

“THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL”: Contemplating the Divine Plan in Ephesians

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The text of Ephesians 1:8b–10 reads:

In all wisdom and insight, he [the Father] has made known to us the mystery of his will in accord with his favor that he set forth in him [Christ] as a plan for the fullness of times, to sum up all things in Christ, in heaven and on earth.¹

This is one of the passages that compounds the feeling that Paul's letter to the Ephesians is so “mysterious” that one despairs of ever coming to a clear understanding of its meaning. What does the phrase *mystery of his will* mean? If it has been made known, as Paul plainly says it has, then what is it? What is this *plan* that Paul speaks of? In what way does the plan *sum up* all things in Christ? And what specifically is the referent of *all things*—apparently a reference to things that encompass not only earth but also heaven?

Scholars have shown that the word “mystery” (Greek: *mysterion*), as it is used both in Ephesians and in the rest of the New Testament, is best understood against a Semitic background attested in both the Septuagint and in the Qumran documents.² In general terms, *mysterion* is used simply to indicate a secret.³ Here are two examples from the Septuagint:

He who betrays a secret [*mysterion*] cannot be trusted, he will never find an intimate friend. (Sir. 27:16)

1 Unless otherwise noted, the translation I am using throughout is that of the New American Bible; hereafter NAB.

2 See, for example, Raymond E. Brown, “The Semitic Background of the New Testament *Mysterion* (II),” *Biblica* 40 (1959): 70–87, especially at 74–84; Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term “Mystery” in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968); Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Ephesian Mysterion: Meaning and Content*, Coniectanea Biblica, New Testament Series 8 (Lund: Gleerup, 1977), 117–135; Franz Mussner, “Contributions Made by Qumran to the Understanding of the Epistle to the Ephesians,” in *Paul and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, eds. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor and James H. Charlesworth (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), 159–178.

3 In the Septuagint, the word *mysterion* occurs in Jth 2:2; Tob. 12:7, 11; 2 Macc. 13:21; Wis. 2:22; 6:22; 14:15, 23; Sir. 22:22; 27:16, 17, 21; Dan. 2:18, 19, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47. In the Septuagint version of Daniel, *mysterion* is used to translate the original Aramaic *raz*, which is also used in the documents found at Qumran.

I will not conceal anything from you. I have said, “It is good to guard the secret [*mysterion*] of a king, but gloriously to reveal the works of God.”⁴ (Tob. 12:11)

In these two examples, *mysterion* simply refers to commonplace, everyday confidences.⁵ In the second example, the archangel Raphael uses a proverb about “guarding the *mysterion* of a king” as a lead-in to the “secret” that he, God’s angel, had been with Tobias all along.

The word *mysterion* is also used in the Septuagint to indicate a secret *plan* of some sort:

[B]ut Rhodocus, of the Jewish army, betrayed military secrets [*mysterion*] to the enemy. He was found out, arrested, and imprisoned. (2 Macc. 13:21)

He summoned all his ministers and nobles, laid before them his secret [*mysterion*] plan, and urged the total destruction of those countries. (Jth. 2:2)

The “military secrets” mentioned in 2 Maccabees probably involve secret *plans* that a certain Rhodocus leaked to the Greek enemies. The passage in Judith speaks of the King of Assyria’s “secret plan” about how he was going to exact revenge on the “whole region” (Jth. 2:1).

“During the Night, the Mystery Was Revealed”

Related to the notion of a secret plan in general, *mysterion* in the Septuagint of Daniel is used to indicate a secret plan of *God*—that is, how God is going to order future events in some special and important way. The Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream about a large and terrifying multi-tiered metallic statue that finally gets pulverized by a stone cut from a mountain. Wary of his sycophantic court wise men, the king demands, on pain of death, that they tell him both the dream and its interpretation. At this point, Daniel, along with his three Hebrew friends, prays to God that the *mysterion*—meaning here both the details of the dream itself *and* its interpretation—be revealed to them. And so it happens:

Daniel went home and informed his companions Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, that they might implore the mercy of the God of heaven in regard to this mystery [*mysterion*], so that Daniel and his companions might not perish with the rest of the

4 The translation here is the Revised Standard Version.

5 So also in Sir. 22:22; 27:17, 21.

wise men of Babylon. During the night the mystery [*mysterion*] was revealed to Daniel in a vision. (Dan. 2:17–19a)

As Daniel relates the *mysterion* to the king, it becomes apparent that it has to do with future events, fixed by God, concerning the rise and fall of successive kingdoms. These kingdoms will subjugate God's people until they themselves are ultimately destroyed at the coming of God's kingdom, a kingdom that will exercise universal and unending dominion over the whole earth:

In the lifetime of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed or delivered up to another people; rather, it shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and put an end to them, and it shall stand forever. That is the meaning of the stone you saw hewn from the mountain without a hand being put to it, which broke in pieces the tile, iron, bronze, silver, and gold. The great God has revealed to the king what shall be in the future; this is exactly what you dreamed, and its meaning is sure. (Dan. 2:44–45)

