

Secret and Revealed Things
A Tentative Study Based on Scripture
With Comments from Ellen White's Writings

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Introduction

The Pentateuch contains an important principle with regard to our knowledge of God, expressed in the following words: "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29).¹ Obviously, it is necessary for God's people to distinguish between the secret and the revealed things, because it will affect our relationship to God and the way we live. In context the revealed things refer to "all the words of this law." This principle is closely related to two other principles in the same book. The Israelites should not add nor take away from God's word and commandments (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32) and through Moses God told them that "man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord" (Deuteronomy 8:3). These principles are reconfirmed in the New Testament (Matthew 4:4; Revelation 22: 18-20).

Obviously God invites us in numerous ways to spend our lives in getting to know Him through "those things which are revealed", through the Holy Scriptures, through His created works, and through human relationships as originally intended by Him. Above all through Jesus Christ, the supreme revelation of God, who assures us that eternal life is to know "the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:3). Having created human beings "in the image of God" (Genesis 1:27) as free moral beings, it was God's purpose to share an eternal relationship of love with them. This relationship, based on God's eternal love (Jeremiah 31:3), was conditioned by a response of loving trust and obedience on the part of His human children. While placed in a beautiful garden full of animal life and with an abundance of the most delicious fruits and the tree of life, God withheld from them the fruit of one tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. To eat from that tree would destroy their relationship of loving trust and obedience with God, give them an experiential knowledge of evil, and ultimately result in death. It was out of love that God withheld from them this knowledge. Unfortunately, the first parents of the human family, deceived by a fallen angel through the medium of a serpent, chose to disobey God and to acquire this forbidden knowledge (Genesis chapter 3; Revelation 12:3). Ever since that fatal choice fallen human beings, rebellious and dissatisfied with divine restrictions, have tried to penetrate "the secret things of God." It is therefore crucial for all who choose to return to God, to know and to avoid those things which God has seen fit to withhold from us. In this paper we will make an attempt, as much as is possible, to determine different aspects of this subject.

¹ Scriptural references are from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated.

Ellen White deals with the consequences of the fall of the parents of our race in a chapter entitled, "The Knowledge of Good and Evil". The following quotations from this chapter throw further light on their fatal choice. "It was the will of God that Adam and Eve should not know evil. The knowledge of evil,--of sin and its results, of wearing toil, of anxious care, of disappointment and grief, of pain and death,--this was in love withheld." When Satan succeeded in deceiving Eve with his misrepresentation of God's character and his denial of the truth of God's words, "She coveted what God had forbidden; she distrusted His wisdom. She cast away faith, the key of knowledge." When Adam joined Eve in transgression of God's prohibition, "Man lost all because he chose to listen to the deceiver rather than to Him who is Truth, who alone has understanding. By the mingling of evil with good, his mind had become confused, his mental and spiritual powers benumbed." It was the knowledge of evil "that opened the door to every species of falsehood and error."²

Different Kinds of "Secret Things" That Belong to God

From the foregoing we can conclude that God withheld the knowledge of evil from Adam and Eve out of love, knowing that this knowledge would destroy their relationship with their Creator and cause nothing but bondage, misery, and death. Ever since that first fatal choice, human beings have pursued forbidden knowledge with disastrous consequences. In the words of Solomon, "Truly, this only I have found: That God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes" (Ecclesiastes 7:29; NASB "many devices"). It is not surprising that Paul wants Christians "to be wise in what is good, and simple (margin: innocent) concerning evil" (Romans 16:19).

Deeper study of the Scriptures makes it clear that the words, "the secret things that belong to God", refer not merely, nor even primarily, to the knowledge of good and evil, but to the deep things of God, which He has not revealed. While it is God's purpose to make Himself and His true character known to humanity and especially to those who believe in Him, He is often limited by our dullness, our prejudices and preconceived ideas. When at the last supper Peter refused to have his feet washed by Jesus, the Lord told him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this" (John 13:7); later that same evening He said to the eleven, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (John 16:12). It is God's purpose and always will remain His purpose for His human children that they will grow in an ever closer relationship with Him, and like our Savior increase "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52).

