

Hebrews, Peter, Revelation and Paul's Mystery of Christ in Ephesians 3:4-6

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## Introduction

Ephesians 3:14-21 is an extraordinary passage, possibly expressing the conclusion of Paul's prayer begun in Ephesians 1:17-23, that each Christian might be given the power to deeply and wholeheartedly know the incredible love of God. In unpacking this, Paul deals with many important topics. This essay will explore Ephesians 3:4-6, where Paul reveals the "mystery of Christ," to be the Gentile inclusion into God's plan of salvation. The incredible love of God in the book of Ephesians is inherently tied in with the great mystery of the Gentiles' inclusion into the new covenant. Because were it not for that inclusion and that great mystery slowly revealed throughout human history, most Christians today being gentiles by all standards, would not know the love of Jesus. We shall see from here and in certain test cases from non-Pauline, New Testament epistles that the love described here is not an innovation of Paul but revelation in tune with the broader Christian witness.

### Paul's Mission and One Body

In unpacking the importance of Ephesians 3:4-6, it is crucial to take a brief look at the text itself and how it fits into Paul's theology as a whole.

*"4 When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, 5 which 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. 6 This mystery is that the*

*Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.”<sup>1</sup>*

What is so special about this passage is that Paul is laying out what has become so important to him: the good news of Jesus for the Gentiles. In Romans 15, Paul plainly states that his calling is specifically to the Gentiles - a special calling which the other apostles acknowledged (Galatians 2:1-10).<sup>2</sup> This is also apparent in passages such as Acts 17, where Paul stands before Rome’s best minds at the Areopagus in Athens and presents the Gospel of Christ to an exclusively Gentile audience. In fact, all of Paul’s writings are colored by this calling he has received to be a “minister of Christ to the Gentiles,” for one of the things Paul is constantly stressing in his letter is the unity that Gentile Christians have with Jewish Christians under Christ. And apparently this was a problem for the early church. James Dunn commented on Paul’s purpose in writing his epistle to Rome, “An increasingly popular view in the second half of the twentieth century is that Paul wrote to counter (potential) division within Rome among the Christian house churches, particularly the danger of gentile believers despising less liberated Jewish believers.”<sup>3</sup> Scholarship aside, this is even apparent in scripture alone - Galatians 2:11-14 is Paul’s retelling of the Antioch episode, where Peter began to reject and avoid table fellowship with the Gentile Christians.<sup>4</sup> This visible division (which will

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<sup>1</sup> All English scriptures taken from the *English Standard Version (ESV)*. 2008. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 15:15-18 - “15 But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God 16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. 17 In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. 18 For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed”

<sup>3</sup> Dunn, James D. 1988. *Word Biblical Commentary: Romans 1-8*. Vol. 38A. Dallas: Word Books. lvii.

<sup>4</sup> Peter’s “open table” practice had likely been one already established there in Antioch at the time, but later he caved to the pressure of what Paul called the “circumcision party,” who believed that Christians became unclean by partaking freely of the food that the Gentiles did. That food being what was prohibited in Jewish diet. George, Timothy. 1994. *The New American Commentary: Galatians*. Vol. 30. N.p.: Broadman & Holman Publishers. 172-175.

be addressed later) is not indicative of two different directions of the early church, but rather revealing the threat that disunity posed to the early church, thereby influencing Paul's writing. Richard Longenecker notes this regarding the Antioch incident, "More than that, such withdrawals (Peter's withdrawal from fellowship) were disastrous for the outreach of the gospel to Gentiles and for the unity of the Church. What he did was for the sake of the Gospel's outreach to Gentiles and the oneness of all believers in Christ."<sup>5</sup>

What Paul does in his words there in Galatians, as well as in Romans are intended to produce unity within the body of Christ. 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 apply here as well. "Paul was troubled about the divisions within the church. Parties had been formed attaching themselves to the names of Paul, Apollos and Peter, and even that of Christ."<sup>6</sup> These divisions apparently formed themselves in the Corinthian church over nearly every distinction one could make, as is the case even in the church today. This is why in 1 Cor. 12:13, the distinctions Paul highlights as being done away with for oneness in Christ are "Jews or Greek, slave or free" effectively covering divisions that fall within class and culture for his ancient Greco-Roman world. Paul's words prior in chapters 1 and 3, when he speaks of believers attaching themselves to Paul or Apollos or Peter, etc., offer also a rebuke to divisions that arise from ideology, theology or political philosophy as well. But Paul goes a step further in Galatians 3:28 where he adds the category of gender, saying "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is *no male and female*, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." This is brilliant on Paul's part, for the vast majority of divisions within the church may arise from any of these four

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<sup>5</sup> Longenecker, Richard N. 1990. *Word Biblical Commentary: Galatians*. Vol. 41. Dallas, Texas: Word, Incorporated. 79.

