

WHAT IS NEW ABOUT THE REVEALED MYSTERY OF GENTILE SALVATION?

Jason S. DeRouchie, PhD (8/17/2025)

What does Paul mean in Eph 3:5 that that “the mystery of Christ”—the mystery related to Gentile salvation—“was not made known ... in other generations *as* it has now been revealed”? Both the Old and New Testaments make clear that the Old Testament saints were anticipating that the Messiah would save a remnant from Israel and from the nations. For example, ...

1. God declared that Abraham would become “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:4) and then promised that his future singular “offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (22:17–18; cf. Gal 3:8).
2. God also noted through Isaiah that his servant would not only “bring back the preserved of Israel” but also be “a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth” (Isa 49:6; cf. Acts 13:47; 26:23).
3. Through Jeremiah, God spoke of a day when “all the nations shall gather to ... the presence of the LORD” (Jer 3:17; cf. 12:16; 30:8–9), and through Zechariah, he foretold how “many nations shall join themselves to the LORD ... and shall be my people” (Zech 2:11; cf. 8:22–23).

These types of verses could be multiplied into the dozens if not hundreds. Thus, Paul could say, “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’” The apostle believed that the very “gospel of God” was “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures concerning his Son” (Rom 1:1–3), and he draws on passages from the Law and the Prophets and Writings (15:8–12; cf. Ps 18:49; Deut 32:43; Ps 117:1; Isa 11:10) to justify his mission to the Gentiles. So, when Paul says the mystery of Gentile salvation “was not made known to the sons of men in other generations *as* it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit,” he must mean it wasn’t revealed to the extent that God disclosed it to the new covenant apostles and prophets. That is, the particle “*as*” in 3:5 marks a shift from partial awareness to fuller awareness and not a move from complete ignorance to knowledge. There is continuity between the testimony of the Testaments, but there is also discontinuity.

Jesus said, “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Matt 13:17). Indeed, saints from Abel to Abraham “all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar” (Heb 11:13). Part of what has changed in the progression between the old age to the new is the movement from anticipation to realization. Yet I think there is more.

The challenge of the early church was not in grasping that the Gentiles could become part of God’s people. Rahab the Canaanite, Ruth the Moabite, and Uriah the Hittite had all become Israelites in the old covenant era, and for Uriah this would have included circumcision. The old covenant Scriptures gave new covenant saints categories for Gentile inclusion in the people of God, and they also foretold that the days of the Messiah would bring in a massive influx of those from the nations. For centuries the Jews had anticipated that the Messiah of God would bring the saving blessing of God to a transformed people of God from all the nations of the earth.

But if this is the case, what does Paul mean when he says that “the mystery of Christ” for the Gentiles “was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit”? *I think what was not as clear in the Old Testament was that, when the Gentiles became Christians, they would do so without having to embrace all the old covenant markers that distinguished Jews from Gentiles.*

Many of the Old Testament passages that foretell Gentile inclusion in God’s future people imply circumcision (Ezek 47:22; cf. Exod 12:48–49) and speak of their pilgrimages to God’s temple (e.g., Isa 2:2–4; Jer 3:17; Zech 2:22–23) and their involvement in Sabbath keeping (Isa 56:4–5), sacrifices (56:6–7; 66:21), and feasts (Zech 14:16–19). Yet Jesus’s person and work culminating in his bodily resurrection showed that he was the substance to which all these old covenant shadows pointed (Col 2:16–17). Jesus was the ultimate temple (John 2:18–22), and all who by grace through faith participate in him become God’s temple and dwelling place, whether Jews or Gentiles (Eph 2:19–22). The Old Testament texts portraying a future pilgrimage to the temple Jerusalem are properly understood symbolically to portray an international ingathering to God in Christ at the end of the age. The center of Christianity is not the earthly Jerusalem but Jesus and the heavenly Jerusalem from which he reigns (1:20–21; 2:6; cf. Gal 4:25–26; Heb 12:22–24). Similarly, Old Testament texts that refer to those from the nations keeping Sabbaths and feasts and performing sacrifices we should read figuratively as typological and not direct prophecy. Jesus is now “Lord of the Sabbath” in who we find our rest (Matt 11:28–30; 12:8), he is our “Passover Lamb” through whom we find pardon (1 Cor 5:7), and we should offer our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1), praising him with our lips and doing good and sharing, for “such sacrifices are pleasing to God” (Heb 13:15–16; cf. 1 Pet 2:5). Because at the cross Jesus overcame the unclean serpent, the distinction between clean and unclean animals is abolished in the new covenant and with it the distinction between Israelites and non-Israelites that the food laws created (Mark 7:19; Acts 10:14–15, 28; cf. Lev 20:25–26).

Supporting my reading, just recall Paul’s comments from the previous passages. Beginning in 2:11:

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands—remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. (2:11–12)

Because the Gentiles were separated from Israel, they were separated from Christ.

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (2:13–18)

Both Jews and Gentiles needed reconciliation with God, and in Christ a new humanity is formed that is marked by faith in Christ and not “the law of commandments expressed in ordinances.” Thus, part of the revealed mystery of Christ is that Gentile Christians as Gentiles are full fellow participants in God’s people.