



Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery
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Unraveling the Mystery

When reading through the four Gospels, one is immediately confronted with a difficult problem: Why are Israel and her leaders unable to grasp fully Jesus' identity and mission? Jesus himself claims that he is the climax of Israel's history and that the entire Old Testament anticipates his arrival, yet why is he not welcomed with open arms? Are not the Jewish leaders, the Old Testament scholars of their day, steeled in their resolve to quell Jesus' mission to restore Israel? One of Jesus' core teachings concerns the establishment of God's eternal kingdom on the earth, which will take place through his ministry, but Israel by and large rejects Jesus' kingdom message.

When Jesus hangs on the cross, the disciples flee for their lives. When the women report to the disciples that Jesus has been raised from the dead, the disciples are reticent to believe. Yet, how can the apostle Paul state in 1 Corinthians 15:3 that "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures"? If the crucifixion and the resurrection were predicted in the Old Testament, then why were the disciples slow to believe? Jesus himself predicted his death and resurrection on several occasions! It appears, then, that even though the Old Testament anticipates Jesus and his ministry, there is some aspect of unexpectedness or *newness* to Jesus' identity and mission, which some would say cannot be found at all in the Old Testament.

Another poignant example is Jesus' interaction with the two men on the way to Emmaus. Jesus castigates them for being "slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken" (Lk 24:25). Surprisingly, Jesus then goes on to demonstrate to them that the whole Old Testament ultimately points to him. A similar event occurs in John's Gospel in the midst of Jesus' interactions with the Jewish leaders: "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (Jn 5:39-40). Jesus' words cut deeply as they expose his method of interpreting the Old Testament – the person of Jesus unlocks the ultimate meaning of the entire Old Testament. Simply put, the Jewish leaders failed to interpret the Old Testament correctly, but we must ask why. Were they not the biblical scholars of their day?

The same can be said for how the Old Testament is used in the New Testament. On a number of occasions, New Testament authors cite the Old Testament in creative ways, ways that seemingly have little to do with the original intent of the Old Testament authors. An often-cited example of this is found in Ephesians 5:31-32, where the writer cites Genesis 2:24 and applies it to Christ and the church: "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church" (NIV). By all appearances, the union



BOOK EXCERPT

G. K. Beale (PhD, University of Cambridge) holds the J. Gresham Machen Chair of New Testament and is professor of New Testament and biblical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary. His books include *The Book of Revelation* (New International Greek Testament Commentary), 1-2 *Thessalonians* (The IVP New Testament Commentary Series), *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* and *We Become What We Worship*.

Benjamin L. Gladd (PhD, Wheaton College) serves as assistant professor of New Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi. He previously served as an adjunct faculty member at Wheaton College, teaching New Testament exegesis and interpretation, Greek, and introductory courses on the Old and New Testaments. Gladd is the author of *Revealing the Mysterion* and lives with his wife and two children.

between Adam and Eve is viewed as ultimately pointing to Christ and the church. Christ, the author believes, is really “there” in the original context in Genesis 2:24. Is there not a “new” layer of meaning in the Genesis text that was not in the mind of the Old Testament author but was in the mind of the New Testament author? Do New Testament writers “read in” new ideas to the Old Testament texts that they cite? And, if so, how can we consider there to be a consistent unity to the whole Bible?

Israel’s unbelief in Jesus, Jesus’ hermeneutical method, and Paul’s use of Genesis 2:24 share a common thread: some believe that the New Testament, while resuming Israel’s story, does not stand in continuity with the Old Testament. Accordingly, an element of discontinuity or “newness” runs through the entire New Testament. Depending on the topic, some elements tend to stand more in continuity with the Old Testament and others seem to be in discontinuity. The New Testament writers, on occasion, tip their hat to this notion of continuity/discontinuity by employing the term *mystery*. They tether this term to important topics such as the nature of the latter-day kingdom (Mt 13 and par.), Jesus’ messiahship (1 Cor 2:7), the resurrection (1 Cor 15), the relationship between Jews and Gentiles (Eph 3) and the timing of Israel’s restoration (Rom 11). By using the term *mystery*, a term from the book of Daniel that embodies both continuity and discontinuity, the New Testament writers expect their audiences to understand that the topic under discussion contains both of these elements. In other words, the term *mystery* alerts the reader that the topic at hand stands both in continuity and discontinuity to the Old Testament.

We will define *mystery* generally as the *revelation of God’s partially hidden wisdom, particularly as it concerns events occurring in the “latter days.”* As we will see, scholars are on the right track when defining *mystery* as *divine wisdom that was previously “hidden” but has now been “revealed.”* We will attempt to sharpen this definition, but generally speaking this widely held understanding of the biblical mystery is correct. Augmenting this definition, *mystery* often means something close to our modern-day denotation – knowledge that is somewhat baffling. In general accordance with the contemporary understanding, several Old Testament and New Testament texts describe individuals not understanding or grasping the mystery. What makes the term *mystery* so dynamic, even complex, is that the biblical writers sometimes use two definitions *simultaneously*: (1) God’s wisdom has finally been disclosed, but nevertheless (2) his wisdom remains generally incomprehensible to unbelievers. The biblical conception of mystery envelops both of these notions.

– Adapted from the Introduction

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Krista Carnet, broadcast publicity, at 800.843.4587 ext. 4013 or kkcarnet@ivpress.com
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