

# The "Mystery" of the Cross of Christ

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The "mystery" which was revealed by God to the Apostle Paul forms the heart of the gospel which Paul preached. Any serious discussion about this "mystery" should begin with the cross of Christ. To Paul, the message of the cross was powerful, for it was at the cross where Jesus Christ established the basis for the "mystery" or "secret administration." This may be confirmed through an examination of those key passages in Paul's letters where the "mystery" is discussed:

Eph. 2:13-3:6

*But now you who were sometimes afar off were made near by the blood of Christ ... having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in dogmas; in order to create in Himself of both [Jew and Gentile] one new humanity, so making peace ...*

*For this cause ... if you have heard of the administration of the grace of God ... How by revelation He made known to me a mystery ...*

*That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body and partakers of His promise in Christ by the gospel.*

Col. 1:20-27

*And, having made peace by the blood of His cross ... to reconcile all things to Himself ... whether things in earth, or things in heaven ...*

*I am made a minister, according to the administration of God ... Even the mystery, which had been hid from eons and from generations, but is now made manifest to His saints;*

*To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory ...*

Col. 2:14-15 (Moffatt)

*He canceled the regulations which stood against us - all these obligations He set aside when He nailed them to the cross, when He cut away the Angelic Rulers and Powers from us, exposing them to all the world and triumphing over them in the cross.*

I Cor. 2:6-8

*But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the eons unto our glory; Which none of the Princes of the eon knew, for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*

The accomplishments of Christ at the cross are those which comprise the mystery. We may glean from the above quoted passages at least three major points:

1. The old testament (covenant) was "done away" or "abolished" along with the rules, rituals and dogmas contained in the Mosaic Law.
2. The authority of angelic powers was abolished: a condition pertaining not only to demonic powers, but to all angelic authorities including those angelic classes which exercised their control in the old testament.
3. The grounds for a "new humanity" were established: the "new creation" of the spiritual "body of Christ," wherein all members have peace and open access with God as their Father, and are all equal members regardless of race, gender or social status.

The first point is held by most Christians at various stages; few would argue that the old testament was in some sense "done away" or "abrogated" by Jesus Christ; many assert that the old testament was actually "postponed" or "put in abeyance," but Paul was very insistent that it was "abolished." Although Paul stated that the old testament was useful "for our learning" (I Cor. 10:11), he nonetheless characterized it as a

"dispensation" of "death" and "condemnation" (2 Cor. 3:7,9).

The second point in regard to the abolishment of angelic authorities will perhaps prove most difficult for many to digest in regard to what we have been accustomed to believe about the spirit world being categorically divided between evil "demons" and purely-good "angels." Nowadays, "angels" are commonly thought to be synonymous with "good spirits." But Paul and other writers of his time did not think this way. While the perception of demons as thoroughly evil held true for Paul as for us, the idea that "all" angels were "good" did not, because assorted classes of angels (outside of demons) were regarded as antagonistic as well. As T. Johnson states, "In the world view of early Christian and other first century writers, there were many supernatural spirits to contend with, good and evil angels, demonic powers, and a host of invisible spirits variously named (e.g. Rom. 8:38; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16; 2:10, 15; Heb. 1:4, 14)."<sup>1</sup>

A clear connection can be seen between the rules, rituals and dogmas contained in the old testament and the "Angelic Rulers and Powers" defeated at the cross (Col. 2:14-15), because when the old testament was "done away," the authority of these angelic powers went with it. What then was that connection? First, both Paul in Gal. 3:19 and Stephen in Acts 7:53 proclaimed that the Law was "ordained," "prescribed," or "delivered" by angels. It is clear then that angels played a very active role at the formation and transmission of the OT legislation to Israel.

Secondly, Paul also stated that such regulations contained in the old testament pertaining to "days, months, times, and years" (Gal. 4:10) and "in respect to meat ... drink ... holy days ... new moons ... and Sabbaths" (Col. 2:16) were according to the "elemental spirits of the world" (Gal. 4:3,9; Col. 2:8, 20 - Moffatt, RSV, NEB and TEV).

The "elements" was another title used by Paul to signify angelic beings, alluded to as such because these angels governed the forces of nature and employed such natural forces as fire, water, earth

and air to prescribe penalties upon those who transgressed their laws (Heb. 2:2). Their activity becomes noticeable through the numerous catastrophes which befell sinners throughout the old testament, and is recognizable in Rev. 16:2-12. These same angels prescribed the "holy days" and "sabbaths," and also functioned as "guardians and administrators" which kept people in bondage under the Law until Christ came (Gal. 3:23; 4:2) and provided us freedom from their authority.

According to the Dead Sea Scrolls, angelic hosts were also the "holy spirits" which endowed the leaders of the congregation with "knowledge" along with other spiritual manifestations and participation with these angelic spirits of "knowledge" was zealously sought;<sup>2</sup> even the "comforter" (Paraclete) in the Gospel of John was a title widely used of angels who functioned as mediators and advocates on behalf of the elect, though Jesus in the Gospel of John re-adapted this term to pertain to the gift of holy spirit which He would send.<sup>3</sup> It is significant that the spirit of Christ residing in every believer carries out the same functions previously performed by angels and empowers every believer with several spiritual abilities and manifestations, thus ending the need for dependence upon angels for access to God, spiritual empowerments and the resultant benefits.

