

The Mystery of God

In the previous issue of *Affirmation & Critique* we saw that God is transcendent and mysterious but that He desires to manifest Himself in His economy to His people in a way that is immanent and expressed. This is implied and hinted at in the Old Testament but is not fulfilled until New Testament times. The word μυστήριον is used twenty-eight times in the New Testament to refer to God and to various items in His economy, indicating the manifestation of something hidden, especially with eschatological significance (following the use of the word in the Septuagint of Daniel). Μυστήριον also occurs in classical Greek literature to indicate the initiation into a secret society and is often associated with a particular place and carried out by means of a series of rites. This article looks at the origin and meaning of the word *mystery*, its use in the New Testament, and its significance, development, and consummation from the perspective of God's economy.

The Word *Mysterion*

There are some uncertainties in deriving the meaning of the word μυστήριον from its etymology. Μυστήριον probably comes from and is related to the noun μύστης "one initiated in[to] secrets or mysteries." Μύστης derives from μύω "to close (the mouth or eyes)," which comes to mean "to initiate into the mysteries." This verb is used in Philippians 4:12: "I have learned the secret." Μυστήριον is a technical term "associated with the idea of the *unfathomable, impenetrable, incomprehensible*" (Caragounis 10). It is often associated with some kind of (usually genitive) modification, which either identifies the place (e.g., Eleusinian), the deity associated with it (e.g., Orphic or Mithraic), the content (e.g., the mystery of the kingdom of God, the mystery which contains the kingdom of God), apposition (the mystery which is the kingdom of God), or subjective genitive (e.g., the mystery of God, Christ, God reveals Christ).

The suffix or ending -τήριον is a standard Greek noun

ending usually meaning "the place of an activity" or "the means to accomplish an action." For example, θυσιαστήριον "an altar" is literally "a place of sacrifice" from θύω or θυσιάζω "sacrifice" (verb) and θυσία "sacrifice" (noun), and κριτήριον "court" is "a place of judgment" from κρίνω "judge." Ποτήριον is a cup or drinking vessel, and ποτιστήριον is a drinking trough, the means to get a drink (πίνω, πο-) or to cause others to drink (ποτίζω). Some nouns may have both the sense of place and means.¹ Some consider that the suffix -τήριον "is no help" in deriving the meaning of the word μυστήριον, but the etymology leads only to a general conclusion that μυστήριον means "something on which silence must be kept." Rather, it is in

its usage that a fuller, richer meaning of the word can be established (Bornkamm 803). Yet perhaps we can demonstrate in its usage that the word μυστήριον can have the sense of a place for the initiation into a mystery or the means to initiate into a mystery or even both senses. Μυστήριον is a hidden, mysterious matter known only to those who come to the right place and through the proper means of initiation into it.

Mysterion in Classical Greek

The word μυστήριον occurs in Greek literature in reference to the mystery religions that developed from pre-Christian Hellenistic times and continued into the Christian era. Many of these mysteries were associated with agricultural festivals along with their associated deities and the cycle of death and life connected with fertility in the natural realm and may have had their origin in the fertility religions (e.g., Baal worship) of the ancient Near East. Some of these mysteries, such as the Eleusinian mysteries, revolved around a belief of a hope of life after death for the initiated. Traditionally in ancient Greece, after death one would cross the River Styx and enter Hades; however, the Eleusinian mysteries gave the Greeks a hope of a better life in Hades. Such a belief was cultivated beginning with the introduction ceremony in which the hopeful initiates were shown a

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number of things including the seed of life in an ear of corn. The uninitiated went through a series of rites to identify himself or herself with a deity (frequently in its sufferings) to be initiated into the secrets of the religion. A vow of silence was also laid on the initiates; as a result, we do not know much about the details of these ancient mysteries. Although the notion of place and means in the word *μυστήριον* is problematic, in the classical Greek place and means can still be considered significant. For example, for those who participated in the Eleusinian mysteries, the site of the cult (Eleusis) and the particular associated rites were both necessary elements of the mystery. In other mysteries, such as the Cabiric, Orphic, and Mithraic, although the deities are emphasized, they were located at particular shrines or temples (e.g., the Cabiri at Samothrace) and worshipped with particular rites that the initiates went through.

