation of Jews who will be present at Jesus’ second advent.<sup>9</sup> Since “Paul does not have in mind a special future for Israel,” he is not referring to some future national salvation when he says that all Israel will be saved.<sup>10</sup> Merkle says that in this section Paul speaks of God’s work with Israel in the present dispensation as a mystery that had three parts: “(1) the hardening of part of Israel; (2) the coming in of the fullness of the Gentiles; and (3) the salvation of all Israel.”<sup>11</sup> But he does not define “mystery,” nor does he deal with Paul’s use of the concept as it applies to either Israel or the church. Thus he misses Paul’s point that God’s dealings with Israel during the church age were a secret kept by God until He revealed it to Paul, and was not intended by God to be mentioned or hinted at in the Old Testament prophetic literature.

Just as “mystery” is a previously unrevealed truth, its outworking in relation to the church was unrevealed as well. In each reference to this mystery, Paul, having provided defining traits, then detailed the content of the mystery as Gentile inclusion in Israel’s participation in Christ as part of the New Covenant community in partial and future fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:31–33 (Eph. 3:6).

Paul stated in Ephesians 3:5 that the mystery of Gentile inclusion was not revealed to any previous generations until it was revealed to the apostles and prophets of the church. He was not saying “Old Testament prophets and New Testament apostles.” Rather, he was describing the two groups—*New Testament* prophets and *New Testament* apostles—through whom God communicated truths to the first-century church, and therefore through

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<sup>8</sup> D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” in *The New Bible Commentary*, ed. G. J. Wenham, J. A. Motyer, D. A. Carson, and R. T. France, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 937 (italics his).

<sup>9</sup> Ben L. Merkle, “Romans 11 and the Future of Ethnic Israel,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (December 2000): 711–14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 717.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 715.

whom He was revealing His previously kept secrets about His plans and purposes for the church.

Paul further affirmed in Ephesians 3:9 that this mystery was “for ages . . . hidden in God,” that is, from the beginning of earth’s history. And since it was “hidden in God,” it could not have been revealed to or through the Old Testament prophets. So it is not a matter of the prophets failing to understand or of God intending deeper truths beyond their scope of understanding. Rather the “mystery” Paul described was information kept from the prophets and thus from Israel as well. It was not an intended secondary sense to promises made, for if it were, then it would have been knowable.

### MYSTERY AND *SENSUS PLENIOR*

Though *sensus plenior* has a range of definitions, its basic sense is that God intended something more than the human authors intended or understood. This additional meaning can be found in later revelation, primarily the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> It is a meaning different from what the human author understood, though it may be related to his intended meaning in some way. Moo’s definition of *sensus plenior* is helpful. “Although precise definitions of the idea may differ, we will use it to designate the idea that there is in many scriptural texts a ‘fuller sense’ than that consciously intended by the human author—a sense intended by God, the ultimate author of Scripture. It is this meaning, an integral part of the text that is discerned and used by later interpreters who appear to find ‘new’ meaning in Old Testament texts. This ‘new’ meaning is, then, part of the author’s intention—the divine author and not necessarily the human author.”<sup>13</sup>

Vanhoozer argues that a fuller meaning that is “associated with divine authorship” only “emerges” at the “level of the whole

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<sup>12</sup> William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 125–27; Elliott E. Johnson, “Author’s Intention and Biblical Interpretation,” in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy and the Bible*, ed. Earl D. Radmacher and Robert D. Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 409–29; Douglas A. Oss, “Canon as Context: The Function of Sensus Plenior in Evangelical Hermeneutics,” *Grace Theological Journal* 9 (spring 1988): 105–7; James I. Packer, “Biblical Authority Hermeneutics, and Inerrancy,” in *Jerusalem and Athens: Critical Discussion on the Theology and Apologetics of Cornelius Van Til*, ed. E. R. Geehan (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian Reformed, 1971), 147–48; and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 264–65.

<sup>13</sup> Douglas J. Moo, in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, 201.

canon."<sup>14</sup> Since God as the divine author authored the entire canon, His intended meaning, while not "contravening" the human author's intended meaning, could "supervene" it.<sup>15</sup> On this basis one can find a fuller meaning in an Old Testament text, one that the human author could not have known. But was this God's intention with regard to the church?

