

THE MEANING OF MYSTERY IN ROMANS 11:25

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to investigate the meaning of the word *μυστήριον* in the argument of Paul in Romans 11:25. The main idea is to demonstrate the importance of assessing the rhetorical structure of the argument before one decides on the meaning of keywords such as *μυστήριον*. The author follows three steps towards his goal: 1) an analysis of the argument flow in Romans 9 to 11; 2) a proposal for a rhetorical structure of Romans 11:25-26 that connects with the larger structure, and finally, 3) a proposal for the meaning of *μυστήριον*.

KEYWORDS

Romans 11:25-26; Salvation of the Jews; *Mysterion*.

INTRODUCTION

Why should we bother whether or not Jews will be saved? Be it partially or completely, now or in the end of the times, how does that concern us? They had their chance to enjoy God's salvation and they have decided not to believe Christ was the son of God.¹ What else can be done but leave them alone and go

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¹ JOHNSON, John J. "A new understanding of the Jewish rejection of Jesus: Four theologians on the salvation of Israel", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000), describing the view of Sidney G. Hall, says that the traditional interpretation of Rom 11:25, which holds that Jews will eventually be saved because they will accept Christ is simply unacceptable for Hall. "The Christ-centered thesis that in the end God will make Jews into Christians is inadequate and unacceptable. It

about our lives? These might have been some of the questions that the Gentile Christians in Rome were raising here and there, while contemplating the inexplicable unbelief of the Jews. The function of the expression *μυστήριον* in Rom 11:25 plays an important role in Paul's answer to these questions. He believed one could certainly find alternative ways of coping with such dilemma without boasting over the Jews. It is important to understand from the outset that *μυστήριον* is not, in itself, the answer for these questions but it is part of the answer, one that is considered crucial to the argument of Paul. This article investigates the reasons why and how the word *μυστήριον* brings strength to the answer formulated by the apostle in Rom 11:25-56. The main focus is not on exegesis but on the rhetorical structure of Romans 9-11 and the way the expression *μυστήριον* helps the argument of the apostle. Granted, the word has a verifiable semantic range of its own,² but its role in the argument found in Rom 9-11 should not be taken for granted. It is a very tempting strategy to rely on the most common meaning of a given expression, but I am inclined to agree with Vanhoozer that meaning is not something that words and texts *have* (meaning as noun) but rather something people *do* (meaning as verb). "A word or text only has meaning (noun) if some person means (verb) by it".³ In the same way, the meaning of *μυστήριον* in this passage is not *only* based on the semantic range peculiar to the expression, but it is *also* based on the role that it plays in the argument of Rom 9-11. In fact, it is precisely because the term has a semi-stable meaning that the author can

retains an eschatological rejection and replacement theology of the Jews", 235. From the perspective of Clark M. Williamson, another theologian dealt with in this article, "any type of Christian theological statement is unacceptable if it in any way suggests that Judaism is inferior to Christianity, or that Jews must convert to the Christian faith. Such statements, he believes, helped pave the way to the Holocaust", 232.

² See BROWN, Raymond. *The Semitic background of the term mystery in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968); PENNA, Romano. *Il mysterion paolino: traiettoria e costituzione*. Supplementi alla Rivista Biblica 10 (Brescia: Paideia, 1978); and BOCKMUEHL, Markus N. A. *Revelation and mystery in ancient Judaism and Pauline Christianity*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2. Reihe (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990).

³ VANHOOZER, Kevin J. *Is there a meaning in this text? The text, the reader, and the morality of literary knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 202. In the context of this quotation, Vanhoozer is trying to answer the questions raised by John Searle as to how we get from physics to semantics. How do physical sounds and visible marks become a verbal message, for example, a promise? In this particular context, his answer is focusing on the important role of the author as a communicative agent. Does it follow that meaning is only a matter of authorial activity? No. Later on, in the same chapter, he will deal with the other side of the question: "Where does meaning come from – personal action or impersonal sign systems? ... In fact, I try to combine both models insofar as I view communication as the action that puts a language system into motion at a particular point in time by realizing certain possibilities offered by the codes", 222. It is precisely those "possibilities offered by the codes", the expression *μυστήριον* being such code in this case, that this paper is trying to address.

use⁴ it to build his own argumentation. There is always a reason why an author picks out a word in order to substantiate the point he wishes to make.

This brings us back to the question of this paper, namely, what is the function of the term *μυστήριον* in Rom 11:25? Why and how does it bring strength to the point Paul is making? Since the expected result of his argument is stated in Rom 11:18, the question at hand is not without reason; it tackles the reason why Paul believes this mystery will bring about a different attitude among Gentile Christians. I plan to answer the proposed question by following three steps: a) an investigation into the rhetorical structure of Rom 9-11, b) an analysis of the structure of Rom 11:25-32, and c) a definition of the function of *μυστήριον* in this passage.

