

GOD AS REVEALER OF MYSTERIES AND FOUNTAIN OF LOVE

Jesse W. Baker on Divine Revelation

The Bible is full of mysteries, a statement that will likely garner “Amen” from lovers and critics alike. But that shared sentiment might quickly divide by asking a simple question, namely, “What type of mystery are you talking about?” No doubt, critics of the Scriptures will claim that the “mystery” in question is that the Bible is full of complicated riddles, not to mention (from their perspective) views of the world that hardly seem rooted in any shared sense of reality. While the Scriptures do contain puzzling passages, the lover of the text could rightly say that these puzzles are not where “mystery” truly lies. To fully grasp the concept of mystery, one must see how the word is used in the text itself. Such a pursuit will lead to a simple discovery: the common idea that “mystery” is a dilemma that people must resolve does not hold up to scrutiny. This should not come as a surprise since the text was written for people who already knew the stories. When, for example, we read the Gospels, we are not shocked that Judas is a traitor when we get to the end of the story because we are told of his treacherous

ways from the first moment he is introduced.¹ The texts we have are given not primarily that we might figure out *how* the events unfold, but that we might know *why* the events unfolded as they did. Furthermore, the Scriptures are given, on the whole, so that readers will come to a deeper understanding of the character of God. In other words, in the Bible “mysteries” are the moments God makes his will and his character clearly known to his people which, as a result, enables God’s people to respond in faithfulness, wisdom, and love.

If mysteries are used by God to reveal his character, then the dilemma/discovery binary aided by human effort and ingenuity are not a necessary part of the process. Instead, all the emphasis is on God and his gift-giving nature. This is the case in both Old Testament and New Testament contexts. In his commentary on Revelation, Biblical scholar Tremper Longman III says, “A mystery is a truth or reality that is hidden from people. A mystery of God is something that he knows but of which humans are not aware at least until a moment of disclosure. God reveals mysteries to his servants as he sees fit.”² Old Testament scholar W. Sibley Towner shows another side of the mystery coin in his commentary on Daniel playfully saying that while Daniel’s use of “mystery” is a bit of a mystery itself, the text ultimately shows that it is a “kind of knowledge which . . . cannot be ascertained through reason or conventional wisdom, but only through divine revelation. God and God alone is the

¹ See Matthew 8:4; Mark 3:19; Luke 6:16; and, John 6:71.

² Tremper Longman III, *Revelation through Old Testament Eyes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregal Academic, 2022), 157.

revealer of such mysteries.”³ When we look at the Biblical texts, we find that the mysteries given are not revealed arbitrarily or discovered accidentally; the revelation comes as an intentional gift from God to, again, highlight God’s character and to disclose how God’s cosmic story is unfolding to his faithful followers, even in surprising or unexpected ways.

A Mystery (and Framework) Revealed:

Daniel 2

While not the first time the word is used in the Bible, Daniel 2 uses “mystery” repeatedly to highlight both God’s character and the appropriate action of a faithful follower. The narrative of Daniel is set during the period of Babylonian exile, where many of the people of Judah and Jerusalem have been deported to live. The first six chapters of the book contain several stories where God’s faithful people are put into situations where their allegiances are tested. The question readers wrestle with is, “Will the characters in the narratives (i.e., Daniel and his three friends) remain true to Israel’s God in the face of threats on their lives, or will they succumb to the pagan pressures and choose the (seemingly) easier path of idolatry?” What we find is whether it is refusing to eat the Gentile king’s food (Daniel 1), not bowing to worship his idol statue (Daniel 3), or ignoring the edict to pray only to the king (Daniel 6), Daniel and his three friends maintain faithfulness throughout these stories. Individually and cumulatively, these stories provide examples to all Israelites of all times what fidelity looks like. The faithfulness of Daniel and his friends is only one

³ W. Sibley Towner, *Daniel*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1984), 32.

part of the story, though, as these narratives also highlight the character of the God of Israel. Even though God's people are in a foreign land, God still proves himself faithful to those who live faithfully.