<sup>6</sup> Morris, Leon. 1985. *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press. 27.

categories: culture, class, ideology and gender. Instead of these divisions, Paul offers a better way for believers to view themselves - as one in the body of Christ.

This overarching theme of unity in Paul's epistles is nothing new. Herman Ridderbos has this to say: "The basic thought in Ephesians and Colossians is therefore the same as that in Romans and 1 Corinthians: the church is one body in virtue of what Christ has accomplished for it and in virtue of its having been comprehended in him when he once suffered and died for it."<sup>7</sup> Paul's theology is robust here and given Paul's primary mission being specifically to the Gentiles, it becomes plain that the division he addresses most frequently in his letters is the division made between Jew and Gentile. But now, the dividing line between all believers (whether Jew or Gentile) is gone in Christ. Rather than dismembered sinners, Christians are forgiven *members* belonging in equal share to Jesus. So Romans, Galatians and 1 Corinthians connect us back to the words written in Ephesians 3:6: "*This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*" Obviously, for the Apostle Paul, an essential truth to understanding the Gospel of Jesus is what is found in Ephesians 3:4-6, that the mystery of Christ is the Gentile

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<sup>7</sup> "Not only is the church again and again simply called the body of Christ (Eph. 1:23; 4:13), and believers his members (Eph. 5:30), but "body" as a designation of the church is also used here in an absolute sense, whether or not further explained with the words: (which is) "his church" (Col. 1:18, 24; Eph. 4:4; Col. 3:15; 2:19). The peculiar expression in Ephesians 3:6 is typical of this pattern, where it is said of the gentiles that they, in addition to being fellow heirs, are "fellow body" (syssoma) and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus. The basic thought in Ephesians and Colossians is therefore the same as that in Romans and 1 Corinthians: the church is the one body in virtue of what Christ has accomplished for it and in virtue of its having been comprehended in him when he once suffered and died for it. This finds clear expression in the well-known passage of Ephesians 2:14f., where the corporate unity of Jews and gentiles is explained thus: "He [Christ] ... has made both ones.. by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments . . . that he might create the two in himself into one new man... and might reconcile both to God in [or into?] one body..All these indications of unity elucidate the thought of the one body in Christ." Ridderbos, Herman N. 1975. *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*. Translated by John Richard d. Witt. Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 377.

union with Christ also and inclusion of those Gentile believers in the promise of Jesus Christ.

### Ephesians 3:4-6 and the Nature of Biblical Mystery

Growing up I can remember sitting in the living room with my grandparents at their home, watching television with them during the day. When baseball, football, golf or tennis were not being broadcast, the space in between was usually filled with older mystery/detective shows. My grandmother had a favorite, *Murder, She Wrote*, a show about Jessica Fletcher, a prolific mystery writer who constantly found herself caught in the middle of a real life murder mystery worthy of one of her novels. Jessica Fletcher would solve these mysteries each time with her cunning, amateur sleuth skills. My grandfather's favorite was *Matlock*. The story of Ben Matlock (played by Andy Griffith), an Atlanta lawyer who used his legal and investigatory skills to solve mysteries in what usually turned into an epic courtroom drama. Both shows always involved crimes that couldn't be solved or had been improperly solved - mysteries where clues - information that would lead to the truth - had to be discovered and interpreted by the protagonist.

One thing shows like *Murder, She Wrote* and *Matlock* (along with most other mystery/detective/police dramas)<sup>8</sup> reveal about the western understanding of mystery is that it is almost always married to the idea of deciphering or decoding a difficult problem. While this generally captures the current understanding of mystery for a modern context, it is quite unhelpful in capturing the biblical meaning of mystery.

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<sup>8</sup> Honorable mentions go to *Colombo*, *Magnum P.I.* and *In the Heat of the Night*.