After defining *sensus plenior* as God intending "a fuller meaning in a text than that intended by the human author," Waltke warns that use of *sensus plenior* "although insisting that the text's true historical significance was always present in the mind of God, tends toward an allegorical method of interpretation by regarding later writers as winning meanings from the text quite apart from their historical use and significance."<sup>16</sup> Poythress acknowledges Waltke's position, but counters that since God intended more applications than those related to the original audience, some form of *sensus plenior* is implied.<sup>17</sup> Johnson rejects *sensus plenior* in favor of *sense singular*, a single meaning shared by the divine and human authors, that may have more than one intended reference, what Johnson calls *references plenior*.<sup>18</sup>

To argue for *sensus plenior* on the basis of either canonical revelation or the New Testament authors' supposed redefinition of previous revelation requires a fuller intention by God than the human author could have known. But is that God's intention? For example Vanhoozer argues from Isaiah 53 that the "canon," expressed in the New Testament, "does not change or contradict the

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<sup>14</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?* 264. J. Gerald Janzen takes a similar approach, reflecting the Christocentric view of Old Testament revelation. He says, "If it is the case that 'the New is in the Old concealed, the Old is in the New revealed,' the reverse is also the case: 'the Old is in the New concealed, the New is in the Old revealed.' That is to say, the revelation of God presented in the OT is hidden in Christ (the way yeast is hidden in dough, or the way the fundamental teaching of the OT concerning the reign of God is again and again hidden like a messianic secret in the parables of Jesus). It is as Christians read and reread the OT that Jesus becomes increasingly clear in his person and work. So, in my view, the OT and the NT—like the ancestral and Mosaic dispensations—stand in a relation of mutual illumination" (*Abraham and All the Families of the Earth: A Commentary on the Book of Genesis 12–50*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?* 265.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg* (Chicago: Moody, 1981), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Vern S. Poythress, "Divine Meaning of Scripture," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48 (fall 1986): 246–47.

<sup>18</sup> Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 185.

meaning of Isaiah 53 but supervenes on it and specifies its referent. In speaking of the Suffering Servant, Isaiah was referring to Christ.”<sup>19</sup> However, is this a fuller meaning, or simply a New Testament report of fulfillment? No new meaning is added by the New Testament report. Rather, fulfillment is described. Isaiah knew he was speaking symbolically and that his understanding of the details of fulfillment was limited.<sup>20</sup> In fact it would be better to say that Isaiah chose to use imagery to describe the Messiah and that its later, literal, more precise or detailed fulfillment was a part of Isaiah’s humanly intended meaning as well as God’s divinely intended meaning. Neither Isaiah nor God ever intended to give every detail of Messiah’s suffering.

*Sensus plenior* does not mean that in progressive revelation God intended to “flesh out” a promise or to alter a regulation (e.g., dietary laws) through future revelation. What is given is what is intended to be understood. Its meaning to the original recipients is the meaning intended by both its human and divine authors. The prophecy contains no divinely intended *second* sense or *fuller* fulfillment, no secondary sense given in the New Testament. What is intended to be figurative is figuratively described; the picture is drawn and information is intentionally limited. Its future fulfillment will be accomplished literally and will include more details than those given in the Old Testament. Of course God knew all the details of fulfillment at the time the prophet wrote with limited knowledge. But that does not mean that God included a secondary meaning unknowable by the human author.

Paul said the church was a secret of God kept from the Old Testament prophets. This means that God did not divulge His plan to anyone before the New Testament apostles and prophets. And it means that the existence of the church was kept hidden until He was ready to reveal it. It was not just a matter of missing details.

### THE MYSTERY REVEALED

Initially Jesus’ message to the nation of Israel was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). Jesus’ use of ἐγγύζω (“is at hand”) does not indicate a specific temporal promise, “the kingdom is arriving very soon.” Instead it means imminence, “the king-

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<sup>19</sup> Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning in This Text?* 265

<sup>20</sup> The use of imagery is integral to the prophetic genre. For example Isaiah refers to Messiah as “the Branch” (Isa. 11:1), a term also used of the Messiah by Jeremiah (Jer. 23:5; 33:15) and Zechariah (Zech. 3:8).

dom is poised to come at any minute.”<sup>21</sup> The coming of Messiah’s kingdom was presented as imminent (it could occur at any time), but it was contingent on the nation’s repentance. Instead of repenting, though, the nation, through its leaders, rejected Him. Then, embodied in the incident involving His family members, came Jesus’ rejection of the unrepentant nation in Matthew 12:46–50. Following this rejection, He described to His disciples God’s work in the world while His coming messianic kingdom was delayed (Matt. 13). The parables in that chapter reveal the outworking of God the Father’s rule during the interim period, now known as the church age.

The church remained a mystery in the parables of the kingdom but was soon introduced to the apostles by Jesus. He referred to God’s new program with His followers when He described them as the “church” rather than the synagogue (16:18) following Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi. Then, while giving instruction to the Eleven concerning forgiveness and discipline, Jesus again described the gathering where fellowship and discipline were to occur as “the church” rather than the synagogue (18:17). Jesus’ instructions to the apostles, as He prepared them for His coming departure, were based on His coming program without yet detailing its outworking.