Some observations about the Danielic use of *mysterion* are needed at this point. First, the basic idea of *mysterion* as a "secret" still applies; however, now the secret is seen to be God's secret. Second, the secret constitutes a knowledge of future events, events of great significance—the rise and fall of tyrannical kingdoms and the defeat of these kingdoms with the rise of God's kingdom. Third, the *mysterion*, though given in unintelligible symbols to King Nebuchadnezzar in his dream, is revealed truly and accurately only through God's chosen prophet, Daniel. Fourth, (and rather obvious) the *mysterion*, having been revealed, is no longer a secret. Daniel's *public* narration of the dream and its authoritative interpretation indicates that God wants not only the king, but the whole world to know what he is going to bring about in due time—namely, the end of all opposing dominions and the establishment of his everlasting Kingdom.

Having said this much, one must concede that Daniel's "revelation" of the *mysterion* still leaves many questions unanswered, many further "secrets" we might wish to know. For instance, how specifically is God going to bring about this everlasting kingdom? What will the kingdom be like? Who or what is symbolized by the destroying "stone"? Is it the long hoped-for Davidic Messiah or is it someone or something else? Is the kingdom to be understood as the restored and revived Davidic Kingdom? What will be the privileges and blessings for those who become a part of this kingdom? How will one be able to partake of the blessings of this coming kingdom?

Even with all these unanswered questions, it is clear that the Danielic use of *mysterion* moves us into the realm of the divine plan for saving humanity. With the Fall in Genesis 3 had come alienation from God and estrangement from one another.

Our fallen nature became prey to the forces of Satan and the other evil spirits, and to the ultimate evil, death—not just physical death—but to the bleak prospect of enduring for endless ages cut off from the source of all goodness and happiness; an infinite, hopeless, ashen existence, a life that cannot be called life, but death eternal. The divine plan, as understood in Daniel and throughout the Old Testament, has to do with God undoing and overthrowing the effects and consequences of the Fall by restoring the glory and dignity of humanity as well as reconciling humanity to communion and union with God Himself. If the pre-lapsarian world was a kind of “temple” in which God and humanity dwelt together in harmony and love (which it was), then the restored world would likewise be such a place, only on a far grander and more glorious—we Catholics would say “divinized”—level.⁶ God raised up Israel to be a light to the nations, to prepare the way for the restoration of all things and to begin the process of overthrowing Satan’s work. But Israel, too, “falls” repeatedly, failing to accomplish the vocation God placed upon it. For a brief, shining moment, during the reign of King Solomon, the oaths God swore to Abraham and David found some degree of realization.⁷ Yet, because of sin, not only had this ascendancy taken centuries longer than it should have, but it all fell to ashes, ruin, and disgrace in the subsequent decades and centuries. The fall of the Northern Kingdom, the exile of the Southern Kingdom with its inglorious return and subservient status—these catastrophes raised questions about how the story would ever work out for the good. The revelation of the *mysterion* in the book of Daniel is a marvelous promise that the divine plan for history *would be realized*, despite the human weakness and sin that had filled human history with so much misery and disaster.

The Mystery of the Kingdom

As we will see, the Danielic use of *mysterion* will prove very helpful as we seek to understand the use of the word in the New Testament and specifically in Ephesians.⁸ In the Pauline usage, the Old Testament trajectory of the word is confirmed and comes to full flower. We find *mysterion* used to indicate the formerly-secret-but-

6 For scriptural intimations of this plan, see for instance, 2 Cor. 6:16b–18; Isa. 43:6–7; Ezek. 37:24–28.

7 See Gen. 17:6–8; 22:15–18; 2 Sam. 12–16.

8 Franz Mussner (“Contributions Made by Qumran,” 163) has traced points of contact between the use of “mystery” in Ephesians and its use in the Dead Sea scrolls (which, like the Aramaic of Daniel, uses the word *raz*). In particular, he has noted that the Qumran documents speak of secret knowledge designated as “mystery,” “insight,” “wisdom” hitherto hidden by God but now revealed to the Teacher of Righteousness and through him, to the Qumran community. As in Daniel, the revealed *raz* / *mysterion* is connected with a hoped-for salvation in the last days where God and his people defeat the forces of evil in a glorious reversal of fortunes. Any proposed interdependence, however, between the Qumran documents and Ephesians would be quite speculative (so also Caragounis, *Mysterion*, 117–135). Daniel is the more likely background for both Qumran and Paul, as well as the rest of the New Testament.

now-revealed-plan of how the whole story of salvation history will be worked out in all of its cosmic, glorious dimensions. This will certainly include the datum about God's coming kingdom revealed to Daniel via Nebuchadnezzar's dream. But it will encompass much more.