The first use of the word mystery ((רָ in the Hebrew/Aramaic, *mysterion* in the Greek Septuagint) comes in the book of Daniel where it occurs eight times, seven of which come in chapter two where Daniel is answering King Nebuchadnezzar as to the content and interpretation of his dream. King Nebuchadnezzar had grown suspicious of his own magicians and put them to the test. In giving them a test, the king not only demanded that the wisemen of Babylon interpret his dream, but that they also recount to him what the dream was. Daniel 2 tells how the best and brightest magician's of Babylon failed to know what the king's dream was, so King Nebuchadnezzar sought to kill all of them.

Daniel and his friends were also sought after by the king, and in an effort to save himself and his friends, Daniel inserted himself into the situation and volunteered to do for the king what the Babylonian wisemen could not do and retell the content of the dream as well as provide interpretation. Daniel 2:17-23 shows that in order for Daniel to carry out what he has volunteered himself for, God comes to Daniel and reveals the "mystery" to him in a night vision.

From the outset, this moment in history gives a sharp understanding of what the bible means when it uses the word mystery. As far as Daniel is concerned, the mystery at hand is the content of the dream rather than its interpretation. Daniel 2:30 gives us Daniel's own take: "But as for me, this mystery has not been revealed to me for any wisdom residing in me more than in any other living man, but for the purpose of making the interpretation known to the king, and that you may understand the thoughts of your mind." Daniel admits that the ability to interpret dreams is possessed by many other men and is not necessarily stronger in him than others, but Daniel does possess something else completely, something that helped him learn the mystery - that is that

God has come to Daniel and reveals the mystery to him. So contrary to what may typically be meant by “mystery” in the modern vernacular, mystery in the bible is not simple knowledge that needs to be deciphered or interpreted, but rather knowledge that must be revealed from God himself.<sup>9</sup>

Michael Minkoff, Jr., has this to say, “I think this lies at the heart of “secret” or “mystery” here and in the Gospels. Whatever various kinds of information divine mysteries might contain, their first defining earmark must remain *that God alone reveals them in His time*. And additionally that God reveals “mysteries” to do something as much as to say something.”<sup>10</sup> His point is evident. Daniel’s access to the mystery of the dream comes only through God’s divine revelation. And in connecting this with the Gospel accounts, the “mystery” of Christ’s parables and teachings becomes less about cryptic and hard-to-understand teachings, but more about whether or not God has revealed truth to the heart of the believer. Taking this point even further, Paul’s words in Ephesians 3:4-6 echo this same sentiment - what he calls “the mystery of Christ” is not a clue that Paul has found about the nature of salvation, nor is it simply a new way of interpreting the message of Christ. The mystery of Christ is the revelation of God that Gentiles have a share in the wonderful heavenly inheritance which Christ gives all believers in his gospel. B.B. Warfield had a wonderful analogy for this when he wrote:

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<sup>9</sup> I borrow this idea from Michael Minkoff who has eloquently put it this way: “Daniel agreed with Nebuchadnezzar’s assessment. He confessed: “But as for me, this mystery has not been revealed to me for any wisdom residing in me more than in any other living man, but for the purpose of making the interpretation known to the king, and that you may understand the thoughts of your mind” (Dan. 2:30). Further, Daniel 1:17 indicates a profound distinction between the God-given ability Daniel possessed to understand “visions and dreams” and the mere “knowledge and intelligence in all literature and wisdom” which his friends had likewise acquired. Apparently such learning proved inadequate for understanding visions and dreams, as desirable as it might prove in other contexts. Remember, the magicians possessed great learning and intellectual capacity as well (being learned men and “academics”), but they stood helpless to discern Nebuchadnezzar’s mystery.” Minkoff, Michael. 2019. “*The Mysterious Purpose of the Parables*.” Michael Minkoff, Jr. <https://michaelminkoff.com/purpose-of-the-parable/#fnref-16666-8>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



“The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before.”<sup>11</sup>

In light of this we can better understand what Paul means in Ephesians 3:4-6 when he speaks of the mystery of Christ, which is as he says in verse 6, “This mystery is that *the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.*” That is to say that the mystery was not a key or a cypher or a groundbreaking interpretation, but a divine revelation. Peter O’Brien has something useful to say here, in suggesting that what was revealed by God was not necessarily the inclusion of the Gentiles, but rather the manner in which God would bring both Israel and the Gentiles unto salvation.<sup>12</sup> Thus Paul’s mystery or secret of Gentile inclusion in Ephesians 3 is God’s revelation of full Gentile union and inclusion in salvation *through* Christ, in human history.<sup>13</sup>

## HEBREWS

In approaching Hebrews, the first thing that ought to be explored is the audience. What does the audience of Hebrews have to do with the Gospel mystery that the gentiles are now members of the body of Christ?