Jesus repeated His “Great Commission” at least three times to His disciples. In one of His earliest appearances He proved His corporeal resurrection by insisting that they touch His body and by His eating some fish. He then gave them the first of three universal commands. “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46–47). He appeared again to His disciples in Jerusalem in a home and repeated their commission. “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). Soon afterward, when He met His disciples on a mountain in Galilee, He commanded them to “make disciples of all the nations” (Matt. 28:19).

As He was about to depart, Jesus was approached by His disciples who asked about the coming of His kingdom. The nature of their question, “Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the king-

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<sup>21</sup> “Ἐγγύζω,” in *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, ed. T. Friberg, B. Friberg, B. Miller, and N. F. Miller (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 125; cf. Herbert Preisker, “ἐγγύς,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel; trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 330–32.



dom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6), indicates that they still expected the kingdom to be restored to the nation.<sup>22</sup> Jesus' response did not oppose their idea; instead He clarified His earlier commands in a fourth Great Commission. They were not to concern themselves with the timing of the nation's restoration, but were to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:7–8). Though they understood the command, what followed in the early chapters of Acts indicates that God had not yet disclosed to them His secret plan for the church.

Apparently the apostles did not fully comprehend the nature of the church as God intended it until after Peter's meeting with Cornelius's household (Acts 10–11) and the Jerusalem Council's recognition of the significance of the Holy Spirit's indwelling of uncircumcised Gentiles (Acts 15). Through this and further revelations given to Paul (Gal. 1:11–12), God detailed the outworking of His plan for the inclusion of Gentiles to the body of Christ, the church, a plan not revealed in the Old Testament and kept secret until then. At the Jerusalem Council the church as a whole began to understand more fully the implications of God's action with Cornelius's family and friends. James's recognition of the significance of the Holy Spirit's action at Cornelius's house led to James's quotation of Amos 9:11–12. James argued that Amos's prophecy of Gentile worship agreed with God's plan to include Gentiles in the church. Even so, this does not mean that he thought the church was prophesied or described in the Old Testament. Rather, James was saying that God's action was *consistent* with prior declarations of His intention to be worshipped by Gentiles. Thus Amos was not speaking better than he knew, nor was God intending more than Amos understood when He inspired that prophesy.

As Paul made clear, it was not God's intention to reveal the church in the Old Testament. Rather He kept His plan secret until He revealed it to His New Testament apostles and prophets. So one cannot argue from *sensus plenior* that references to Israel were intended by God to mean the church, or that the promises made to Israel are to be applied "spiritually" to the church. Kaiser's warning must be heeded. "To argue for a *sensus plenior*, a fuller, deeper or secondary theological sense, which arises either from the princi-

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<sup>22</sup> Though an argument from silence, this question by the disciples and Jesus' response indicate the coming of the kingdom must have been a topic of discussion during the forty days of Jesus' appearances. Jesus did not reject the idea of the coming of the kingdom. Rather, He told them that they were not to know such things and that they were to concern themselves with the task He had already given them in His three "great commissions."

pal divine author of Scripture or from the totality of revelation in general and the New Testament in particular—especially a meaning which eluded the human author in the act of giving the Old Testament text—is to make nonsense out of revelation and to lead Christ's Church into the neo-orthodox confusion between illumination and revelation."<sup>23</sup>

Any argument from *sensus plenior* that in the Old Testament God included references to the church is invalidated by Paul's affirmation that God intended to keep His plan for the church a secret. It was not God's intention that some double sense be included.

### CONCLUSION

Any argument on the basis of *sensus plenior* that the church is revealed in the Old Testament is invalidated by Paul's definition of mystery and his clear teaching that the church was indeed a divine mystery. References to Israel do not have a second, deeper, divinely intended meaning. Each reference means exactly what is said. Promises made to Israel were never intended for the church, nor given to the church following Israel's rejection of Jesus.<sup>24</sup>

Paul's description of the church as a divine mystery discounts any argument from *sensus plenior* for applying the promises to Israel to the church. Still many promises given to Israel remain unfulfilled, awaiting Jesus' return. Since God's gifts and calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29), what was given to Israel has not been revoked. The church's place in God's present program cannot replace or invalidate promises made to the nation Israel. Only if one can demonstrate that God intended a second sense in a promise to Israel that was always intended to mean "the people of God of all times" should one apply to the church any Old Testament promise made to Israel. And Paul has made it clear that one cannot do this without violating his definition of "mystery."

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<sup>23</sup> Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Present State of Old Testament Studies," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 18 (spring 1975): 73-74.

<sup>24</sup> The promise of a restored kingdom under Messiah in Isaiah 54-66 follows the prophecy of the Suffering Servant in chapter 53. The rejection of Jesus by the nation was not a surprise to God nor to Isaiah. It was a part of God's plan and program for Israel. In Isaiah the nation's rejection necessarily precedes their spiritual and national restoration. For God to take it from them and give it to another people group, such as the Gentiles, would be inconsistent with the outline of His plan detailed in Isaiah.



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