Mysterion in the Old Testament

As we mentioned in the previous issue, one of the characteristics of God in the Old Testament is what Bockmuehl calls “the problem of divine hiddenness” (10; cf. Isa. 45:15). In the Old Testament God’s economy remained hidden, intimated only in types and shadows to be revealed at a later time in the New Testament (cf. Eph. 3:4-5). Furthermore, the classical Greek notion of mystery is not present in the Old Testament. There are two Hebrew words, *sod*, which is sometimes used for “secret council,” “secret,” or “council” (Amos 3:7), and words from the root *str* “hide,” including *mistar* (sounding similar to mystery), which is used for secret or hidden places (Isa. 45:3; Jer. 23:24), that approximate some notions of mystery. However, these words are usually translated by a derivative of *κρύπτω* “to hide” in the Septuagint. *Μυστήριον* is used only in the Septuagint of Daniel (2:18-19, 27-30, 47) to translate the Aramaic-Persian word *raz* “secret, mystery” to refer to Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and its interpretation regarding the great image of human government. According to Bornkamm, in Daniel

μυστήριον takes on for the first time a sense which is important for the further development of the word, namely, that of an eschatological mystery, a concealed intimation of divinely ordained future events whose disclosure and interpretation is reserved for God alone...and for those inspired by His Spirit (4:9 Θ). (814-815)

Μυστήριον is also used in the apocryphal writings where it usually has the notion of secret(plan)s, and perhaps only twice has the classical Greek sense (Wisdom 14:15, 23). Perhaps “one reason for the reluctant use of mystery language esp. in the LXX could be that at the time of its completion such terminology was still felt to be too obviously tainted with unacceptable pagan overtones” (Bockmuehl 102).

Mysterion in the New Testament

While at first glance, as Hugo Rahner and others indicate, there may seem to be some resemblance between certain elements of the Greek mystery religions (such as death and life and union with a deity) and the Christian mystery, the differences between the two are far greater than their similarities. It is difficult to attribute dependence between the two, and historical connections are also minimal; rather, the connection is mainly in that they share some common terminology. An example of a difference between the two is that the classical Greek mysteries (always in the plural) were not to be revealed by the initiates, whereas the New Testament mystery (more commonly singular) is revealed and is to be proclaimed (yet the element of mystery is still preserved), as Rahner states:

Mysterion...which issues from the depths of God, is manifested in Christ and the Church, and returns to the depths of God...*Mysterion* is always both a manifesting and a concealment of the divine act of salvation: manifest in the communication of the truth through the promised Christ; concealed in the unfathomable nature of the divine utterance, which even after its communication cannot be fully understood but is apprehended only by faith...The Christian *mysterion* is always a “secret revelation”: secret, because here on earth it appeals only to faith and once taken in faith permits only a slow ascent to understanding;...revealed, because it is “proclaimed from the rooftops,” addressed to all mankind. (165-166)

Also, “Hellenistic mysticism had no doctrine of a divine intervention in human history with an eschatological consummation as its goal” (Wikenhauser 200). Rather, as Brown and Bockmuehl demonstrate, in the New Testament *μυστήριον* is mostly used in the Old Testament and Semitic sense of “a hidden eschatological mystery to be revealed.” However, the sense of classical Greek, “to be initiated into a mystery” (cf. Phil. 4:12), with the notions of place and means embodied in the ending *-τήριον*, and other related concepts such as silence (Rom. 16:25) and unspeakable things (ἄρρητα, 2 Cor. 12:4), can still be observed in the New Testament use of the word.