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<sup>11</sup> Warfield, Benjamin B. 1952. “Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity.” In *Biblical and Theological Studies*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed. 30.

<sup>12</sup> O’Brien, Peter T. 1999. *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Pillar New Testament Commentary). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company. 232.

<sup>13</sup> “Rather to speak of the savior Messiah who includes the Gentiles in his body is to speak of the one revealed secret of God [...] Consequently, the secret of Christ is not just the plan or doctrine of the Gentiles’ fee admission, but includes the execution of God’s decision on the plane of history.” Barth, Markus. 1974. *Ephesians*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 331.

The audience of Hebrews has been a long debated topic. Historically it has been understood that the letter was written to a Jewish audience living in Rome, a view which is easy to come to given the numerous and extensive Old Testament allusions.<sup>14</sup> John Calvin seemed to believe so, frequently citing “the Jews” as those to whom the argument and theme of the letter is geared.<sup>15</sup> If the author of Hebrews intended to write his letter to an exclusively Jewish audience, then what would that mean for Gentiles? However, despite the historic assumptions that come with this letter, it is important to let internal evidence speak for itself. F.F. Bruce helped extend Calvin’s with some nuance, arguing that the audience of Hebrews was likely a group of Christians of Jewish background who had been hellenized in their lives away from Israel, geographically.<sup>16</sup> Other scholars such as Gareth Cockerill have fine-tuned Bruce’s view even further, arguing that the term “Jewish Christians,” used to describe Hebrews’ audience, should be seen as a religious distinction rather than an ethnic one.<sup>17</sup> Both Jews and Gentiles professing Christ could have taken up certain Jewish practices and thus been familiar with the ways and language of the old covenant. The author of Hebrews never makes a distinction between Jew and Gentile, but rather focuses on essentially Christian identity - for the core message of the book of Hebrews is to point to Christ’s fulfillment of the Old Covenant and its requirements. So while the author of Hebrews may be writing specifically to those born into the Jewish faith now professing faith in Christ, it appears that Hebrews’ writer is not wholly concerned with whether the audience is exclusively Jewish or not.

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<sup>14</sup> Bruce, F. F. 1964. *Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids, MI: WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. xxiv-xxv.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, John. 1963. *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews and the First and Second Epistles of St Peter*. Translated by William B. Johnston. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce. xxx. - “We may infer from the epistle that they were Hellenists [Jews in the diaspora who had been molded and shaped by Greco-Roman society]; they knew the Old Testament in the Greek version. It is implied, too, that their knowledge of the ancient sacrificial ritual of ISrael was derived from the reading of the Old Testament and not from firsthand contact with the temple services in Jerusalem.”

<sup>17</sup> Cockerill, Gareth L. 2012. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. N.p.: Eerdmans Publishing Company. 20.

Rather, it is aimed at Christians at large - specifically those who are familiar with the Old Covenant and are wrestling with the decision to walk away from Christ or remain a part of the body.

The text of Hebrews offers some clues as well as to the author's agreement with Paul's words on the Gentile inclusion into the body of Christ. The first passage of note is Hebrews 11:30-31:

*“By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.”*

To fully understand the above text, it is helpful to backtrack to Hebrews 10:39. The writer has encouraged Christians saying *“But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”* This is a call for believers to hold fast to their faith rather than give up. The writer then follows up by defining what faith is in 11:1 - *“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* Having told them to hold fast to their faith and then defined exactly what is meant by faith, the author will turn to a rhetorical device in chapter 11 and clarify for the readers examples of faith they are already familiar with.<sup>18</sup> Among this list are all the patriarchs and heroes of the Old Testament, from Abel to Samuel. One interesting inclusion comes in verses 30-31, where the faith of Rahab is referenced as the kind of faith to be pursued by Christians. This is done without batting

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<sup>18</sup> Beale, G. K., and D. A. Carson, eds. 2007. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group. 984-985. This rhetorical device of using the phrase “by faith,” followed by a real example worked to impress on the audience that “people of God must be people of faith”. Thus further pressign the challenge of 10:39 to remain faithful rather than abandon the faith.

an eye. Rahab, the Gentile prostitute from Jericho is included among those whose faith in God is “to be commended” (11:39).