As with Daniel, in the New Testament the *mysterion* is revealed through God's chosen instruments:

When you read this you can understand my insight into the mystery [*mysterion*] of Christ, which was not made known to human beings in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets. (Eph. 3:4–5)

God's first chosen instrument is Christ himself. Jesus uses the word *mysterion* when explaining to his disciples the great privileges they had come to receive as his chosen followers:

He answered them, "The mystery [*mysterion*] of the kingdom of God has been granted to you. But to those outside everything comes in parables, so that they may look and see but not perceive, and hear and listen but not understand, in order that they may not be converted and be forgiven." (Mark 4:11–12)⁹

Jesus uses *mysterion* here to refer to the insight he has given the disciples to interpret the confusing parable he had just spoken to the crowds. The "global" tenor of Jesus' statement, however, could easily be understood to mean that the disciples had already been given some measure of insight into other "secrets" of the Kingdom of God, the kingdom Jesus had come to proclaim and, in his person, inaugurate. Yet, it is likely that Jesus' statement also has a proleptic element to it—that is, the disciples' must await Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension in order to grasp the deeper understanding of the kingdom's mysteries.

The notion of *mysterion* in Paul exhibits greater depth and clarity. On a number of occasions, Paul uses *mysterion* as a virtual synonym of the Gospel itself:

Now to him who can strengthen you, according to my Gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery [*mysterion*] kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith, to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ be glory forever and ever. Amen. (Rom. 16:25–27)

⁹ The parallel passages in Matt. 13:11 and Luke 8:10 also use *mysterion*.

The phrase “according to the revelation of the mystery [*mysterion*] kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed” is essentially in apposition¹⁰ to Paul’s preceding statement “according to my Gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ.” Other examples of this near synonymous usage of *mysterion* and Gospel can be observed in several other texts in Paul:

When I came to you, brothers, proclaiming the mystery [*mysterion*] of God, I did not come with sublimity of words or of wisdom ... and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive (words of) wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power. (1 Cor. 2:1, 4)

Thus should one regard us: as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries [*mysterion*] of God.” (1 Cor. 4:1)

[B]e watchful with all perseverance and supplication for all the holy ones

and also for me, that speech may be given me to open my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery [*mysterion*] of the Gospel. (Eph. 6:18–19)

[A]t the same time, pray for us, too, that God may open a door to us for the word, to speak of the mystery [*mysterion*] of Christ, for which I am in prison. (Col. 4:3)

Similarly, deacons must be dignified, not deceitful, not addicted to drink, not greedy for sordid gain, holding fast to the mystery [*mysterion*] of the faith with a clear conscience. (1 Tim. 3:8–9)

Undeniably great is the mystery [*mysterion*] of our religion: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed to the Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.¹¹ (1 Tim. 3:16)

The text from Ephesians 6:19 is especially telling, for the Greek construction underlying the translation makes explicit that the *mysterion* is the Gospel.¹² The

¹⁰ A grammatical construction where what follows virtually restates the preceding statement, word, or phrase.

¹¹ Slightly modified NAB.

¹² The Greek reads *to mysterion tou euaggeliou* (“the mystery of the Gospel”). The noun *tou euaggeliou*

Gospel, of course, is the story of God's redemptive work in and through Christ. The Gospel is neatly summarized in texts like Acts 10:36–43 and 1 Corinthians 15:3–5, 22–26, which tell of Jesus being anointed with power, proclaiming the Kingdom, working miracles which liberate people from Satan and his tyranny, then dying, rising from the dead, and finally being enthroned on high as sovereign Lord, King, Judge, and giver of heavenly gifts. Other Pauline texts also use equivalent terms for “the Gospel” in apposition with the word *mysterion*:

- Colossians 4:3: *to mysterion tou christou*¹³ (the *mysterion* of Christ);
- 1 Timothy 3:9: *to mysterion tēs pisteōs* (the *mysterion* of the faith); and
- 1 Timothy 3:16: *to tēs eusebeias mysterion* (“the *mysterion* of [our] religion”).

To proclaim Christ is to proclaim the *mysterion*; to proclaim the faith is to proclaim the *mysterion*; to proclaim our religion is to proclaim the *mysterion*. The material immediately following the genitive in 1 Timothy 3:16 (see quote above) strikingly demonstrates how Paul can use the word *mysterion* to summarize the Gospel message: “He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed to the Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.”

Ephesians and the Meaning of Salvation History

Our understanding of the *mysterion* is taking shape. To repeat, what we are talking about when we speak of the New Testament *mysterion* is the working out of the story of salvation history. To speak of the *mysterion* is to speak of how the biblical story moves forward and comes to its dénouement. More precisely, the *mysterion* is about how the many catastrophes we hear of in the Old Testament are rectified and reversed, and how renewal, restoration, and transformation come to humanity through the coming of Christ and his Kingdom into the world. The *mysterion* constitutes the story of how God brings to fruition the many and wonderful promises

(“the Gospel”) is a genitive of apposition, which is to say that it refers to the same thing as the noun just prior, *to mysterion* (“the mystery”). A more “wooden” translation would be, “the mystery, that is, the Gospel.” For more on this common grammatical construction, see Daniel B. Wallace, *Basics of New Testament Syntax: An Intermediate Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 52–54.

