

The meaning of ΜΥΣΤΗΡΙΟΝ in the Greek New Testament

Michael D. Rhodes

The English word “mystery” is a borrowing (via the Latin *mysterium*) of the Greek noun μυστήριον, which in Classical Greek had the general sense “mystery, secret.”¹ The plural, τὰ μυστήρια, “the Mysteries,” was a technical term for the mystery cults that were practiced in the Greco-Roman world from the 7th century BC to the 4th century AD, the Eleusinian Mysteries at Athens being the most well-known.² μυστήριον could also designate a secret religious truth revealed by God.³ It was even used for a Roman Soldier’s oath of enlistment, τὸ σεμνὸν μυστήριον.⁴

Among Latter-day Saints, the term “mystery” sometimes has a rather negative connotation referring to “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.”⁵ However, in the New Testament (and in all revealed scripture for that matter) it *never* has that sense.

In the New Testament μυστήριον occurs 28 times—three times in the Gospels, 21 times in the epistles of Paul, and four times in Revelation. It has the general sense “secret knowledge revealed by God,” but with various nuances depending on context.⁶ In the New Testament, μυστήριον, unlike the English word “mystery,” did not denote that which was impenetrable because it was inherently unintelligible or incoherent. Rather, it pointed to that which was too profound for human ingenuity and could not be obtained by unassisted human logic or reasoning.⁷ It could be gained only by the Spirit.⁸ Once disclosed, however, it made perfect sense to the spiritually mature.

Let’s now examine some New Testament passages where μυστήριον is used.

The Gospels

In the Gospels μυστήριον occurs only in a single setting in which Christ’s disciples (οἱ μαθηταί - Matthew 13:10, Luke 8:9) which includes οἱ περὶ αὐτὸν σὺν τοῖς δώδεκα, “those around him together with the Twelve” (Mark 4:10, author’s translation) ask him, διὰ τί ἐν

¹ Liddell, H. G., Scott, R., Jones, H. S., & McKenzie, R., *A Greek-English Lexicon* Oxford: Clarendon Press (1996), 1156; Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press., 661.

² Bornkamm, TDNT, 4: 803.

³ LSJ, 1156.

⁴ LSJ, 1156. *Sacramentum militum* in Latin.

⁵ Robinson and Garrett, *Commentary on the Doctrine and Covenants*, 1:65.

⁶ LSJ, 1156; BDAG 662; Bornkamm, TDNT, 4:824.

⁷ Findlay, “St. Paul’s First Epistle,” 778.

⁸ BAGD, 661–62; Thiselton, First Epistle, 240–41.

παραβολαῖς λαλεῖς αὐτοῖς, “Why do you speak to them in parables?” (Matthew 13:10, author’s translation). Christ’s answer in the three synoptic variants are:

ὕμῖν τὸ μυστήριον δέδοται τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ,

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

ὕμῖν δέδοται γινῶναι 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)

ὕμῖν δέδοται γινῶναι 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).

Mark has the singular, “mystery,” whereas Matthew and Luke have the plural, “mysteries,” and they both add the infinitive “to know.” Finally, Matthew has “kingdom of heaven” instead of “kingdom of God.”

And what are these *mysteries*? Christ explains, “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). Thus, 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.⁹

The Writings of Paul

In the writings of Paul, μυστήριον is used 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.

1 Corinthians

The first several verses of 1 Corinthians chapter 2 are especially instructive for clarifying what μυστήριον means.

“¹Now 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. ²For I resolved to know

⁹ In a soon to be released publication, *The Parables of Jesus: Revealing the Plan of Salvation*, John W. Welch 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. Thus a study of all the parables together can provide a detailed understanding of that plan.

nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³And I appeared before you in weakness and fear and with considerable trepidation, ⁴and my speaking and my preaching was not with the persuasiveness of wisdom, but with *the convincing proof of the Spirit and of power*, ⁵*so that your faith would not be based on human wisdom but on the power of God*. ⁶However, 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. ⁷But 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).

Paul came to Corinth to proclaim, "the mystery of God" (1 Cor. 2:1). Note that several manuscripts have μαρτύριον, "testimony," in verse 1, which the KJV follows. Earlier manuscripts, however, suggest that the correct word should be, μυστήριον, "mystery."¹⁰ Paul makes it clear that his message is not for all—it is "hidden in a mystery" (1 Cor. 2:7). Indeed, only the spiritually mature (τοῖς τελείοις) can fully understand and embrace it. Since Paul's term τέλειος (given its technical nuance in the Greco-Roman world) applied to those initiated into the mystery religions, it hints at a Christian mystery that is centered on sacred rites and knowledge not shared with the world, through which the Christian came into full fellowship and maturity with other Christians.¹¹ So Paul uses μυστήριον to describe the spiritual knowledge that can only come from God and which mere mortal intellect, without divine help, cannot grasp. In doing so, he stresses the importance of ongoing revelation from God.