While the writer of Hebrews goes on in 11:39b-40 to point out that though their faith was great, it was not enough to receive the promise, it is striking to note that Rahab would be counted among the most faithful. Her inclusion on this list is not because of her identity as a Jew, but rather because of her faithfulness to God. Cockerill points out that the author of Hebrews identifies Rahab as a “prostitute” with the express purpose of highlighting Rahab’s faith rather than her merit or ethnicity or race.<sup>19</sup> The presence of Rahab in the pages of Hebrews reveals great agreement with Paul’s words in Ephesians 3:4-6. Just as Paul has made it known that the mystery of Christ is Gentile inclusion in the New Covenant, so too the writer of Hebrews has disclosed that traces of this mystery are found even in the Old Covenant. Even as God has revealed fully his plans to include Gentiles in salvation through Paul, the mystery began to unravel long before even the death of Christ.

The writer of Hebrews has no need to point out the fantastic news of the mystery of the Christ as Paul does because to his audience this fact is obvious. Why make plain something that is already embraced by you and your readers - just like when one enters a movie theater for the hundredth time, there is no need to be reminded what the dimming of the lights means for the start of the film: it is close at hand. To his audience, this truth seems already understood by way of who they are (as the author makes no great deal about a Jew-Gentile distinction among them, but rather focuses his time on encouraging Christians) and his rhetoric that makes plain that being a part of the New Covenant in Christ has nothing to do with merit or birth.

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<sup>19</sup> Cockerill. 584-585. “Second, by calling Rahab “the prostitute” the pastor makes it clear that one does not become or persevere as a part of Gods’ people because of previous merit or birth.”

Here lies an amazing truth for the believer - that is that God's plan to make Gentiles co-heirs has always been present. Hints of the fragrance of God's grace to the Gentiles have always been present in human history. This means that God's inclusion of Gentiles (most believers today who do not have Jewish heritage) has always been a calculated part of his plan. It was not a reactionary movement for God after giving the Jewish people countless chances to be faithful. Rahab's example shows that God's love for the Gentiles has been there since the beginning. Therefore it can confidently be said that Hebrews agrees with Paul in Ephesians 3 - the Gentiles are indeed united to the body of Christ and partakers of the promise of Christ as well. A comfort for most believers today to understand their place in redemptive history not as one of chance, but as one ordained by God.

## 1 Peter

Much is often made of the conflict between Peter and Paul in what has been called by some as the "Antioch incident."<sup>20</sup> Typically scholars pick up on passages such as Galatians 2:11-14 where Paul openly speaks of Peter's capitulation to the circumcision party (those wanting Gentile converts to become circumcised) and Paul's public call to correction. Michael Goulder argues that Galatians 2:11-14 reveal a clear division that existed in the early church; the Apostle Peter and the Apostle Paul each represented a different movement (mission as he calls it).<sup>21</sup> Goulder's view of conflicting visions in the

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<sup>20</sup> Longenecker. 79.

<sup>21</sup> Goulder, Michael. 1995. *St. Paul Versus St. Peter: A Tale of Two Missions*. Louisville: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. ix. "From as far back as we can trace it (to the 40's) there was never a single, united church. There were (in fact from the 30's) two missions. One run from Jerusalem, with Peter and the sons of Zebedee in charge, and later James, Jesus' brother and other members of his family; the other run by Paul from various centres."

New Testament and early church is a predominant one among critical scholars today, but despite what liberal scholars may believe about some division between Paul and Peter (or any of the apostles for that matter), 1 Peter as if to refute those scholars, contains some of the most clear connections to Paul's words in Ephesians 3:4-6. Just as Hebrews was approached, Peter's first letter must be approached as well.

It is widely accepted that the audience of Peter's first letter is Gentile Christians in Asian Minor.<sup>22</sup> Most of the evidence for this comes from four verses in Peter's letter, which bear brief examination here.