13 The genitives *tou christou*, *tēs pisteōs*, and *tēs eusebeias* could also be categorized as genitives of definition, description, or even content (see Wallace, *Basics*, 45–55). Whatever classification one uses, it is clear that the words in the genitive closely describe or identify with the word *mysterion*.

he had made throughout the Old Testament, promises that he had made concerning this reversal, restoration, and transformation of all things.

It is especially in Ephesians that we see how the *mysterion* constitutes, so to speak, the “rest of the story” of salvation history. The impossible, tangled mess that humanity (in general) and Israel (in particular) have made of things is all impossibly, stunningly, overthrown. Through Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, ascension, enthronement, and bestowal of heavenly gifts, all is restored, renewed, and transformed.

To understand the idea of the *mysterion* in Ephesians, one must travel somewhat methodically through the letter, beginning with the word’s first occurrence and then following not only later usage of the word but related themes as well. While a truly thorough journey is the stuff of books, not short articles, we will look at several key texts and note key themes connected to the Ephesian *mysterion*. We will observe that Paul reveals the *mysterion* in layers—analogueous to how those anatomical drawings in certain encyclopedias are revealed in greater and greater detail as the successive layers of printed transparencies are folded on top of one another.

The most important use of *mysterion* is also its first occurrence, in Ephesians 1:9–10. This verse provides important clues for helping us open the trove of understanding to be found in Ephesians’ use of *mysterion*. We begin with the Greek word *anakephalaiōsasthai*,¹⁴ one of the most important words in the New Testament.

The meaning of *anakephalaiōsasthai* (Eph. 1:10b) is important to the discussion of the Ephesian *mysterion* because of its syntactical relation to the word *mysterion* in Ephesians 1:9. This syntactical relation can be seen by setting aside the digressions within 1:8b–10. The train of thought can then be easily traced. In the following quotation, the digressions have been set off in brackets:

[In all wisdom and insight,] He has made known [to us] the mystery (*mysterion*) of his will, [in accord with his favor] that he set forth [in him] as a plan [for the fullness of times,] to “sum up” [?] (*anakephalaiōsasthai*) all things in Christ, [things in heaven and things on earth.] (Eph 1:8b–10)

Without the digressions, the passage reads: “He has made known the mystery (*mysterion*) of his will, that he set forth as a plan to ‘sum up’ (*anakephalaiōsasthai*) all things in Christ.” And so it becomes clear: the *mysterion* is the Father’s *plan* to “sum up”¹⁵ all things in Christ. The importance of the meaning of *anakephalaiōsasthai*

14 In Greek grammar, *anakephalaiōsasthai* is an aorist middle infinitive form of the verb *anakephalaioō*.

15 We use “sum up” here, but this will be modified as we proceed, for the whole point of the following discussion is to determine with as much precision as possible the meaning of *anakephalaiōsasthai*.

becomes apparent—*anakephalaiōsasthai* defines the plan. The *mysterion* is the plan, therefore, *anakephalaiōsasthai* defines or describes the “content” of the *mysterion*.

Mysterion and Anakephalaiōsasthai

The verb *anakephalaioō* occurs only three times in Scriptures.¹⁶ In Romans 13:9 *anakephalaioō* means to “sum up” or to “gather together under a general idea”:

The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; you shall not kill; you shall not steal; you shall not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up [*anakephalaioūtai*] in this saying, [namely] “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Rom 13:9)

A similar meaning for *anakephalaioō* can be observed in ancient writers such as Aristotle, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Quintilian.¹⁷

The Greek of LXX (Theodotion) Psalm 71:20 reads: *anakephalaioōthēsan proseuchai dayid* (“the prayers of David are [?]”). It is unclear whether the verb indicates that David’s prayers are “gathered together”¹⁸ or “brought to a conclusion.”¹⁹ The word *anakephalaioō* is perhaps used in the second sense in the *Epistle of Barnabas*,²⁰ which speaks of how Christ “brought about an end” to sin, though this passage is open to other interpretations.

The word *anakephalaioō* derives immediately from the noun *kephalaion*, which has several meanings.²¹ In rhetorical contexts, *kephalaion* can mean “the main point” as in “the gist” or “the summary” of what is under discussion (Heb. 8:11).²² It can also mean a “sum” in the sense of a “cumulative total” of something—for instance,

16 In Eph. 1:10, Rom. 13:9, and LXX (Theodotion) Ps. 71:20. Theodotion was a second century Jewish scholar who produced a Greek version of the Old Testament. Whether or not, at any given point in his version, he was revising an existing Greek translation or was working from actual Hebrew manuscripts, is debated. It appears to have become a popular version among some early churches.

