

The meaning of
ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ
in the Greek New Testament

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English - mystery

Latin - mysterium

Greek - μυστήριον

μυστήριον

General sense: mystery, secret

Plural: τὰ μυστήρια

The Greco-Roman mystery cults 7th century BC to 4th century AD
Eleusinian Mysteries practiced at Athens

Secret religious truth revealed by God

Roman soldiers oath of enlistment: τὸ σεμνὸν μυστήριον
Latin *sacramentum militum*

Latter-Day Saints sometimes use “mystery” in a rather negative sense:

“Information unnecessary for our salvation or for our personal progress, information the Lord has chosen, for whatever reason, to withhold from us. A preoccupation with such things can distract us from the really important truth that has been revealed and often leads to a loss of spiritual balance, then to contention, doubt, and apostasy.”

In the New Testament—and in fact in all revealed scripture it *never* has that sense.

In the New Testament μυστήριον appears 28 times

3 times in the Gospels

21 times in Paul's writings

4 times in Revelation

The Gospels

μυστήριον occurs only in a single setting in the synoptic Gospels where Christ responds his disciples when they ask him why he teaches in parables.

ὑμῖν τὸ **μυστήριον** δέδοται τῆς βασιλείας **τοῦ θεοῦ**

“to you is given the **mystery** of the kingdom **of God**” (Mark 4:11, author’s translation).

ὑμῖν δέδοται **γνῶναι** τὰ **μυστήρια** τῆς βασιλείας **τῶν οὐρανῶν**

“to you is given **to know** the **mysteries** of the kingdom **of heaven** (Matthew. 13:11, author’s translation)

ὑμῖν δέδοται **γνῶναι** τὰ **μυστήρια** τῆς βασιλείας **τοῦ θεοῦ**

“to you is given **to know** the **mysteries** of the kingdom **of God**” (Luke 8:10, author’s translation).

What are these Mysteries?

“For this reason I speak to them in parables, because although they see, they really do *not* see, and although they hear, they really do *not* hear *nor* understand” (Matt. 13:13 author’s translation).

At a rudimentary level parables can provide a limited understanding of ethical behavior, but a deeper level of understanding requires committed discipleship and the inspiration of the Spirit of God to comprehend “the mysteries,” that is to obtain a full understanding of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the Plan of Salvation.

In a soon to be released publication:

The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation,

John and Jeannie Welch convincingly show that *all* of Christ's parables have this same double level of meaning—a simple story illustrating an ethical principle and a much deeper level presenting some aspect of the Plan of Salvation, and a study of all the parables together can provide a detailed understanding of that Plan.

The Writings of Paul

In the writings of Paul, μυστήριον is used no less than 21 times—18 times in the singular and 3 times in the plural.

I will not deal with every single instance, but I have selected several examples that illustrate the various nuances of Paul's usage of the term.

“Now when I myself came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come with eloquent speech or wisdom as *I proclaimed to you the mystery of God*. For I resolved to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I appeared before you in weakness and fear and with considerable trepidation, and my speaking and my preaching was not with the persuasiveness of wisdom, *but with the convincing proof of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not be based on human wisdom but on the power of God*. However, we do speak wisdom among *the spiritually mature*, but not the wisdom of this world or of the leaders of this present age who are doomed to perish. But we speak *God’s wisdom which is hidden in a mystery, which God foreordained for our glory before the world was*.” (1 Cor. 2:1–7, author’s translation).

1 Corinthians 4:1

Paul describes himself and other apostles as “agents of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries,” thus emphasizing that Church leaders have the responsibility to ensure the correctness and preservation of sacred Gospel truths, which he designates as “mysteries.”

1 Corinthians 13:2

In Paul's great discourse on ἀγάπη "love" in 1 Cor. 13:2 he emphasizes the primacy of the Gospel principle of love:

"If I should have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and knowledge ... but do not have love, I am nothing" (author's translation).

1 Corinthians 15:51

When talking about the physical resurrection, Paul states:

“Look, I’m telling you a mystery” (author’s translation).

Ephesians 1:1-4, 8

Paul explains that has been entrusted him with God's Plan of Salvation for the Gentiles, which was "a mystery made known to me through revelation" which was why he had "insight into the mystery of Christ" (author's translation).

And God did this so that Paul could "enlighten everyone concerning the plan of the mystery that has been kept secret for ages in God, who created all things" (author's translation).

Colossians 26-27

Paul emphasizes his God-given responsibility to bring “the mystery that has been kept secret from ages and from generations—but is now revealed to his saints, to whom he wanted to make known the glorious richness of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of Glory” (author’s translation).

Paul focus here is on Christ as being central part of the mystery, i.e. the Plan of Salvation (author’s translation).

2 Thessalonians 2:7

Here Paul uses “mystery” nuanced differently. In the context of his description of conditions that will lead up to the second coming of Christ he says, “For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work” (author’s translation).

The “mystery of lawlessness” seems to be referring to the Devil’s hidden attempts to thwart God’s purposes, which are made known to Paul through revelation.

1 Timothy 3:9

In his description of the qualifications for a deacon, Paul emphasizes that he must be a person “who holds onto the mystery of faith with a pure conscience” (author’s translation).

“Mystery of faith” referring to the revealed truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

1 Timothy 3:16

Paul describes how members of the Church should conduct themselves, stating,

“And we all agree that the mystery of our religion is great” (author’s translation).

“The mystery of our religion” again refers to revealed principles of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Revelation 10:7

The whole content of the book appears is described as :

“the mystery of God”

τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ

Revelation 1:20

“The mystery of the seven stars”

τὸ μυστήριον τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀστέρων

Refers to the revealed allegorical significance of the seven stars, they represent the “angels of the seven churches.”

Revelation 17:7

“The mystery of the woman”

τὸ μυστήριον τῆς γυναικός

Refers to the allegorical significance of the woman described in Rev. 17:5, who has μυστήριον written on her forehead.

Summary

Within the New Testament, the noun μυστήριον, “mystery” or in the plural, μυστήρια, “mysteries,” refers to the fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, God’s plan for the salvation of his children, which cannot be obtained by human logic or reason, but can only be gained through revelation from God.

Summary

Depending on context, μυστήριον, can refer, in a more restricted sense, to individual aspects of the Gospel, such as:

“The resurrection” (1 Cor. 15:51)

Christ’s central role as Savior and Redeemer (Col. 1:26-27)

“Faith” (1 Tim. 3:9)

The contents of the Book of Revelation (Rev. 10:7).

For thus saith the Lord—I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end. Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory. *And to them will I reveal all mysteries*, yea, all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old, and for ages to come, will I make known unto them the good pleasure of my will concerning all things pertaining to my kingdom. Yea, even the wonders of eternity shall they know, and things to come will I show them, even the things of many generations. And their wisdom shall be great, and their understanding reach to heaven; and before them the wisdom of the wise shall perish, and the understanding of the prudent shall come to naught. For by my Spirit will I enlighten them, and by my power will I make known unto them the secrets of my will—yea, even those things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor yet entered into the heart of man. (D&C 76:5-10)