1. THE RHETORICAL STRUCTURE OF ROM 9-11

The purpose of this section is to understand the way in which Romans 9-11 was supposed to work as a rhetorical structure. It is not difficult to see that this pericope has a point and that the author has designed a rhetorical structure to ensure the comprehension of that point. A good rhetorical structure always explores a few aspects that are peculiar to the intended audience such as: a) a question that no one wants to ask, b) an answer that no one wants to give, c) prejudices and biases towards a given topic, and so on. The problem begins when a different audience attempts to read the text and the rhetorical structure may not produce the same results. The first indication that the rhetorical structure is not working as designed is the feeling of inconsistency in the text. In some cases, reviewing the development of the argument helps us to understand the way in which the rhetorical structure was designed to work.

1.1 *The development of the argument*

What is it that the apostle wants to accomplish with his argumentation in Rom 9-11? Moo has suggested that “Paul’s complex theologizing in chaps. 9-11 has a very practical purpose: to unite the squabbling Roman Christians behind his vision of the gospel and its implications for the relationship of Jew and Gentile”.⁵ If that is the case, the next question is: how can this section serve the purpose of uniting “squabbling Christians”? A formal analysis of the transition from 8:31-39 to 9:1–11:32 will quickly show that there is an important tension being addressed here, namely, the problem of Israel’s unbelief.⁶ Part of this

⁴ HIRSCH, E. D. *Validity in interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967) rightly remarks that “although verbal meaning requires the determining will of an author or interpreter, it is nevertheless true that the norms of language exert a powerful influence and impose an unavoidable limitation on the wills of both the author and interpreter”, 27.

⁵ MOO, Douglas J. *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 552-3.

⁶ Moo frames this tension by saying that “the Jews, recipients of many privileges (9:4-5), are not experiencing the salvation offered in Christ (implied in 9:1-3); they are object of God’s electing love, yet, from the standpoint of the gospel, they are enemies (11:28)”. *Romans*, 548-9.

tension is due to the way Paul conducted his argument in chapters 1 to 8. He has refuted the status of Israel as chosen-saved-people as something based on ethnic reasons only, and he has also insisted that “what once apparently belonged to, or was promised to, Israel now belongs to believers in Jesus Christ, whether Jew or Gentile”.⁷ It is as if he is intentionally provoking the question that he will deal with in chapters 9-11, that is, did God reject Israel? The purpose of Rom 9-11, therefore, is to give a negative answer to this question, along with all the necessary considerations.⁸

How about the role of Romans 11 specifically? As part of Rom 9-11, chapter 11 must play a role in the argument leading to a negative answer to the question whether God rejected Israel. Chapter 11 balances out the emphasis put on God’s election with respect to the way he chose Jacob but not Esau. Left without its counterpart, such emphasis brings up inevitably the question of God’s justice, a question that is spelled out in 9.14: “Is God unjust?” That is the place where the argument of chapter 11 comes in with the pivotal question: “Did God reject his people?” (11:1). It is not difficult to understand the attitude of Gentile Christians in Rome on this matter. If God decided not to have mercy on part of his people, and thereby keep them from accepting the Gospel, what is the point in pushing such discussion further? What is the point in justifying the unbelief of the Jews?⁹

However, that is not the attitude the apostle wants to see among the Gentile Christian community. The question raised in 11.1 will address the idea of Israel’s hardening as an *intentional part of God’s plans* and not a result of a contingency plan.¹⁰ Thus, the discussion regarding the *rejection of Israel* stands as the climax of this entire section of 9-11, as Aletti says,

⁷ MOO, *Romans*, 549.

⁸ LYONNET, S. “Le Rôle d’Israël dans l’histoire du salut selon Rom 9-11.” In: *Die Israelfrage nach Röm 9-11*, ed. L. de Lorenzi (Rome: Abtei von St. Paul von der Mauern, 1977), 42-47, sees this section as an illustration for what had just been discussed. DODD, C. H. *The epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Collins, 1949), sees it as a “foreign body”, that is, “a compact and continuous whole, which can be read quite satisfactorily without reference to the rest of the epistle”, 148.

⁹ ELLUL, Jacques. *Ce Dieu injuste...? Théologie chrétienne pour le peuple d’Israël* (Paris: Arléa, 1991) exemplifies what seems to be a common conclusion for this dilemma. “Nous abordons maintenant l’une des questions les plus ardues, et les versets de Paul ne peuvent que nous scandaliser, à moins que l’on n’accepte la théorie de la double prédestination”, 57.