We will always be dependent on God's self-revelation for our knowledge of God. Apart from such revelation we grope around in darkness and dismal ignorance. Already in the discussion between Job and his friends the question was raised, "Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty?" (Job 11:7). Later in the book God reveals Himself to Job, who in his extreme suffering had questioned God's justice. God in His response asks Job, "Who is this that darkens counsel by words

² Ellen G. White, *Education*, 23, 24, and 25. References to Ellen White's writings are to the pagination of standard editions.

without knowledge? Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me” (Job 38:2-3). Chapters 38 through 41 are filled with questions from God to Job, which Job cannot answer and which lead him to acknowledge his nothingness before God. He said to God: “You asked, Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge? Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know....I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:3, 5-6). The experience of Job illustrates in a powerful way that the only appropriate attitude before God’s revelation is one of humility in the recognition that we are totally dependent on the Lord for a true knowledge of Him.

Ellen White comments on the challenge of questions raised in the Scriptures and of the mysteries in nature. “Divine inspiration asks many questions which the most profound scholar cannot answer. These questions were not asked that we might answer them, but to call our attention to the deep mysteries of God and to teach us that our wisdom is limited; that in the surroundings of our daily life there are many things beyond the comprehension of finite minds; that the judgment and purposes of God are past finding out. His wisdom is unsearchable.” She adds: “Skeptics refuse to believe in God because with their finite minds they cannot comprehend the infinite power by which He reveals Himself to men. But God is to be acknowledged more from what He does not reveal of Himself than from that which is open to our limited comprehension. Both in divine revelation and in nature, God has given men mysteries to command their faith. This must be so. We may be ever searching, ever inquiring, ever learning, and yet there is an infinity beyond.”³

Mysteries

The English word mystery is derived from the Greek word *musterion*, which occurs twenty-seven times in the Greek New Testament and eight times in the Greek Old Testament in the Book of Daniel (not counting its occurrence in the Apocryphal books). Some English translations render the word *musterion* in Daniel as “mystery” (e.g. NASB), others as “secret” (e.g. KJV and NKJV). In the New Testament it is usually translated as “mystery”.⁴ In the Greek world the word “mysteries” was widely used for the so-called mystery religions with their secret rites and ceremonies, which were only made known to the initiates of the mystery. In the Holy Scriptures the word mystery (or mysteries) is mainly used for revelations from God referring to things that were hidden before, and that even after having been revealed would only be comprehended through the enlightenment of God’s Spirit. However, such mysteries were intended by God not merely for some elect initiates, but for all who were willing to hear and believe.

³ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, 8:261.

⁴ Some English translations which render *musterion* as “secret” in Daniel, make an exception in Daniel 2:22, where they render it as “mystery” (e.g. REB). This is probably due to the fact that the Aramaic text of Daniel chapter two uses a different word in Daniel 2:22 (namely *sethar*, the Aramaic equivalent for the Hebrew *sathar*, used in the Hebrew of Deuteronomy 29:29) than in the other texts where *musterion* is the Greek translation of the Aramaic *raz*. For an extensive discussion of the use of the word *musterion* in the Bible and in Ancient Greek see the article by Guenter Finkenrath, “Secret, Mystery, *musterion*,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 volumes, general editor Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1979), 3:501-506.

The mystery revealed in Daniel chapter two provides an illustration of the biblical meaning of the word “mystery” or “secret”. God reveals in a dream to King Nebuchadnezzar under the symbol of a majestic image the future of human history. However, the king cannot remember the dream. He requests his wise men to tell him the dream and its meaning, but they are not able to do so. Then God reveals the dream and its explanation to Daniel in answer to earnest prayer by Daniel and his three friends. When the king asks whether Daniel is able to tell him the dream and its explanation, Daniel answers, “The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, and the soothsayers cannot declare to the king. But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets, and He has made known to King Nebuchadnezzar what will be in the latter days” (Daniel 2:26-28). Daniel then makes known to the king the dream and its explanation. The first part of the dream shows that in succession there would be four major kingdoms of which Babylon was the first. These kingdoms were to be succeeded by a division of the fourth kingdom in ten smaller kingdoms. Finally God would establish an eternal kingdom. No names of the three kingdoms to follow Babylon seem to have been revealed to Daniel at this time. So, although the basic meaning of the dream was revealed, much of its fulfillment remained unexplained. Even at the present the final part of the dream still waits to be fulfilled. At the conclusion of Daniel’s explanation of the dream, the king said to Daniel, “Truly your God is the God of gods, the Lord of kings, and a revealer of secrets, since you could reveal this secret” (Daniel 2:47).