The character of God (especially his wisdom and power) are on full display in Daniel 2. The chapter begins with King Nebuchadnezzar awaking from a troubling dream and enlisting the help of the local magicians, enchanters, sorcerers, and astrologers to both tell him his dream and interpret the dream. A failure to do both of these things would result in death for the whole lot of those recruited to help (Daniel 2:2-6). Naturally, the helpers consider this not just a tall task but an impossibility. The astrologers note — saying much more than they even realize — “There is no one on earth who can do what the king asks! No king, however great and mighty, has ever asked such a thing of any magician or enchanter or astrologer.”⁴ If no human has the ability to both reveal and interpret the undisclosed thoughts of Nebuchadnezzar, his only hope is to seek help beyond the human realm. When Daniel enters the story, he and his friends pray to God for help, since as they alone know, God “reveals deep and hidden things; he knows what lies in darkness, and light dwells with him.”⁵ Following God's gift of revelation, Daniel shares both the dream and its interpretation which lead to Nebuchadnezzar's proclamation, “Surely your God is the God of gods and the Lord of kings and a revealer of mysteries, for you were able to reveal this mystery.”⁶

⁴ Daniel 2:10, NIV.

⁵ Daniel 2:22, NRSV.

⁶ Daniel 2:47, NRSV.

Daniel 2 gives readers a proper framework for how to understand “mystery” as it is used in the rest of the Bible. The English word “mystery” is used over thirty times in both the Old and New Testaments. More often than not, the word “mystery” is accompanied by some sort of action which can be traced to divine hands. For example, Daniel says, “there is a God in heaven who *reveals* mysteries.”⁷ Paul writes to the Colossians, “To them God has chosen *to make known* among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.”⁸ And in Revelation, John is told that after the seventh trumpet blows that “the mystery of God will be *accomplished*.”⁹ God is the one who both knows and reveals mysteries, and humans are completely dependent on God shedding light on that secret information. Otherwise, humans remain in the dark.

The Great Mystery: Jesus and His Kingdom

Most moderns do not use the word mystery in the way we just described. Many today would assume that any mystery is something unknown that needs to be figured out or a puzzle that needs to be solved. Thinking of it that way largely puts the onus on humans to find the solutions to all problems. Our modern usage is not a bad thing. In fact, this usage has led to many great stories in their own right (I, for one, love Sherlock Holmes in all of his different iterations). While our modern usage is not inherently bad, it is simply different than the way the Bible uses it. It would only become bad if we impose our

⁷ Daniel 2:28, NRSV, emphasis added.

⁸ Colossians 1:27, NRSV, emphasis added.

⁹ Revelation 10:7, NRSV, emphasis added.

modern terminology on the Bible, confusing readers about how the biblical narrative unfolds from a divine perspective.

As Paul tells the Ephesians, Jesus the Messiah was a secret God has long known about and has only, in his day, recently revealed to wondrous effect. It was Jesus who gave every spiritual blessing (Ephesians 1:3), it is through Jesus that people of faith are made sons and daughters of God (Ephesians 1:5), and it is through Jesus that unity has been accomplished (Ephesians 1:10). To be sure, these are not a random collection of achievements, but these are categories that will help Paul frame his argument he is making for the Ephesian readers. The argument is that, surprise of all surprises, even this Gentile audience has been incorporated into the family of faith. This is the “mystery of his will . . . which [God] purposed in Christ.”¹⁰ As Paul explicitly states later, “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.”¹¹ This revelation is perhaps not what humans, even faithful followers of God, would have predicted, but God’s revelation has made it clear.

The Mystery of Thanksgiving

I confess two contradictory thoughts when it comes to the practical and apologetic impact of this sort of mystery. First, as a modern who has, at times, bought into the overly individualistic mindset and the necessity of self-actualization our culture emphasizes, I am

¹⁰ Ephesians 1:9, NRSV.