*1:14 - As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but be as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.*

Peter is considering those who were once totally ignorant of the gospel. While this could be still a reference to Jewish believers, he is clearly aiming at people whose life before Christ was vastly different (marked by ignorance) than their life with Christ. Michaels has noted that the latter portion of the verse should be seen as a call for believers to fully break away from their sinful past by equating Gentile Christians' present call to be holy with that of the Jews.<sup>23</sup>

*1:18 - knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold...*

Here once again, Peter is referring to a Christian's state prior to conversion. It is unlikely that Peter is referring to his own Jewish background, for the "ways" given to Israel in the law and the prophets could hardly be considered future. More likely is that Peter is referring to Greco-Roman, pagan ways as he wishes for Christian practices to

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<sup>22</sup> Michaels, J. R. 1988. *Word Biblical Commentary: 1 Peter*. Vol. 49. Waco, Texas: Word Books.xlv-xlvi.; Achtemeier, Paul J. 1996. *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* (Hermeneia: a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible). Edited by Eldon J. Epp. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 50-52.

<sup>23</sup> Michaels. 58.

replace those.<sup>24</sup> His remark on “silver or gold,” likely refers to the idols of the Greco-Roman world that would have been made with or adorned with those precious metals.

*2:10 - Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy...*

The most clear verse is this one and it helps make sense of the previous two verses. Those he is writing to were NOT once a people. Peter would not refer to the Jews, a people with a clear national, religious and ethnic identity as not being a people, because they clearly were. Thus it should be inferred that Peter is speaking to Gentiles. Karen Jobes, in her commentary on 1 Peter noted this about 2:9a - “Peter here makes the radical claim that those who believe in Jesus Christ - Whether Jew, Gentile, Greek, Roman, Cappadocian, Tithynian, or whatever - though from many race, constitute a new race of those who have been born again into the living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”<sup>25</sup> The point here, according to Jobes, is that distinctions of race are gone now. Peter, in total agreement with Paul, is revealing that the dividing line between believers has vanished because all have become a part of a chosen race under Christ.

*4:3 - For the time that is past suffices for doing what the Gentiles want to do ... with respect to this they are surprised when you do not join them...*

Here, “the time passed” is a key phrase - they lived like Gentiles, but are no longer Gentiles in the sense that they are now under Christ. Early church father Theophylact provides some meaningful commentary: “This is ironic, as if Peter were saying: ‘Have you not had enough of the pleasures which you once indulge in? Or do you

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>25</sup> Jobes, Karen H. 2005. *1 Peter (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. 159.

still hanker after the Gentile life which you used to live?’ It is in connection with this that he notes the various types of debauchery.”<sup>26</sup>

The fact that Peter - the one who had, according to the Apostle Paul, struggled with accepting Gentile Christians - is even writing to Gentiles is telling about Peter’s agreement with Paul that Gentiles do indeed belong to the body of Christ. To better smooth over this connection (as audience alone is not enough to unify theology) it bears fruit to circle back to 1 Peter 2:9-10. Peter’s words in this passage deserve repeating:

*“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy”*

The message here seems to echo Paul’s in Ephesians 3 - that the Gentiles who were once considered to be outside the bounds of covenant with God, have now been revealed to be full participants in it. First in verse 9, Peter calls his Gentile audience “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people called for his own possession.” Chapters could be written on each of these descriptions being applied to the formerly Gentile Christians in 1 Peter, and Old Testament parallels can be found for each of these descriptors in 2:9, but suffice it to say that the descriptors found there in verse 9 are of a kind of covenantal language previously reserved for God’s chosen nation, the Jews. This passage shows “how he [Peter] understands the true line of continuity to run from the people of God under the old covenant to the people of God under the new covenant.”<sup>27</sup>

Peter’s view here essentially mirrors that of Paul’s, though it differs in vocabulary. The

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<sup>26</sup> Bray, Gerald, and Thomas C. Oden, eds. 2000. *Ancient Christian commentary on Scripture: James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*. Vol. New Testament 11. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 112.

<sup>27</sup> Beale, Carson. 1030-1033. - This commentary provides a tremendously helpful exposition on the Old Testament connections.



idea that Peter and Paul constitute two separate “missions” or strains of theological thought in the early church becomes a strained theory under such unity, for where Paul confesses the great mystery of Christ, now revealed, to be Gentile inclusion, Peter too confesses that the people who were once not God’s people are now “a people for his own possession.”