17 See Henry Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), sub verbum *anakephalaioōmai*.

18 So Heinrich Schlier, “*Anakephalaioōmai*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 10 vols., ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–1985), 3:682.

19 So Martin Kitchen, *Ephesians* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 37.

20 *Barnabas* 5:11, text in *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation*, vol. 6, trans. James A. Kleist (New York: Newman, 1948), 53.

21 See Walter Bauer, Frederick Danker, William Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), sub verbum *kephalaion*; Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, sub verbum *kephalaios, a, on*.

22 See Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, sub verbum *kephalaios, a, on*, II.2.

of money (Acts 22:8), of people (Num. 4:2; 31:20,49), or of words (Dan. 7:1).²³ The word *kephalaion* can also mean “chief” in the sense of “ruler” or “director.”²⁴ It can also indicate some prominent event or “crowning act” that brings something to completion.²⁵

Both *anakephalaioō* and *kephalaion* are related to the noun *kephalē*, which has the basic meaning of “head.” The meaning of *kephalē* in the Pauline corpus is disputed, as is its meaning in Ephesians.²⁶ Scholars have argued that in Ephesians *kephalē* could indicate “authority over,” “source,” or both of these meanings.²⁷

Without the prefix “*ana-*,” the verb *kephalaioō* can mean “to sum up,” “to bring under a head” (that is, “to bring under the rule of”). Alternately, in a more passive sense, it can mean “to be summed up,” “to amount to,” or “to be combined.”²⁸ These meanings are very similar to the attested meanings for *anakephalaioō* itself.

When used in compound verbs, the prefix “*ana-*” can add a directional “upward” sense, as in *anabainō* (“to go up”) or *anablepō* (“to look up”).²⁹ It can also add a sense of repetitiveness as in *anagennaō* (“to be born again”), or it can indicate a return to a former condition (*anablepō* [“to see again”], *anakainizō* [“to restore”]). This prefix can also intensify a verb, as in *anastenazō* (“to groan deeply”) or *anaphoneō* (“to cry out loudly”).³⁰

In light of these grammatical considerations and precedents, there are at least several possible interpretations of the word *anakephalaioōsasthai* in Ephesians 1:10. It could mean “to sum up,” or “to gather under a general heading.” It could mean “to bring to a conclusion.” It could also be a way of saying, “to bring to a *kephalaion*” (“summation” or “head”).³¹ In this latter reading, *anakephalaioōsasthai* could mean “to summarize.” This meaning, when used of people or things and not of ideas,

23 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, sub verbum *kephalaios*, *a*, *on*, II.5.

24 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, sub verbum *kephalaios*, *a*, *on*, II.3.

25 Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, sub verbum *kephalaios*, *a*, *on*, II.6.

26 For the occurrences of *kephalē*, see Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23. The disputed occurrences in the Pauline corpus (besides those in Ephesians) are 1 Cor. 11:3; Col. 1:18; 2:10, 19.

27 For recent discussions of the meaning of *kephalē* in Ephesians and in the Pauline corpus, see Gregory Dawes, *The Body in Question: Metaphor and Meaning in the Interpretation of Ephesians* 5:21–23 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 12–49; Wayne Grudem, “The Meaning of *Kephālē* (‘Head’): A Response to Recent Studies,” *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990): 42–71; Stephen Miletic, “*One Flesh*”: Eph. 5.22–24, 31. *Marriage and the New Creation*, *Analecta Biblica* 115 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1988), 67–87.

28 See Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, sub verbum *kephalaioō*.

29 Other examples include: *anabibazō* [“to go up, ascend”], *anakuptō* [“to stand up”]). If the prefix occurs with a verb in a context that has to do with teleology (purpose) rather than something physical, the sense can be that of “fulfillment,” “completion,” or “perfection.”

30 In some cases, *ana-* appears to be simply a stylistic addition with little denotative implication whatever (*anaggellō* [“to announce” = *aggellō*]).

31 So Schlier, “*Anakephalaioōmai*,” 681.

comes close to the meaning of “to gather together.” It is also possible that it means “to bring under the rule of” as in “to bring under the authority of.”³²

Several contextual considerations help bring more precision to our inquiry. First, in Ephesians 1:10 *anakephalaiōsasthai* is associated with a realized eschatological perspective. That is to say, the *anakephalaiōsasthai* is taking place in “the fullness of times” (Eph. 1:9). The association of *anakephalaiōsasthai* with eschatology strongly suggests that the word may indicate “restoration”³³ or “bringing to a culmination.”

