

# THEISM

## God's Mystery

When Adam and Eve sinned they were expelled from the Garden of Eden, separated from God and doomed to die (Genesis 3). The fellowship they could have had with God was no longer possible. "Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). In order for humanity to be saved from sin and its eternal consequences, i.e., to be reconciled to God, God would have to take the initiative. He did. But the way he did it was not revealed to humanity until after Jesus arose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Until then God's method of providing redemption was largely unknown – not even understood by either Old Testament prophets or angels in heaven (1 Peter 1:10-12).

For more than two thirds of biblically recognized human history, the nature of salvation was a mystery. Although the mystery of God was "ordained before the ages for our glory" (1 Corinthians 2:7), it was "kept secret since the world began" (Romans 16:25), hidden from "ages and generations" (Colossians 1:26) "in God who created all things through Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 3:9). Only gradually and slowly did God progressively reveal his mystery.

The first inkling of God's plans for human redemption was made to Adam and Eve. God said that he would put enmity between the serpent and the woman, "between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:14-15). The implications of that statement must have been a mystery to Adam and Eve. Surely, they could not then have fully understood what others later came to consider a messianic prophecy.

That God wanted a relationship between himself and humanity is indicated by the fact that he established a medium of worship during the days of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4), which required an offering by faith (Hebrews 11:4). Without faith, God cannot be pleased (Hebrews 11:6). Noah, a righteous man (Genesis 7:1 ; 2 Peter 2:5) lived by faith (Hebrews 11:7). But the overwhelming majority of people were wicked (Genesis 6:5). Because God cannot tolerate wickedness, he determined to destroy the earth with a flood (Genesis 6:7). Only Noah and his family were spared (Genesis 7:23).

Ten generations after Noah, God promised Abraham, "In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 22:18). Abraham probably did not fully understand that promise. It is not fully explained in the Old Testament. The Apostle Paul observed that God did not say "'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'and to your Seed,' who is Christ" (Galatians 3:16). When God made that promise to Abraham, Abraham probably did not realize that the promised blessings would come primarily from one person and that he would be the Son of God!

Just before Jacob's death he blessed Judah saying, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to him shall be the obedience of the people" (Genesis 49:10). The language of a "scepter" indicates kingship while statements about a "lawgiver" and "obedience of the people" reinforces the concept of a ruler. The prophecy looks forward not just to a line of kings but also creates an expectation of a great one to come among them. When and how these things would come to pass remained a mystery throughout Old Testament times.

When the Israelites were about to enter the promised land of Canaan, Moses declared, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear" (Deuteronomy 18:15; 18). This prophet was none other than the

Christ (Acts 3:20-23), but that would not have been fully understood by people during Old Testament times. The ancient Israelites to whom Moses spoke may not have considered the prophet about which he spoke as the same person that Jacob had predicted in speaking to Judah.

Several hundred years later God promised David, who was from the lineage of Judah and king over Israel, that “when your days are fulfilled and you rest with your fathers, I will set up your seed after you, who will come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. . . . And your house and your kingdom shall be established forever before you.” (2 Samuel 7:12, 16). God hereby revealed that the future lawgiver, king, and prophet would rule over an everlasting kingdom. Both Isaiah and Micah prophesied about the nature of this kingdom. (Isaiah 2:1-4; Micah 4:1-3). The prophets envisioned a marvelous kingdom of peace! The prophet Daniel told Nebuchadnezzar about great kingdoms but then declared the superiority of God’s everlasting kingdom over all others (Daniel 2:44). The establishment of an everlasting kingdom required not only a great prophet and king but also a new covenant which was prophesied by Jeremiah (Jeremiah 31:31-34; see also Hebrews 8:6-13).

These promises and many others relate to reconciliation of sinful humanity back to God. Contemplations of these promises – however inadequate and incomplete they may have been – would surely have evoked marvelous wonderment in the minds of anyone who gave them serious thought. However, a full understanding of the meaning of these promises remained mysterious until apostolic times. Only after Christ’s ascension into heaven was the mystery “made manifest” (Romans 16:26) “to his saints” (Colossians 1:26) “by the Spirit to his holy apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 3:5). According to his “eternal purpose” (Ephesians 3:11) “the everlasting God” (Romans 16:26) intended that his manifold wisdom “might be made known by the church” (Ephesians 3:10) “for obedience to the faith” (Romans 16:26). During apostolic times, the mystery was “made known to all nations” by “the prophetic Scriptures” (Romans 16:26).

God’s mystery was his plan for human redemption. That plan of salvation needed preparation time for people to realize they could not save themselves. Time was needed to develop “prophetic scriptures” (Romans 16:26) and “holy apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 3:5) through whom God’s mystery would be revealed to all nations. Since the mystery was to be made known by the church, the church first had to be established. Categorical distinctions separating Jew and Gentiles first had to be developed historically before Jews and Gentiles could be united as “fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:6). Most significantly, Christ had to come in the fullness of time (Galatians 4:4) to give his life as a ransom (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6), to reconcile sinful humanity to God (2 Corinthians 5:19; Colossians 1:20), and to unite Jew and Gentile into one body (Ephesians 3:6). 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).

When Adam and Eve sinned and were consequently separated from God, God did not abandon humanity. Rather, he executed his plans for human redemption, revealing to humanity only what was needful. While there are hints – bits and pieces – of information in the Old Testament about resurrection of the dead, the afterlife, eternal destiny, etc. those ideas did not need to be fully revealed until after God had executed his mysterious plan for human redemption. Only then could the meanings of those subjects be appreciated by humanity.