## Revelation

The final place this paper will attempt to look at is the book of Revelation and the connection it has Ephesians 3:4-6 will be explored. When considering Paul’s view that the mystery of the gospel (Gentile inclusion) is directly connected with God’s love, there seems to be no greater verse to look at than Revelation 7:9.

Revelation 7 is an important chapter that has been long debated as to its eschatological implications.<sup>28</sup> And it is here, in Revelation 7, that John is given a unique view of the multitude of 144,000 being sealed away by God. John describes this multitude in 7:9 saying, *“After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne and to the Lamb!””*<sup>29</sup> As far as it relates to the topic of this paper, the connection could not be more

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<sup>28</sup> This paper will not attempt to deal with any of the debates between any of the premillennial, amillennial or postmillennial views, but rather focus on the theological connection between Revelation 7 and Ephesians 3.

<sup>29</sup> Beale, Gregory K. 1999. *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans. It has been argued by some that verse 9 describes a group separate from the 144,000 noted in the verses prior. (cf Johnson, Dennis E. 2001. *Triumph of the Lamb: A Commentary on Revelation*.

clear. Revelation itself is given to John by Christ himself. The view John has is to the ultimate, eschatological composition of those sealed away for salvation by God. This is deliberately and painstakingly described by John in no uncertain terms: every nation, all tribes, all peoples and every language compose the people of God.<sup>30</sup>

It is hard to imagine a more apt verse to connect with Paul's words in Ephesians 3:4-6. Like a fuller description of what Paul speaks of, John gives his readers a full view of the multitudinal throng that is the worshipers of God. This needs no further explanation. Whatever someone in John's audience may have considered the Old covenant to be, the New Covenant under Christ is not isolated to a single nation, tribe, people or language. Not only is their identity proof of Gentile union in the body of Christ, but their worship as well intensifies their union. Not only do the multitude stand together, but they sing together! This is the fullest view that the bible offers readers of what Paul says in Ephesians 3, and if we pull on this thread, it will unravel to remind us that Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

For the Gentiles living in John's time as well as today, this represented and still represents an example of the incredible love of God. In His plan to save all people, God has not left out a single people group. And here lies a promise - that those who are redeemed, sealed away as a part of God's flock will be of every kind and type of person that God has made.<sup>31</sup> This also fully reveals the scope of God's love. Considering Paul's

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Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Pub. 134.) Beale however says that it is more likely that the group in verse 9 is the same as the 144000 from 4-8, from a different perspective. He says, "The second picture in 7:9-17 understands the same host from the viewpoint of their actual vast number. Although they are a saved remnant, they are also those who have been gathered from all over the earth and have lived throughout the entire period of the church age."

<sup>30</sup> "They came from every nation, tribe, people and language; expression piled on expression indicates the crowd's universality." Morris, Leon. 1987. *The Book of Revelation: Introduction and Commentary*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press. 113.

<sup>31</sup> cf . Revelation 14:6

words in Ephesians 3 (breadth, length, height and depth), Revelation completes that picture. What is the breadth? - Every nation. What is the length? - Every tribe. What is the height? - All peoples. What is the depth? - All languages, saying "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne."

### Conclusion

In conclusion I wish to provide practical applications for using what has been said in this essay to help myself and others correct misconceptions of God and his desired relationship with us to better appreciate the power of being continuously filled with his Spirit to be able to abidingly focus with the eyes of our heart at an identity level on the astoundingly immeasurable love of God for each of us. Most people confessing Christ today cannot claim to have any kind of Jewish heritage. There is little to nothing that ties them in culture, language or heritage to God the Father other than Christ himself. Though not Jews, the vast majority of believers in Jesus have been, as Paul says in Romans 11, "grafted" into the tree of God's covenant, the mystery of Christ fully revealed. This mystery (revelation) of Christ described by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 3 is truly key to understanding the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ. This revelation that Paul professes, echoed by his co-laborers for the gospel: the writer of Hebrews, the Apostle Peter and the Apostle John revealing tremendous agreement with Paul, understanding and communicating the great love of Christ in terms of the work of Christ as it relates to both Jew and Gentile! For it is this mystery as

defined by Paul that makes God's love not just gracious, merciful and unconditional, but also inclusive. God's plan has always been to draw a people to him that outnumber the stars (Genesis 22:17), from every tribe, tongue and nation, that he may be glorified. For a Gentile, this mystery truly colors the love God has for a people who were once not his own, incredible.

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