Second, in its immediate context in Ephesians, *anakephalaiōsasthai* has a cosmic and spatial perspective. It affects “all things, things in heaven and things on earth.”³⁴ In this sense, the meaning might be related to the statement in Colossians 1:20 about God reconciling “things in heaven and things on earth” through Christ. Indeed, *anakephalaiōsasthai* in Ephesians 1:10 probably suggests a similar “bringing together” of these two once-separate spheres, heaven and earth. Hence, we can suggest that the word is meant to also indicate an idea of “unification.”³⁵

Third, the *anakephalaiōsasthai* of “all things” takes place “in Christ” (*en tō Christō*). The preposition *en* may have an instrumental force (“through Christ’s agency”) or a local, corporate sense (“in Christ”).³⁶ Understood either instrumentally or locally, it is clear that Christ is the power behind the activity of the *anakephalaiōsasthai* of all things.

There is no evidence to suggest that the word *anakephalaioō* had acquired any special meaning either for Paul or his audience. As we have noted, use of the word in the New Testament is rare, and elsewhere in ancient writing the word conveys a range of meanings. Therefore, as the audience hears or reads the word *anakephalaiōsasthai* in Ephesians 1:10, they would not have any pre-understanding or assumptions about what Paul might have meant.

In other words, the *mysterion* is introduced in a somewhat mysterious fashion. Based on the possible meanings for *anakephalaioō* with which they were familiar, the audience might have supposed that the eschatological *plan* has to do with “all

32 It is also possible that *anakephalaiōsasthai* may preserve the sense of “source” or “authority over” attested for the related noun *kephalē*. Also, the prefix *ana-* might add the sense of restoration or intensification to *anakephalaiōsasthai*.

33 As was seen above, the prefix *ana-* can add this nuance.

34 The phrase “all things, things in heaven and things on earth” most likely refers to the totality of the cosmos, meaning especially all human beings (both good and evil) and all angels (both good and evil). So Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1998), 140; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Ephesians: A Commentary*, trans. Helen Heron (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 60; Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary 42 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 34.

35 So Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, 60.

36 The interpretation of these *en-* phrases is a problem throughout Ephesians. See John A. Allen, “The ‘In Christ’ Formula in Ephesians,” *New Testament Studies* 5 (1958–59): 54–62; Best, *Ephesians*, 153–154; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 21–22.

things” now being “gathered together” or “brought under authority” or “united” or “brought to a culmination” or “restored” by Christ. That is about all that could be guessed at this point in the letter.

One could go further and posit that at Ephesians 1:10 Paul does not *intend* or *expect* his audience to understand fully what the *anakephalaiōsasthai* of “all things” means. Although the lengthy *berakah*, or prayer of blessing that begins the epistle (Eph. 1:3–14) is probably not meant to be understood as a thematic introduction to the letter,³⁷ and although Paul did not write Ephesians specifically as an exposition of the *mysterion*, nonetheless, the *mysterion* and ideas latent in the *anakephalaiōsasthai* “of all things in Christ” are opened up as the letter progresses. What has been brought under, restored, and brought to a culmination in and through Christ will be developed and clarified later. Paul’s introduction and development of the *mysterion* in this fashion is possibly an example of *insinuatio*, a rhetorical technique where ambiguous or subtle phraseology is used at the beginning of a work not only to catch the attention of the audience, but to entice the audience to discover the hidden meaning or meanings as the work moves forward.³⁸

The Church in the Mystery of “Mysterion”

Ephesians 1:20–23 is connected to and flows from the prayer requests that precede it. Paul prays first that his audience might “understand the hope that belongs to God’s call” (1:18a). Next he prays that they might understand “what are the riches of the glory of God’s inheritance that belong to the saints” (1:18b).³⁹ In Ephesians 1:19a Paul then prays that the audience might understand “the surpassing greatness of God’s power” available to them (1:19a).

This power available to Christians is said to be “in accord (*kata*) with the exercise of his great might” (1:19b). The word *kata* is usually understood rather nebulously as “in accord with” or “according to.” In this instance, as is the case with several other occurrences of the word in Ephesians, *kata* is best understood as indicating that what has just preceded *has come about as a result of* what follows.⁴⁰

37 So Best, *Ephesians*, 111–12. For opposing views, see Peter O’Brien, “Ephesians 1: An Unusual Introduction to a New Testament Letter,” *New Testament Studies* 25 (1979): 510–512; Peter O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 93; Nils A. Dahl, “Adresse und Prömium des Epheserbriefes” [The Address and Introduction of the Letter to the Ephesians] *Theologische Zeitschrift* 7 (1951): 241–264; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 18–19.

38 See Richard A. Lanham, *A Handbook of Rhetorical Terms*, 2d. ed. (Los Angeles: University of California, 1991), 91.

39 This is a disputed translation. Many scholars understand the possessor of the “inheritance” as God himself, and therefore the inheritance as the saints, God’s “inheritance.” I think it much more plausible, and in keeping with the spirit of the *berakah* in chapter one, that all three of Paul’s prayer requests have to do with blessings that now belong to his Christian audience by virtue of their faith.

40 See, for example, Eph. 1:11 (first occurrence); 3:7 (both occurrences). See Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, sub verbum *kata*, B.5.a.δ.