In the New Testament the occurrences of the word *mystery*, frequently modified by a genitive noun or apposition, all have hidden eschatological significance that develops in the New Testament. First, there are the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens (Matt. 13:11), and the mystery[ies] of the kingdom of God (Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10) given in parables due to the hardness of the people, followed by the mystery of Israel’s hardness and eventual salvation (Rom. 11:25). Then there are a series of mysteries related to Christ: the proclamation of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery (16:25), the mystery of the wisdom of God—Christ

crucified (1 Cor. 2:7), the mystery[ies] of God—Christ (2:1; 4:1; Col. 2:2), the mystery of the indwelling Christ (1:26-27), the mystery of transfiguration (1 Cor. 15:51), the mystery of His will—to head up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:9), the mystery of Christ—the church as the Body of Christ (3:3-4, 9; Col. 4:3), and the great mystery of the couple—Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). The mystery of the gospel (6:19), the mystery of the faith (1 Tim. 3:9), and the mystery of godliness (v. 16) are also related to Christ and the church, especially in propagation and living. The mystery of the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands is related to the practical expression of Christ in the church (Rev. 1:20), and the finished mystery of God (10:7) consummates the age of mystery, the church age. In parallel development, negatively and in contrast to the positive mysteries of God’s economy, following Daniel’s mystery of the image of human government (ch. 2), are the mystery of lawlessness (2 Thes. 2:7) and the mystery of Babylon the Great, of the woman and the beast (Rev. 17:5-7).²

Mostly in the occurrences of the word related to God and Christ does *mystery* have the classical Greek sense of initiation. First, we will consider the expressions that have eschatological significance and then consider the mystery of God, Christ, and the mystery of Christ, the church, taking into account the linguistic force of the suffix *-ῥῖον*.

The Mystery(ies) of the Kingdom of the Heavens and of the Kingdom of God

In Matthew 13 the Lord told seven parables concerning the mysteries of the kingdom of the heavens to the crowds, the significance of which He later made known to the disciples. These parables, the parable of the sower, the parable of the wheat and tares, the parable of the mustard seed and the great tree, the parable of the leaven in the meal, the parable of the treasure in the field, the parable of the pearl of great value, and the parable of the net, indicate the development of the kingdom of the heavens throughout the church age, which is the age of mystery. At the beginning of the church age, Christ the Sower sows Himself as the kingdom seed into the believers, but His enemy also sows false believers, especially after the time of the adoption of Christianity as a state religion. This had the effect of enlarging the appearance of the kingdom into Christendom, a great tree. The teachings of Christianity were also “leavened” to make them easier to take with the addition of many pagan teachings and practices. In the last three parables, spoken privately to the disciples,

the treasure and the pearl signify the church redeemed through Christ’s death from the God-created earth (the field) and the Satan-corrupted world (the sea), whereas the net “signifies not the gospel of grace, which is preached in the church age, but the eternal gospel, which will be preached to the Gentile world during the great tribulation” (Recovery Version, Matt. 13:47, note 1). Mark relates only the parables of the sower and the mustard seed (ch. 4), and Luke relates the parable of the sower (ch. 8) and later the mustard seed and leaven (13:18-21). They also refer to the mystery and mysteries of the kingdom of God respectively.

The Lord also indicated that the lack of understanding of the mysteries is not necessarily due to the mysterious nature of what was being revealed but was due to the condition of the hearers, especially in their heart. “For the heart of this people has become fat, and with their ears they have heard heavily, and their eyes they have closed” (Matt. 13:15).

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The Mystery of Israel’s Hardness and Eventual Salvation

Due to Israel’s unbelief, hardness has come on the majority of Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles comes (at the end of this age), and then all Israel will be saved, turned away from ungodliness and have their sins taken away (Rom. 11:25-27; Isa. 59:20-21). This is a mystery, an indication of the kindness and severity of God in dealing with His people, with the misstep of Israel enabling God to “graft in” the church, mainly consisting of Gentiles (Rom. 11:1-25). This realization caused Paul to utter the following doxology, which incorporates the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and untraceable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him, and it will be repaid to him? Because out from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (vv. 33-36)

Most of the remaining New Testament passages containing the word *mystery* associate the word with Christ in His person and work.