¹⁰ For FITZMYER, Joseph. *Romans: A new translation with introduction and commentary, The Anchor Bible 43* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), “the picture painted thus far by Paul in chaps 9-10 is not pleasant: Israel’s misstep suits the plan of God based on his gratuitous election (chap. 9), but actually its cause rests not with God but with Israel itself (chap. 10). Yet as early as 9:27 Paul hinted at a ray of hope, when he said that ‘a remnant shall be saved’. Now he returns to this aspect of the problem and further explains that God has not rejected his people...”, 602. Moo, *Romans*, also identifies a theme structuring this entire chapter: “A single basic theme can be traced throughout 11:1-32, stated at the beginning and the end of the section: ‘God has not rejected his people, whom he foreknew’ (v. 2a); ‘from the standpoint of election they [Israelites] are beloved because of the patriarchs’”, 671.

avec Rm 11, l'argumentation de la section (Rm 9-11) arrive à son climax rhétorique et sémantique, puisque le salut final de tout Israël y est annoncé. Ces claires et simples, ne doivent pourtant pas faire oublier la difficulté des détails. Qu'entendre en effet par "tout Israël" (11,26)? Et Jésus Christ sera-t-il le médiateur du salut accordé par Dieu à son peuple?¹¹

There are two elements in Aletti's approach that help us to see why Israel's unbelief should be seen as an original part of God's plan: *tout Israël* and *le médiateur*. These elements point to the discussion found in chapter 11. Pita, discussing the literary function of 9-11, acknowledges that the link between 1:18–8:39 and 9:1–11:36 determines in many aspects the meaning and function of both sections.¹² In other words, unless one decides the function of each of these two sections, it is impossible to understand the relationship between them. Consequently, if the function of the second section is not defined, it is hard to know the exact meaning of the expression mystery in Rom 11:25. Either one chooses to take 9-11 as an appendix to 1:18–8:39, in which case the argument would move from a discussion on salvation in a broad sense (for Jews and gentiles) to a narrow focus on the situation of Israel, or one chooses to take 9-11 as the climax of the entire letter. But, as Pita rightly points out, neither alternative will put the meaning of mystery as the center of the discussion.

A ben vedere, pur riconoscendo la presenza di motivazioni valide per l'una e l'altra posizione, Rm 9-11 sembra affrontare questioni che riguardano non soltanto Israele ma anche i gentili e che, soprattutto, chiamano in causa Dio stesso. La disposizione retorica e i generi argomentativi utilizzati dimostrano che il problema di questa sezione è non soltanto né principalmente il mistero e la situazione d'Israele ma la fedeltà o la credibilità della Parola di Dio.¹³

1.2 The questions driving the argument flow

A great deal of the rhetorical structure of Romans 9-11 depends on key questions driving the flow of the argument. As we can see in Figure 1, both chapters 9 and 10 raise question that are dealt with later in chapter 11.

¹¹ ALETTI, Jean-Noël. *Comment Dieu est-il juste? Clefs pour interpréter l'épître aux Romains* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1989), 179.

¹² PITA, Antonio. *Lettera ai Romani: nuova versione, introduzione e commento* (Milano: Paoline Editoriale Libri, 2001), 329.

¹³ Ibid.

Figure 1: The relationship between chapters 9-10 and 11.

Issue raised	Issue dealt with
Chapter 9	Chapter 11:1-10
Gentiles pursued righteousness by faith, while Jews were hardened.	Did God reject his people? By no means!
Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν; ὅτι ἔθνη τὰ μὴ διώκοντα δικαιοσύνην κατέλαβεν δικαιοσύνην, δικαιοσύνην δὲ τὴν ἐκ πίστεως, (9:30).	Λέγω οὖν, μὴ ἀπώσατο ὁ θεὸς τὸν λαὸν αὐτοῦ; μὴ γένοιτο· (11:1).
Chapter 10	Chapter 11:11-32
Jews stumbled over the stumble rock, becoming a disobedient and obstinate people.	Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all!
16 Ἄλλ' οὐ πάντες ὑπήκουσαν ... 18 ἀλλὰ λέγω, μὴ οὐκ ἤκουσαν; 19 ἀλλὰ λέγω, μὴ Ἰσραὴλ οὐκ ἔγνω;	Λέγω οὖν, μὴ ἔπταισαν ἵνα πέσωσιν; μὴ γένοιτο· (11:11).