In 1 Cor. 4:1 Paul describes himself and other apostles as ὑπηρέτας Χριστοῦ καὶ οἰκονόμους μυστηρίων θεοῦ, "agents of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries," (author's translation), thus emphasizing that Church leaders have the responsibility to ensure the correctness and preservation of the sacred Gospel truths, which he designates as "mysteries."

In Paul's great discourse on ἀγάπη, "love" in 1 Cor. 13:2 he emphasizes the primacy of the Gospel principle of love: ἐὰν ἔχω προφητείαν καὶ εἰδῶ τὰ μυστήρια πάντα καὶ πᾶσαν γνῶσιν ... ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐθέν εἰμι, "If I should have prophetic powers and understand all mysteries and knowledge ... but do not have love, I am nothing" (author's translation).

In 1 Cor. 15, when talking about the physical resurrection, Paul states: ἰδοὺ μυστήριον ὑμῖν λέγω, "Look, I'm telling you a mystery" (1 Cor. 15:51, author's translation).

Ephesians

In Ephesians chapter 3 Paul explains that he has been entrusted with τὴν οἰκονομίαν τῆς χάριτος τοῦ θεοῦ, "God's Plan of Salvation"¹² (Eph. 3:2, author's translation,) for the Gentiles, which was κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν ἐγνωρίσθη μοι τὸ μυστήριον "a mystery made known to me through revelation" (Eph. 3:3, author's translation,), which was why he had τὴν σύνεσίν μου ἐν

¹⁰ See Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 480. For a careful analysis, see Collins, *First Corinthians*, 118.

¹¹ On the early Christian mystery, see Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *The Temple in Time and Eternity* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, 1999), 88, 214–17, 247; Hugh Nibley, *Temple and Cosmos: Beyond This Ignorant Present*, ed. Don E. Norton, vol. 12 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies at Brigham Young University, 1992), 28, 56, 65, 71, 213–14.

¹² BDAG, 697.

τῷ μυστηρίῳ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, “insight into the mystery of Christ,” (Eph. 3:4, author’s translation,). And God did this so that Paul could φωτίσαι πάντας τίς ἡ οἰκονομία τοῦ μυστηρίου τοῦ ἀποκεκρυμμένου ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων ἐν τῷ θεῷ τῷ τὰ πάντα κτίσαντι, “enlighten everyone concerning the plan of *the mystery* that has been kept secret for ages in God, who created all things” (Eph. 3:9, author’s translation).

Colossians

In Colossians Paul also emphasizes his God-given responsibility to bring τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν — νῦν δὲ ἐφανερώθη τοῖς ἀγίοις αὐτοῦ, οἷς ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεὸς γνωρίσαι τί τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς δόξης τοῦ μυστηρίου τούτου ἐν τοῖς ἔθνεσιν, ὃ ἐστὶν Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν, ἡ ἐλπίς τῆς δόξης, “*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.” (Col. 1:26-27, author’s translation). Paul focus here is on Christ as being the central part of the mystery, i.e. the Plan of Salvation.

2 Thessalonians

In 2 Thessalonians, 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, τὸ γὰρ μυστήριον ἤδη ἐνεργεῖται τῆς ἀνομίας “For the *mystery* of lawlessness is already at work.” (2 Thess. 2:7, 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

In Paul’s first letter to Timothy he uses the term “mystery” twice. In his description of the qualifications for a deacon, Paul emphasizes that he must be a person ἔχοντας τὸ μυστήριον τῆς πίστεως ἐν καθαρᾷ συνειδήσει, “who holds onto the *mystery* of faith with a pure conscience” (1 Tim. 3:9 author’s translation).

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

Further on in the same chapter Paul describes how members of the Church should conduct themselves, stating, καὶ ὁμολογουμένως μέγα ἐστὶν τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον “And we all agree that the *mystery* of our religion is great” (1 Tim. 3:16, author’s translation).

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

Revelation

In Revelation μυστήριον is used in reference to the mysterious things portrayed there. The whole content of the book is described as τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ, “the *mystery* of God,” (Rev. 10:7, author’s translation).

In Rev. 1:20 τὸ μυστήριον τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀστέρων, “the *mystery* of the seven stars,” (author’s translation) refers to the revealed allegorical significance of the seven stars, they represent the “angels of the seven churches.” The same is true of Rev. 17:7, where τὸ μυστήριον τῆς γυναίκος, “the mystery of the woman,” (author’s translation), refers to the allegorical significance of the woman described in Rev. 17:5, who has μυστήριον written on her forehead.

Summary

In summary then, 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. 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), and the contents of the Book of Revelation (Rev. 10:7).

In this dispensation, God has also explained what his “mysteries” are:

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)