¹¹ Ephesians 3:6, NRSV.

bothered by the notion that a mystery is not something I can discover or solve on my own. It is off-putting that I must rely on something outside myself to make something clear to me. I'm really not sure if I can argue my way out of that way of thinking. But where strict logic may fail, narrative tells a more powerful tale. It is interesting to think that Israel's task was a seemingly simple one: trust God and not themselves. In fact, in trusting God Israel would garner a reputation seemingly unheard of in the ancient world. As Moses tells the generation about to enter the Promised Land:

See, I have taught you decrees and laws as the Lord my God commanded me, so that you may follow them in the land you are entering to take possession of it. Observe them carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people."¹²

The narrative plays itself out, albeit in a negative fashion. Israel was a disobedient people, and therefore no such wise reputation came their way. There were a few bright spots, with Daniel and, of course, our Lord Jesus being some of the highlights. On a practical level, even with these few examples, the narrative shows that faithfulness works and trust in God leads to wisdom. What God reveals creates a clear path for prospering and flourishing.

¹² Deuteronomy 4:5-6, NRSV.

Second, I am thankful that this responsibility is taken out of my hands. My track record has proven as anything but successful, so it is good for everyone that this burden is God's to bear and not my own. The model for how this is enacted and embodied turns back to God, especially as expressed in the life and ministry of Jesus the Messiah.

Turning to Jesus, it is appropriate to explore this area of thanksgiving more, in particular as it is expressed sacramentally. As a pastor, I have no greater regular joy than presiding at the table. Personally, it has been a moment of deep connection with people in the congregations I have served. It is a holy moment to place a piece of bread torn from a larger loaf and say, "The body of Christ, broken for you." I've witnessed the deep connections that are formed between the communicants and God, whether in the form of a simple but sincere whispering of, "Thanks be to God," when the bread is placed in their hands, or the moments of prayer when people kneel at the altar after taking Communion. The gratitude expressed in this moment is why we call this meal Eucharist, a word which traces its origin to the Greek word for "thanksgiving." That said, it has only been the last few years that it hit me (and I've served churches for over eleven years now) what is really being expressed in the Communion liturgy. After prayerfully recalling the words Jesus spoke during the last meal he had with his disciples before his death, the pastor prays (followed by the congregational response in bold):

And so,

in remembrance of these your mighty acts in
Jesus Christ,

we offer ourselves in praise and thanksgiving
as a holy and living sacrifice,
in union with Christ's offering for us,
as we proclaim the *mystery* of faith.

**Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will
come again.¹³**

The death, resurrection, and return of Jesus is a mystery precisely because it is something God knew about long before it happened and was revealed in due time. But I wanted to include this whole prayer around the word “mystery” as it makes an important point, one that bears apologetic import. The mystery revealed is not simply a thought or idea to ponder; rather, it is a life that was and is lived. Just as Jesus was revealed as one who loved, who served, and who died so that others might live, so too do faithful followers of Jesus seek to do the same with their lives. This is more than an apologetic of words, as important as that is. This is an apologetic of loving actions. If we believe that Jesus was a mystery revealed, that he was revealed as the climax of a story of love that began at creation and will be consummated at his return, then it is a story we are meant to live and express now. The mystery continues to be revealed in the loving actions of Jesus’s disciples. As we read in John’s Gospel, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”¹⁴

¹³ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville, TN: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 10 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ John 13:35, NRSV.

Mystery Solved

Just because a Biblical mystery is something that God knows and reveals does not mean that we understand the idea exhaustively. The Trinity, for example, is a mystery revealed in Scripture and tradition, but that does not guarantee that even the most intelligent of Christians can say everything there is to say on the matter. What we have been given, however, is enough to maintain faithfulness and trust. God does not know the limitations we do and has the vantage point to know what we cannot. Given that God himself is a giver and a sharer of the good that infused the world's first days, we can rest assured that as he provided for his people in the past, he will provide again for us in the future, perhaps even in surprising ways. Just as he gave his son to show his love, he asks now that we give the same, knowing that in God there is a fountain of love which never runs dry. The mystery of Christ was revealed to bring about a new creation, a new kingdom, so that followers of Christ might live as if the new heaven and new earth of Revelation 21 and 22 is a present reality.

If anyone wants to know who God is or how we should live in light of who God is, the Christian can say in all seriousness, "Look to Christ," thus easily resolving that mystery.

Bibliography

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