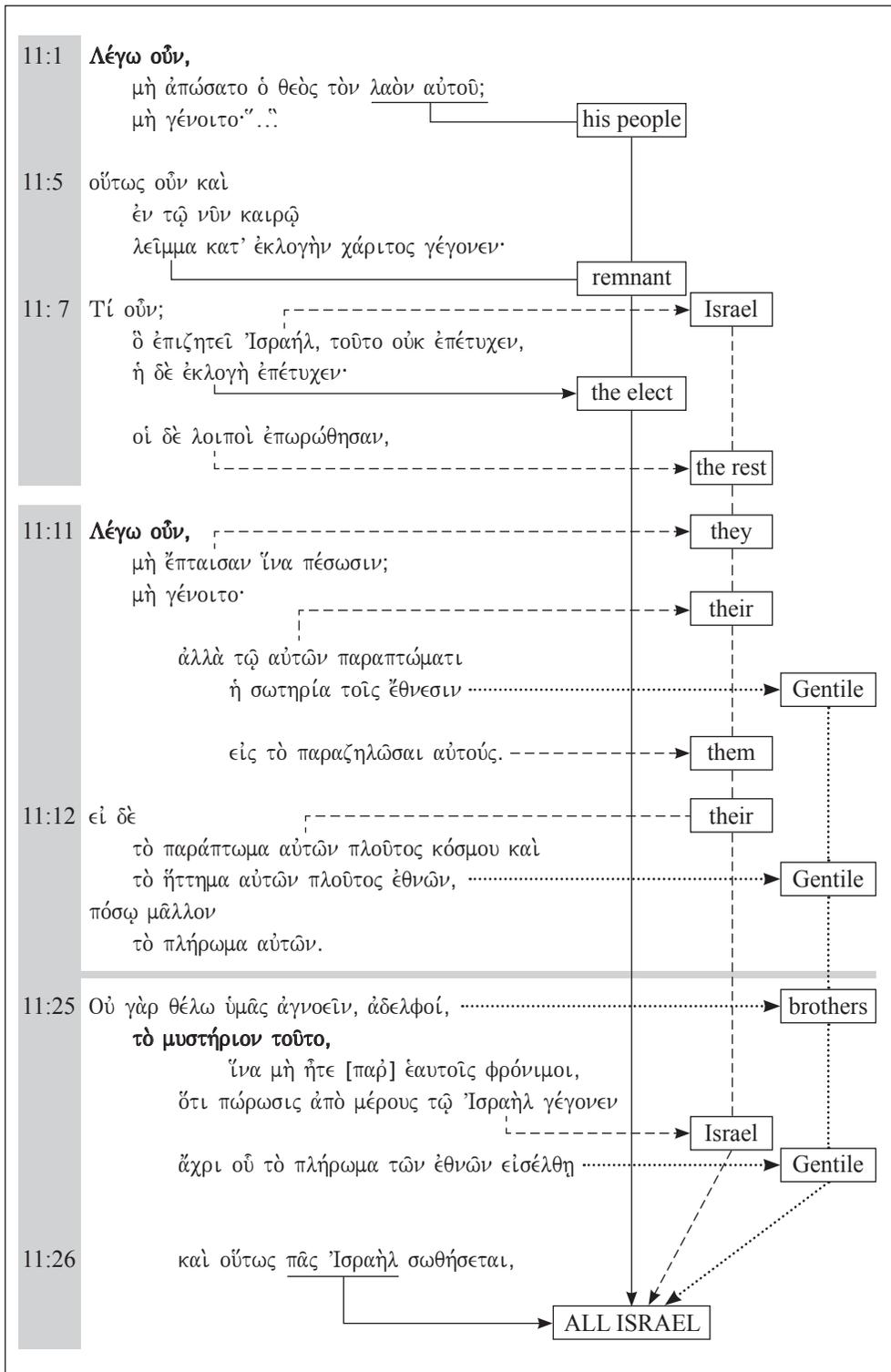
Let us focus for a moment on the question why Israel's unbelief is not beyond recovery. Why is it that her disobedience does not equal her total rejection? This apparent contradiction needs to be addressed in order for Paul to conclude his argument. As Volf puts it,

... the fact that God's *elect people* Israel stood, by and large, outside the community of the saved was in tension with the claim that God will faithfully carry out God's intention in the election of Christians. How can election guarantee salvation if even God's elect people Israel fails to participate in the Messianic community of salvation?¹⁴

That is precisely the focus of this next section (11:1-32), namely, to offer an answer to this question. Since our main passage is part of this section, the concept of *mystery* will also play a role in the answer.

¹⁴ VOLFF, Judith M. G. *Paul and perseverance: Staying in and falling away*. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament: Reihe 2; 37 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), 161-2.

Figure 2: The structure of Romans 11



How do these two questions structure the argument of Paul? The first part of the chapter (11:1-10) starts by making a distinction between the *remnant* and the *rest of Israel*, a distinction that will be crucial to the concluding concept of “all Israel”. Later, in 11:7, another set of distinctions is proposed between ἐκλογή and λοιποί; the distinction between the two is found precisely on the fact that the ἐκλογή obtained what they sought so earnestly (cf. Rom 9:30), while the latter did not. Οἱ λοιποί, did not obtain it because they were hardened, that is, “God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day” (Rom 11:8 [NIV]).