The surpassing greatness of God's power for Christians has come about as a result of "the work of his (God's) great might" (1:19b).

This work of God's great might is then specified in 1:20–23. What God has "worked in Christ"⁴¹ can be described concisely as Christ's exaltation, whereby the Father:

- raised Christ from the dead (1:20b);
- made him to sit at his right hand⁴² in the heavens (1:20c), far above every principality, authority, power, and dominion⁴³ (1:21);
- put all things beneath his feet (1:22a);
- gave him as head over all things (1:22b);⁴⁴ and
- made him the "life-giver" and "filler" of all things (1:23).

In 1:22b–23 Paul returns to his point (from v. 19b) that Christ's exaltation is for the sake of the Church (1:22b). From his position of exalted glory, Christ completely fills "all things." The Church is singled out as the locus of Christ's "filling" in a special way, being described as his "fullness" (1:23).⁴⁵

41 Which is to say, perhaps, worked "with respect to" Christ. See *en* in 1 Cor. 4:2.

42 The notion of being seated at God's right hand is drawn from the Old Testament and would appear to indicate the enthronement of an individual to a position of favor, honor, and power (see Ps. 110:1). The right hand of God, particularly as seen in the psalms, signifies God's power exercised against Israel's enemies (see Pss. 20:6; 21:8; 44:3; 60:5; 98:1; 118:15). Most commentators see in Eph. 1:20 an allusion to Ps. 110:1.

43 These categories of beings are most likely the evil angelic forces mentioned elsewhere in the letter (3:10; 6:12). So, for example, Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 41–56; Thurston Moritz, *A Profound Mystery: The Use of The Old Testament in Ephesians*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 85 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 19; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 62–65; Peter T. O'Brien, "Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church," in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984), 110–150, especially 125–128, 133–136.

44 The phrase "and he gave him as head over all things" in verse 22b connects with and rephrases "and he put all things beneath his feet" in v. 22a, immediately preceding. Thus, the thought is, "and he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things—for the sake of the Church." Two considerations suggest this interpretation: (1) the word for "all things" (*panta*) occurs in both halves of the verse; and (2) the word for "head" (*kephalē*, v. 22b) and "put under" (*hypotassō*, v. 22a) occur in close connection later in Eph. 5:21 and 5:24 where wives and the Church are spoken of as being subject to (*hypotassō*) their husbands and to Christ, their respective heads (*kephalē*). See the concurring view of Dawes, *The Body in Question*, 139.

45 There has been considerable scholarly discussion regarding the meaning of the word *plērōma* ("fullness") as well as the phrase *to plērōma tou ta panta en pasin plēroumenou* ("the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way") in Eph. 1:23. Bringing together clues found in 1:23, 2:20–22, and 3:16–19 results in the notion that what Paul has in mind is the "filling" of the Church (the

With respect to the “mystery” in Ephesians, two things are particularly important. First, Ephesians 1:22 is reminiscent of the *anakephalaiōsasthai* of all things (*ta panta*) in Christ from Ephesians 1:10. The word *kephalē* (“head”) in 1:22 reminds one of the word *anakephalaiōsasthai* in 1:10. The *panta* (“all things”) in 1:22 (used twice) evokes the *panta* in 1:10. The notice that all things have been subjected “under” (*hypo*) Christ’s feet (1:22a) and that he has been given as head “over” (*hyper*) all things (1:22b) recalls the general meaning of the verb *anakephalaiōō* as “gathering under.”

As was suggested earlier, by using the word *anakephalaiōsasthai* Paul probably was introducing a word targeted to entice the audience to discover its meaning as the letter progressed. Ephesians 1:22 is the first and most important explication of the *anakephalaiōsasthai* of all things in Christ. At this point in our study, we can say that it is very likely that a major aspect of the “*mysterion*” is that all things have been subjugated under the exalted Christ.⁴⁶

Second, Ephesians 1:20–23 indicate that the riches, power, and fullness that the Church has received have come about as a result of the exaltation of Christ.⁴⁷ All blessings flow to the Church and humanity from the exalted Christ. Paul thus makes it clear that the *mysterion* was inaugurated at the event of Christ’s exaltation. In Ephesians 2:6 Paul states that the audience itself has already come to participate in the glory and power of Christ’s exaltation.

Further on in the letter, Paul will make a remarkable assertion concerning the *mysterion*—that because of its participation in the power of Christ, it is actually through the Church that the evil demonic forces experience defeat and humiliation:

[A]nd to bring to light (for all) what is the plan of the mystery [*mysterion*] hidden from ages past in God who created all things, so that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the Church to the principalities and authorities in the

new Temple) with the presence of God’s glory, a New Testament fulfillment and analog of how Solomon’s Temple was filled with God’s glory at its dedication (2 Chron. 7:1).