It seems safe to conclude that often in Scripture a mystery or secret of God refers to something that God has revealed but can only be understood in as much as God gives understanding of the revelation. The enlightenment of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential for a true understanding of divine secrets. On another occasion, when the wise men of Babylon were unable to explain a dream of King Nebuchadnezzar, the king trusted that Daniel could give the explanation, saying to him, “you are able, for the Spirit of the Holy God is in you” (Daniel 4:18). The same fact was recognized by Pharaoh of Egypt after Joseph had explained his two dreams, when he said to his servants, “Can we find such a one as this, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?” (Genesis 41:38). The apostle Paul explains in a rather elaborate statement in First Corinthians the necessity of the enlightenment of the Spirit to understand the things of God (see 1 Corinthians 2:7-16). We will come back to this passage, but want to stress here this necessity of the Spirit’s illumination to comprehend the secrets or mysteries of God.

The Supreme Mystery of God

The apostle Paul used the word “mystery” more than any other biblical writer. Of its twenty-seven occurrences in the New Testament twenty are found in Paul’s writings.⁵ He uses it in different ways. In 1 Thessalonians 2:7 he uses the expression, “the mystery of lawlessness is already at work”, in reference to the manifestation of the man of sin, the son of perdition, who will exalt himself as if he is God. In 1 Corinthians 13:2 Paul makes it clear that even if one understands all mysteries and all knowledge, but has not love, he is nothing. And in 1 Corinthians 15:51 he refers to the fact that the righteous in the

⁵ Paul’s use is distributed as follows: Romans 2 times; 1 Corinthians 5 times; Ephesians 6 times; Colossians 4 times; 2 Thessalonians 1 time; 1 Timothy 2 times.

resurrection will be raised incorruptible and immortal as a mystery (margin: “hidden truth”). In Romans chapter eleven the apostle expresses his desire that the gentile believers should not be ignorant of this mystery, “that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved...For as you (Gentiles) were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their (Israel’s) disobedience, even so these (Israel) also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you (Gentiles) they (Israel) also may obtain mercy” (Romans 11:25, 26, 30, 31). It is in reference to this mystery that Paul writes the famous words: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out” (Romans 11:33).

Great as the mysteries or secrets of the resurrection of the righteous as well as the relation of the election and later partial rejection of Israel and the adoption of the Gentiles in God’s plan for the salvation of the human race may be, there is one greater mystery. We will let Paul speak: “Without controversy great is the mystery (margin “hidden truth”) of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory” (1 Timothy 3:16). Obviously, Paul speaks here of the incarnation of Christ and the glorious results of what Christ accomplished in His incarnation. In the first chapter of First Corinthians Paul contrasts the wisdom of this world (or this age) with the wisdom of God. “For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block (margin “offense”) and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). He elaborates on this theme in the second chapter as he states: “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” He further clarifies his focus when he writes, “We speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained (margin “predetermined”) before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:2, 6-8). In this context Paul stresses the necessity of the reception of “the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God” (1 Corinthians 2:12).

According to Paul, the mystery of Christ’s incarnation and death were the hidden wisdom of God ordained or predetermined before the ages. In the worshipful conclusion of his Epistle to the Romans Paul highlights “the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God for obedience to the faith” (Romans 16:25-26). In Colossians 1:26 the apostle once more speaks of this mystery as “the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints.” He adds, “To them God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles: which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27). From the words of Paul it is evident that it is only through the Scriptures under the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit that we will be able to comprehend the mystery of the gospel, the message of

Christ incarnate, crucified, and risen from the dead. (See 1 Corinthians 15:1-4). While, according to Paul, the Holy Scriptures “are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”, and are “profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15-17), we should not forget his words in Romans 11:33, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” Especially when it comes to the study of the supreme mystery of all mysteries we should come to that study with great humility and with earnest prayer for the guidance and illumination of the Holy Spirit.