The second part of this chapter (11:11-32) is to be understood as another pericope with two distinct sections (see Figure 3), the first of them describing a scenario with four situations. Situations 1 and 2 can be attested in salvation history: their transgression meant riches for the world (v. 12), their loss meant riches for the Gentiles (v. 12), their rejection meant reconciliation of the world (v. 15) and their being cut off meant Gentiles being grafted in (v. 17). Situations 3 and 4 cannot be attested in salvation history so far because they deal with events that have not come to pass yet. One can just imagine that *their* (the rest of Israel) fullness will bring greater riches (v. 12), and *their* acceptance will bring life from the dead (v. 15). The argument being made here is this: if situation 1 brought about situation 2, one should expect that situation 3 would bring about situation 4. Again, situations 3 and 4 are deductions based on what happened in situations 1 and 2. Paul can only wish that situations 3 and 4 will take place. Had Paul stopped his argument here, there would be no need for appealing to the *mystery* of God’s will. Had Paul stopped here, the answer that this entire chapter is dealing with would be very simple: whether or not Israel (the rest) fell once and for all, it really doesn’t matter, for we know that Israel (the remnant) guarantees the fulfillment of God’s promises. Or, one could say that *the rest* of Israel fell beyond recovery in order to make room for the Gentiles.

However, Paul does not leave his reader with a scenario based on an *informed hunch* only, he wants to present it as an *informed fact*. In order to do that, he needs to warrant his hunch with information that no one knows, so that situations 3 and 4 (see Figure 3) become a description of what will actually happen. If he succeeds in doing that, his argument will be very powerful to deal with a boastful attitude towards the current situation of the Jews. So, how is he going to change the status of his informed hunch? That is exactly the role of μυστήριον in this passage, for Paul uses it to warrant his informed hunch and change it into a set of informed facts.

Figure 3: The structure of the argument in 11:11-32

FIRST SECTION: SCENARIO 11:11-24	
IF situation 1 brought about situation 2	
<p>Situation 1: The Rest of Israel</p> <p style="text-align: center;">their transgression [v.12] →</p> <p style="text-align: center;">their loss [v.12] →</p> <p style="text-align: center;">their rejection [v.15] →</p> <p style="text-align: center;">their being cut off [v.17] →</p>	<p>Situation 2: Gentiles & World</p> <p style="text-align: center;">[v.12] riches for the world</p> <p style="text-align: center;">[v.12] riches for the gentiles</p> <p style="text-align: center;">[v.15] reconciliation of the world</p> <p style="text-align: center;">[v.17] gentiles being grafted in</p>
HOW MUCH MORE situation 3 will bring about situation 4	
<p>Situation 3: The Rest of Israel</p> <p style="text-align: center;">their fullness [v.12] →</p> <p style="text-align: center;">their acceptance [v.15] →</p> <p style="text-align: center;">they do not persist in unbelief [v.23] →</p> <p style="text-align: center;">their being grafted back in [v.24] →</p>	<p>Situation 4: Gentiles & World</p> <p style="text-align: center;">[v.12] greater riches</p> <p style="text-align: center;">[v.15] life from the dead</p> <p style="text-align: center;">[?]</p> <p style="text-align: center;">[?]</p>
SECOND SECTION: FACT 11:25-32	
Fact 1: God's plan	[25a] ὅτι πῶρωσις ἀπὸ μέρους τῶ Ἰσραὴλ γέγονεν
Fact 2: God's plan	[25b] ἄχρι οὗ τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν εἰσέλθη
Fact 3: God's plan	[26a] καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται,

2. THE RHETORICAL STRUCTURE OF ROM 11:25-32

How does the term *μυστήριον* in Rom 11:25 is able to warrant the informed hunch in situations 3 and 4? Let me start by looking into the referent of *μυστήριον* in this verse. François Refoulé, reviewing some of the different proposals, mentions seven lines of interpretation: 1) the salvation of *all Isarel*, 2) the temporal limitation of Israel's hardening, 3) the *way* in which Israel will be saved, 4) the interweaving of Jews and Gentiles, 5) the *enlargement* of salvation to include the Gentiles, 6) the establishment of the Israel of God, and 7) a particular way of salvation.¹⁵ For Refoulé, the range of possibilities is due to the structure of 11.25-27:

Comment peut-on expliquer de telles divergences, au premier abord assez déroutantes? Elles tiennent avant tout à la façon dont les auteurs conçoivent la

¹⁵ REFOULÉ, François. "...et ainsi tout Israël sera sauvé": *Romains 11,25-32*, *Lectio Divina* 117 (Paris: Cerf, 1984), 25-30.

construction des versets 25-27, au sens donné à *houtôs* au verset 26a et à *achri hou* au verset 25b, enfin à la formule “tout Israël”.¹⁶

The first step towards a better understanding of the structure of Rom 11:25-27 is to discover how many things τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο is pointing to. There seems to be four possibilities of structuring this passage (see Figure 4). The first possibility, stating that ὅτι is pointing to three statements (excluding the quotation), rightly recognizes that the conjunction subordinates the statements (1), (2), and (3).¹⁷ The second possibility, though acknowledging the subordinate role of the conjunction, includes the quotation as part of what the mystery is pointing to.¹⁸ However, the quotation does not support all that has been said in 11:25-26a, but only the statement that “all Israel will be saved”.¹⁹ In the third possibility, the conjunction ὅτι is also a subordinate conjunction, but only the first clause is directly connected to the conjunction. Kim, one proponent of this possibility, explains the argument.