A major problem perceived by Paul with the "Judaisms" of his day (regardless of whether this was always a problem, or one which later developed), was that of "angel worship" (Col. 2:19), for people were enslaved to those "called gods" (I Cor. 8:5), but "who by nature, are not gods" (Gal. 4:8). The extent of "angel worship" is witnessed from the writings of that era, and may be discerned from the Dead Sea Scrolls, as in the writing, "The Messianic Rule" (IQSa 2:3-10):

"No man smitten with any human uncleanness shall enter the assembly of God ... No man smitten in his flesh, or paralysed in his feet or hands, or lame, or blind, or deaf, or dumb, or smitten in his flesh with a visible blemish ... for the Angels of Holiness

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<sup>1</sup>T. Johnson, p. 94, *New International Biblical Commentary*, , *Letters of 1,2,3 John*, v.17 (Hendrickson, 1993).

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<sup>2</sup>E. Earle Ellis, " 'Spiritual' Gifts in the Pauline Community," pp. 128-144, NTS 20, 1974.

<sup>3</sup>E. Schillebeeckx, p. 423f, *Christ* (Crossroad, 1983).

are [with] their [congregation], for he is smitten."<sup>1</sup>

Herein we are brought to our third point concerning the "new humanity" and of its necessity in relation to the abolishment of the old testament and the authority of angelic authorities. In contrast to Qumran, where people were turned away out of reverence for the "angels of holiness," Jesus turned away no one, and lovingly embraced the "rejectees"

*... But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed ... (Luke 14:12-21):*

The Gospels are filled with many examples of Jesus reaching out to the "blind," the "dumb," the "lame" and so on, and delivering them of their afflictions.

But not only did the Old Testament system magnify enmity between God and humanity, it also engendered "enmity" between human beings on the grounds of race, gender and social standing in addition to those ailments listed above. But this "enmity" was destroyed at the cross of Christ:

*... having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in dogmas; for to create in Himself of both [Jew and Gentile] one new humanity, so making peace;*

*And that He might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross ... (Eph. 2:15-16).*

In the body of Christ,

*there is no Jew, nor yet Gentile, there is no slave nor yet free, there is no male and female (Gal. 3:28);*

From now on, "we are acquainted with no one according to the flesh" for everyone, "in Christ is a new creation" (II Cor. 5:16-17). Through the one spirit of Christ we now enjoy open access to the Father (Eph. 2:18). We have been "sealed with the holy spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:14), bestowed to us freely by God's grace and making each one of us a member of God's family:

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<sup>1</sup>G. Vermes, p. 102, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (Penguin, 1987). See also *Jesus and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, pp. 261-267, edited by J.H. Charlesworth (Doubleday, 1992).

*Consequently, then, no longer are you strangers and foreigners, but you are joint-citizens of the saints and belong to God's family,*

*being built up on the foundation of ... Jesus Christ himself,*

*in whom the entire building, being connected together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord;*

*in Whom you, also, are being built together for God's dwelling place, in spirit (Eph. 2:19-22).*

*On this behalf I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for you, the nations,*

*since you surely hear of the administration (gr. oikonomia) of the grace of God that is given to me for you,*

*that by revelation the secret [mystery] is made known to me ... (Eph. 3:1-3).*

The word "administration" (gr. oikonomia) literally means "home-rule" or the "rule" or "reign" of a household. The administration spoken of in Eph. 3:3 is the "home-rule" of God's family referred to in Ephesians 2:19ff. Scholars often speak of the different Jewish sects in the first century as "home rule" parties (i.e. Pharisees, Saducees, etc.),<sup>2</sup> each possessing their own ideas as to how a theocracy should be run. However, God's "administration" established through Christ may best be understood as being the "family" that it is, rather than a political, governmental structure. In reality, God is our Father, and we are His children.

L.B. Paton noted that the "fundamental fact" and "foundation" upon which Jesus based His gospel was the "Fatherhood of God" as attested by Jesus' continual addressing God as "Father" throughout the Gospels. While this title is used in the Old Testament, Jesus advanced to this "a new meaning both extensively and intensively" going "well beyond the teaching of the Old Testament" in magnifying that "parental love of God toward His

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<sup>2</sup>M. Enslin, *Christian Beginnings*, pp. 68, 113, etc. (Harper & Brothers, 1938).

For a good introduction on the "Elements" see Ernest Martin's booklet "Angelic Powers and the Law of Moses" (ASK Pub., Portland, Oregon, 1989).

children" with a love that transcended "the limits of race" and extends to whole world (cf. John 3:16).<sup>1</sup>

God's very heart was brilliantly expressed through Jesus Christ and in contrast to the fiery swords, condemnations and judgments which were to accompany the expected Messiah, Jesus Christ came dispensing love, grace and truth. Because of that both angels and men had Him crucified. And yet even after that Christ forgave them while hanging from the cross! Christ responded to hatred with love. The message of the cross is indeed powerful, of which there is no need to be ashamed.

In conclusion, the "mystery" is a lot more than a "gap" in God's chronological plan as often portrayed in colorful dispensationalist charts. The "mystery" is God's "secret will" which He "purposed in Christ" - to have an "administration of the complement of the eras," of which God has appointed His Son as the "Head" - through which to reconcile all those in heaven and earth to himself (Eph. 1:9-11).

As Christian believers, members of the body of Christ, we have been entrusted with the "service of reconciliation" and are emissaries for Christ to proclaim this "good news" to humans and before angels (2 Cor. 5:18-21; Eph. 3:10). The "cross of Christ" may be considered our "spiritual declaration of independence" because the work of Christ resulted in true "liberty" (cf. 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:1). In a dying world where wars, strifes and slaveries abound on account of fleshly and religious differences, the "mystery" of the cross of Christ is just as relevant and urgently needed today as it was almost two thousand years ago.

[Daniel Mahar is currently translating into English a German work on the subject of angels]

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<sup>1</sup>L.B. Paton, *Spiritism and the Cult of the Dead in Antiquity*, pp. 290-291 (Macmillan, 1921).

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