46 Many scholars share this general approach to how Eph. 1:22 relates to 1:10. See, for example, Herbert A. Meyer, *A Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. from the 4th German ed. by M. J. Evans, rev. and ed. by W. P. Dickson (New York: Funk & Wagnals, 1884), 322–323; Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, 60; O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 114; Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 35. See especially Schlier (“*Anakephalaioomai*,” 682), who comments: “The *anakephalaioomai ta panta en tō christō* [‘unifying dominion’ (?) of all things in Christ] obviously consists in the *auton edōken kephalēn hyper panta tē ekklēsia* [... He gave him as head over all things for the Church] (1:22). The summing up of the totality takes place in its subjection to the head. ... To be sure, *anakephalaioomai* is to be derived from *kephalaion* [a summation] rather than *kephalē* [head]. But it is most likely that what is meant by the designation of Christ as *kephalē* led Paul in Ephesians to choose this relatively infrequent but rich and varied term which agrees so well with his intention.”

47 Compare Eph. 1:18, 19, 23.

heavens. This was according to the eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Eph. 3:9-11)

The “manifold wisdom” that is now being made known to the evil demonic forces (principalities and powers) is that the power of the exalted Christ is working through the Church to bring about their downfall and defeat. This is God’s plan—the *mysterion*—now revealed. Rudolf Schnackenburg has aptly commented:

To the extent that the Church, through the Gospel, inwardly wins back humanity alienated from God and formerly enslaved by the “powers,” she reveals to the ungodly powers God’s manifold wisdom (compare Eph. 3:10) and the deprivation of their own power. Hence the Church is the representative of the nonviolent and yet powerful rule of Christ, but still more: she is a power which pervades and transforms the world—if she convincingly communicates to the world the effective healing-power of Christ within her—that is, convinces by her own unity and love (compare Eph. 4:12–14).⁴⁸

As the letter moves forward, other aspects of the *mysterion* are revealed, all finding their source in the exalted Christ. The audience will discover that the *anakephalaiōsasthai* of all things in Christ means the following:

- That though once far off and cut off from God and his promises, Christians are now brought near (having been made the very dwelling place of God), and are the beneficiaries of the fulfillment of his promises (Eph. 2:12–13; 19–22);
- though the audience was once divided and scattered (particularly with respect to their ethnicity), they are now as believers united and gathered together by and in Christ (Eph. 2:11–22; 3:6);
- though once dead, they are now renewed or restored in him (2:5);
- though once poor, they are now made rich (1:18; 2:7);
- though once weak, they are now made strong (1:19,22; 3:10; 6:11–18);

48 Schnackenburg, *Ephesians*, 84. The interpretation of the phrase “the manifold wisdom of God” is debated. In context, however, it is best understood as the functional equivalent of the Ephesian “mystery” (so Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 185–195; Best, *Ephesians*, 323–324; O’Brien, *Ephesians*, 245–246; Caragounis, *Mysterion*, 108).

- though once darkness, they are renewed as light (5:8);
- though once spiritually “deformed” and “stunted,” so to speak, they now find their perfection and culmination in him as they grow into his glorious likeness (4:13); and
- though once little more than puppets of the “ruler of the power of the air,” they are now ruled by Christ (1:20–22) and rule with Christ (2:6), dominating the vile “powers” that formerly dominated them (3:9–11).

In sum, by the end of the letter, Paul will have made clear to his audience that the allusive plan of the “*mysterion*,” explicated in the phrase “*anakephalaiōsasthai* of all things in Christ,” has to do with events now being realized in the age inaugurated by Christ. Theirs is an age that anticipates and even participates in the age to come. The scope is universal. For Christians, the emphasis is on participating in the power, rule, and glory of Christ. To the Church belongs victory, unification, and restoration.

That part of the cosmos that rejects Christ (both angels and human beings) remains outside of these blessings. They must acknowledge the sovereignty of Christ and his Church, but not willingly. With respect to this second group, the *anakephalaiōsasthai* / *mysterion* involves subjugation, humiliation, and ultimate defeat (see 1:21–23; 3:10; 6:11–18).

As the letter unfolds, Paul intends that the members of the Church at Ephesus begin to understand the plan of the “*mysterion*” and their place in that plan. They are to be uplifted and given a sense of the dignity and privilege that is now theirs. The eschatological plan whereby all things, particularly evil powers, are subjugated under Christ’s rule has begun. God’s people are being united in an invincible, everlasting kingdom that will fill the earth. The promises to Israel, especially to Abraham and David, are being fulfilled. This entire process began with the exaltation of Christ. All of history had been moving toward this time when all things would be brought under his dominion and lordship. The secret is now revealed; the realization of the plan has begun.

The audience begins to see for themselves what they have now become: empowered, transformed children of Almighty God, called by Christ to bring the Gospel—the *mysterion*—to the world; to reign with Him, to battle and conquer the forces of darkness, and to dwell in the peace, joy, and glory of the Church—the new Temple, the new Jerusalem.