The καὶ οὕτως of Rom 11:26 is inferential (“and so/therefore”). So the “mystery” proper is the ὅτι-clause of Rom 11:25c, and the next clause of 26a is an inference from it. However, with the conjunction kai, Paul binds the mystery proper and the inference closely together, so that the mystery is: “Partial hardening has come upon Israel until the full number of the gentiles have come in, and so all Israel will be saved”. Καθὼς γέγραπται introduces a scriptural support for the foregoing statement, “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26a).²⁰

What is interesting about Kim’s argument is that he binds together both the first and second clauses, leaving no option for choosing one out of the two or three statements in 11: 25-26. In other words, the identification of

¹⁶ REFOULÉ, *Romains 11,25-32*, 31.

¹⁷ Refer to Figure 4: Four possible structures. This structure is found in old commentaries like ZAHN, Th. *Der Brief an die Römer*, KNT (Leipzig, 1910), LEITZMANN, H. *Der Brief an die Römer*, HNT 8 (Tübingen, 1906); later on in JEREMIAS, J. “Einige vorwiegend sprachliche Beobachtungen zu Röm 11, 25-36,” in *Die Israelfrage nach Röm 9-11* (Rome: St. Paul’s Abbey, 1977), 193-205; CRANFIELD, C. E. B. *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Epistle of Romans IX-XVI*, ICC (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1979); more recently in MOO, *Romans*.

¹⁸ Thus MÜLLER, Ulrich B. *Prophetie und Predigt im Neuen Testament* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1975), 225-233; STULHMACHER, Peter. “Zur Interpretation von Römer 11, 25-32,” in *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, Gerard von Rad, ed. (München: C. Kaiser, 1971), 555-570.

¹⁹ Thus WAGNER, J. Ross. *Heralds of the good news: Isaiah and Paul ‘in concert’ in the Letter of Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 277; and KIM, Seeyon. *Paul and the new perspective: Second thoughts on the origins of Paul’s Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 240.

²⁰ KIM, *New perspective*, 239-40. See also, SCHLIER, H. *Le temps de l’Église* (Tournai: Casterman, 1961), 238-248.

the referent of *μυστήριον* does not need to be one specific clause or statement, excluding all the others. In this particular aspect, contrary to what Kim does, Moo is using another criterium to identify the referent of *μυστήριον*.

An important clue in answering this question is the sense of something new in Paul's argument that his use of the word "mystery" suggests. This consideration would seem to rule out the fact of Israel hardening since Paul had plainly taught it earlier (11:7b-10). It also suggests that the focal point of the mystery is not the salvation of all Israel since this was an expectation widely held among Jews in Paul's day. What stands out in vv. 25b-26a, what Paul has not yet explicitly taught, and what entails a reversal in current Jewish belief, is the sequence by which all Israel will be saved.²¹

The limitation with the *clue* adopted by Moo is that it is somehow unilateral; the referent of the mystery must be something new, never taught before. But is the "sequence" of Israel's salvation something never taught before? Is the sequence the *only thing* (in 11:25-26) never taught before? Not necessarily. There are three reasons for that. First, these three elements have already been developed throughout Rom 9-11 by using Old Testament quotations. Second, the literary function of the term mystery here does not require that the referent be something never taught before. The role of *μυστήριον* in the argument of Paul is to warrant his conclusion and present it *as informed fact*. Third, if we consider these three statements in the context of a broad concept of mystery for Paul, as *Heilsplan* (as Kim does), the sequence in which Israel will be saved loses its newness. That is a significant contribution Kim brings to this topic, for the meaning of *μυστήριον* in Rm 11.25 needs to be understood in light of other passages where Paul describes the source of his gospel.²² Seen from that perspective, the content of the mystery receives a strong support from Old Testament passages.

It seems reasonable to suppose that by about A.D. 34/35 Paul had the "mystery" of Rom 11:25-26 as his conviction of divine *Heilsplan* and began to design his apostolic mission in accordance with it. Probably we are to suppose that soon after his Damascus experience of divine revelation and call Paul searched the Scriptures (esp. Isa 6 and 49; but also Isa 45:14-25; 59:19-20; Deut 32:21; etc.) to interpret the most unexpected revelation and call and came to an understanding of divine *Heilsplan* as embodied in the "mystery".²³

²¹ MOO, *Romans*, 716.

²² See KIM, *New perspectives*, 240; BOCKMUEHL, *Revelation and mystery*, 171.