Ellen White Comments on Mysteries, Especially the Mystery of the Incarnation

Ellen White has much to say in her writings about mysteries. In her widely translated book, *Steps to Christ*, we find this wide-ranging statement: “The word of God, like the character of its divine Author, presents mysteries that can never be fully comprehended by finite beings. The entrance of sin into the world, the incarnation of Christ, regeneration, the resurrection, and many other subjects presented in the Bible, are mysteries too deep for the human mind to explain, or even fully to comprehend. But we have no reason to doubt God’s word because we cannot understand the mysteries of His providence” ⁶ She argues that just as in the natural world we are confronted with mysteries that we cannot fathom, it should not surprise us that in the spiritual world there are likewise mysteries that we cannot fathom. ⁷ However, she also stresses that, “God intends that to the earnest seeker the truths of His word shall be ever unfolding. While, ‘the secret things belong unto the Lord our God,’ ‘those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children.’ Deuteronomy 29:29.” She further explains, “The fact needs to be emphasized, and often repeated, that the mysteries of the Bible are not such because God has sought to conceal truth, but because our own weakness or ignorance makes us incapable of comprehending or appropriating truth. The limitation is not in His purpose, but in our capacity.” ⁸

In an article in *The Signs of the Times*, entitled: “The Mystery of God,” Ellen White writes: “The incarnation of Christ is a mystery. The union of divinity with humanity is a mystery indeed, hidden with God, “even the mystery which hath been hid from ages.” It was kept in eternal silence by Jehovah, and was first revealed in Eden, by the prophecy that the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent’s head, and that he should bruise his heel. To present to the world this mystery that God kept in silence for eternal ages before the world was created, before man was created, was the part that Christ was to act in the work he entered upon when he came to this earth. And this wonderful mystery, the incarnation of Christ and the atonement that he made, must be declared to every son and daughter of Adam, whether Jew or Gentile.” ⁹ In another article Ellen White states that, “It will be profitable to contemplate the divine condescension, the sacrifice, the self-denial,

⁶ Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, 106.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ellen G. White, *Education*, 170-171.

⁹ Ellen G. White, “The Mystery of God,” *Signs of the Times*, March 25, 1897.

the humiliation, the resistance the Son of God encountered in doing His work for fallen men.” Commenting further on this “mystery of godliness,” she explains, It is the glory of God to conceal Himself and His ways, not by keeping men in ignorance of heavenly light and knowledge, but by surpassing the utmost capacity of men to know. Humanity can comprehend in part, but that is all that man can bear. The love of Christ passes knowledge. The mystery of redemption will continue to be the mystery, the unexhausted science and everlasting song of eternity. Well may humanity exclaim, Who can know God? We may, as did Elijah, wrap our mantles about us, and listen to hear the still, small voice of God.”¹⁰

Some Concluding Comments: When Silence is Eloquence

While Ellen White encouraged a deep study of the mysteries in the Scriptures and especially of the incarnation of Christ, she at the same time warned against undue speculation in regard to these mysteries. Commenting on Deuteronomy 29:29 she writes, “The revelation of Himself that God has given in His word is for our study. This we may seek to understand. But beyond this we are not to penetrate....No human mind can comprehend God. None are to indulge in speculation regarding His nature. Here silence is eloquence. The Omniscient One is above discussion.”¹¹ In regard to Christ’s incarnation she wrote, “It is a mystery that is left unexplained to mortals that Christ could be tempted in all points like as we are, and yet be without sin. The incarnation of Christ has ever been, and will ever remain a mystery. That which is revealed, is for us and for our children, but let every human being be warned from the ground of making Christ altogether human, such an one as ourselves: for it cannot be.”¹²

¹⁰ Ellen G. White, “Christ Works Through Human Agents,” *Bible Echo and Signs of the Times* [Australia], April 30, 1894.

¹¹ Ellen G. White, *Ministry of Healing*, 429.

¹² Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 13, 19.