²³ KIM, *New perspectives*, 257. Segal also acknowledges that Paul "is a trained Pharisee, an early rabbinic Jew, who left that community and joined a group of Gentiles redeemed. God-fearers if you will, based on religious experience of conversion. All of those facts are crucial for understanding what

If one assumes that Paul interpreted his Damascus experience in light of Old Testament passages, then the referent of μυστήριον was not completely new or never taught before. The fact that Israel has been hardened is taught in passages like Isa 6.9-10. The fact that the Gentiles will be given the opportunity of hearing the gospel is plainly taught in Isa 49.22. The fact that Israel (those who repent) will be saved is taught in Isa 59.20-21.²⁴

3. A PROPOSAL FOR THE MEANING OF MYSTERY

We should not be so emphatic pointing out the *newness* when discussing the meaning of μυστήριον because its referent depends on many passages in the Old Testament. Thus, if its meaning is derivative of Old Testament passages, would it be right to say that the rhetorical force of μυστήριον is not related to *revelation* of new facts but *interpretation* of old ones? Both Refoulé and Kim ask the same question. For Refoulé, it is a matter of an *inspired theological conclusion*.

Le mystère de 11,25 ne serait donc ni une révélation au sens strict du mot, ni une exégèse inspirée à proprement parler, mais plutôt une conclusion théologique inspirée. Quand Paul comprit quelle lumière projetait sur l'endurcissement d'Israël un logion comme celui de Mc 13, 10 il dut avoir le sentiment d'une illumination, d'une révélation.²⁵

For Kim, it is a matter of *special revelation*:

Had Paul obtained the mystery only through exegesis of Scriptures he would have referred to those Scriptures to substantiate it. In terms of my thesis, however, the absence of explicit scriptural substantiation for the “mystery” proper is quite understandable. Paul did not explicitly refer to Isa 6 and 49 or any other passage to substantiate the “mystery”, because they were not the primary sources of the “mystery”, but only confirmation of that which he had received through special revelation.²⁶

The latter seems to be the case, for the *mystery proper* is more than a theological conclusion, but a special revelation that led to many conclusions throughout Paul's ministry.

he means in any place”. SEGAL, Alan F. “Paul's experience and Romans 9-11”. *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 11 (1990), 56.

²⁴ The expression “all Israel” is found in several extra-biblical passages like Tobit 14:6-7; Jubiles 1:28; and Apocalypse of Baruch 78:7. See REFOULÉ, *Israël*, 135-43, for further discussion on each of these occurrences.

²⁵ REFOULÉ, *Israël*, 267.

²⁶ KIM, *New Perspectives*, 249.

Thus, I propose that the third possibility of structuring Rom 11.25-26 (see Figure 4), sheds more light on the meaning of *μυστήριον* as a rhetorical strategy to validate Paul's informed hunch. The reasons for my conclusions are the following: a) it does not rely on the *clue* suggested by Moo, b) it sees the two phrases in verse 25 in a continuum, instead of three distinct statements, and c) it moves the gravity center of responsibility for the meaning of *μυστήριον* from the narrow context of 11.25-26 to the broad understanding of mystery.

CONCLUSION

The meaning of *μυστήριον* in Rom 11:25-26 has to do with God's *Heilsplan*. It is the "apocalyptic description of soteriological mysteries (i.e. components and modalities of the future salvation)",²⁷ or, to use Brown's words, "the divine economy of salvation".²⁸ Such mysteries are presented as "already objectively existent in heaven, only to be manifested in the eschaton at God's behest".²⁹ In this passage, the mystery is that: a) Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of Gentiles has come in, and b) all Israel (i.e. the remnant and the Gentiles) will be saved. It served well the purpose announced in 11:18, by fostering a new attitude among the Gentile-Christian community in Rome not to boast over "those branches".

Later on, Paul will balance out his *gospel* with the proclamation of Christ in relation to this mystery:

Now, to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him... (Rom 16:25-26).

The mystery is not a theological conclusion added to the gospel of Christ through the writings of the apostle Paul, but it was a *hidden* message in the prophetic writings that could not be grasped until the days of the apostle.

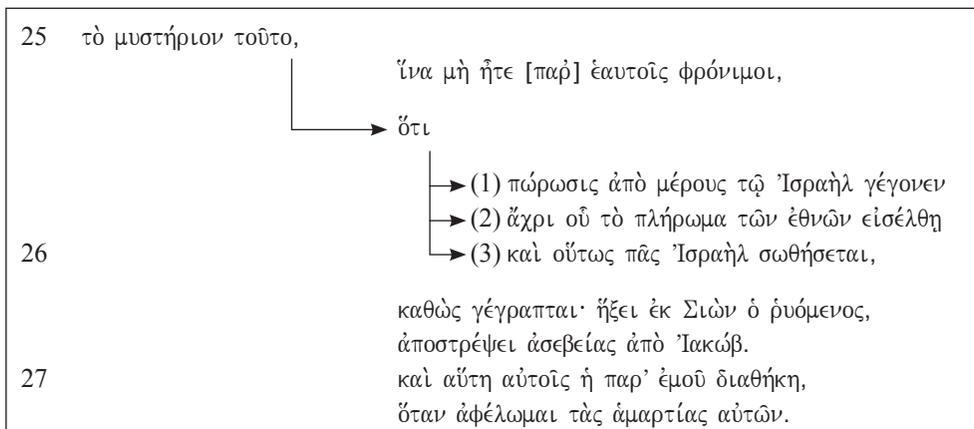
²⁷ BOCKMUEHL, *Revelation and mystery*, 38-39.

²⁸ BROWN, *Semitic background*, 50.

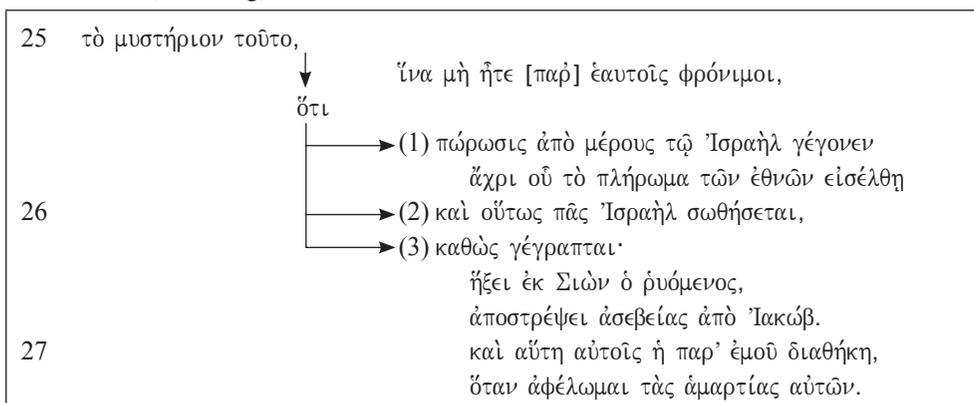
²⁹ BOCKMUEHL, *Revelation and mystery*, 39.

Figure 4: Four Possible Structures

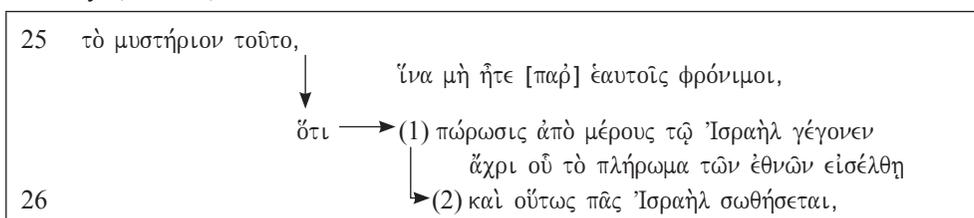
First possibility – three statements (excluding quotation). Thus: Zahn, Lietzmann, Jeremias, Michel, Cranfield, Wilckens, Moo, etc.



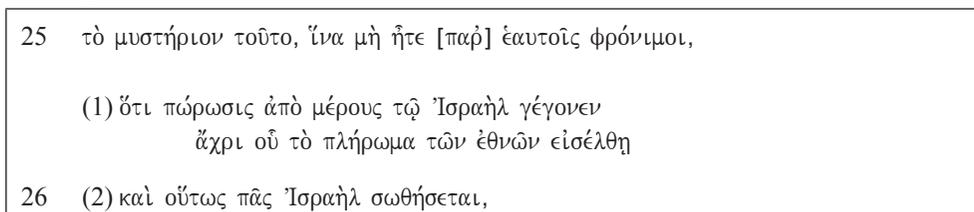
Second possibility – three statements (including quotation). Thus: B. Müller, P. Stuhlmacher, Ch. Plag, F. Mussner.



Third possibility – two clauses depending on ὅτι. Thus: Luthardt, J. Munck, D. Zeller, B. Mayer, S. Kim, etc.



Fourth possibility – two independent clauses. Thus: B. Weiss, Lipsius, Althaus, Maier, Sanday-Haedlam, Käsemann, O. Vicentinni, etc.



RESUMO

O objetivo deste artigo é investigar o significado da palavra μυστήριον no argumento de Paulo em Romanos 11.25. A ideia principal é demonstrar a importância de avaliar a estrutura retórica do argumento antes de decidir o sentido de palavras-chave como μυστήριον. O autor segue três passos em direção a esse alvo: 1) uma análise do fluxo argumentativo de Romanos 9 a 11; 2) uma proposta da estrutura retórica de Romanos 11.25-26 que se relacione com a estrutura mais ampla, e, finalmente, 3) uma proposta para o sentido de μυστήριον.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Romanos 11.25-26; Salvação dos judeus; *Mysterion*.