The Mystery of God, Christ Crucified, the Wisdom of God

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my

gospel, that is, the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the *mystery*, which has been kept in silence in the times of the ages but has now been manifested, and through the prophetic writings, according to the command of the eternal God, has been made known to all the Gentiles for the obedience of faith. (16:25-26, emphasis added)

In these verses in Romans 16 Paul mentions his gospel—the proclamation of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery, which has been kept in silence (σεσιγημένος) since the beginning of the world. Jesus Christ is proclaimed according to the revelation of the mystery, which concerns Christ as the mystery of God and the church as the mystery of Christ, both of which were hidden until the New Testament times.³ Paul also associates the word *mystery* in an eschatological sense (the times of the ages) with the classical Greek sense (kept in silence).

And I, when I came to you, brothers, came not according to excellence of speech or of wisdom, announcing to you the *mystery* of God. For I did not determine to know anything among you except Jesus Christ, and this One crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling; and my speech and my proclamation were not in persuasive words of wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, in order that your faith would not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. But we do speak wisdom among those who are full-grown, yet a wisdom not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are being brought to nought; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the *wisdom* which has been hidden, which God predestined before the ages for our glory, which none of the rulers of this age have known; for if they had known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but as it is written, "Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard and which have not come up in man's heart; things which God has prepared for those who love Him." But to us God has revealed them through the Spirit, for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. (1 Cor. 2:1-10, emphasis added)

In these verses Paul follows 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, where he proclaims the crucified Christ, the power and wisdom of God. This proclaiming is equivalent to Paul's announcing the mystery of God in the aspect of the crucified Jesus Christ (2:1-2) and his speaking God's wisdom in a mystery (v. 7).

Christ as wisdom was predestinated before the ages for our glory, or glorification. This wisdom is spoken among those who are full-grown and is not of this age or the rulers of this age, since if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory (vv. 6, 8). God's wisdom, or way of doing things, is to bring to

nought everything (including human wisdom and self-exaltation) in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. He reveals His deep and hidden things concerning Christ to us through His Spirit with the proper exercise of our human spirit (vv. 10-15). Paul again combines the Old Testament sense of the word *mystery*, in an eschatological sense (before the ages) revealed in Spirit, with the classical Greek terminology (*full-grown* τέλειος, used in classical Greek to refer to initiates in the mysteries, but here and elsewhere with not exactly the same sense).

Paul's clearest statement regarding Christ being the mystery of God is in Colossians 2 in which he places *Christ* in apposition to *the mystery of God*.

That their hearts may be comforted, they being knit together in love and unto all the riches of the full assurance of understanding, unto the full knowledge of the *mystery* of God, Christ, in whom all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden. (vv. 2-3, emphasis added)

Prior to this Paul spoke of becoming a minister of Christ's Body, the church,

according to the stewardship [οἰκονομία] of God, which was given to me for you, to complete the word [λόγος] of God, the *mystery* which has been hidden from the ages and from the generations but now has been manifested to His saints; to whom God willed to make known what are the riches of the glory of this *mystery* among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory, whom we announce, admonishing every man and teaching every man in all wisdom that we may present every man full-grown in Christ; for which also I labor, struggling according to His operation which operates in me in power. (1:25-29, emphasis added)

In these verses *the word of God* is in apposition to *the mystery*, of which the main point in this passage is that Christ indwells the believers as their hope of glory (v. 27). Again, *mystery* has an eschatological sense of being hidden from the ages and from the generations (v. 26). The goal of the mystery is to make every man full-grown, or perfect, (τέλειος) in Christ (v. 28). Paul uses classical Greek terminology for the initiates (τέλειος), but a longer growth or maturing process is involved in his use than in classical Greek use.

Paul refers to himself and the other apostles as servants of Christ and stewards (οἰκονόμοι) of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1). Paul was a dispensing steward, dispensing these mysteries to God's household. These mysteries (plural) of God are hidden things (especially in the Old Testament times) that are to be revealed by God through the stewardship of Paul and the apostles. "The apostles were

appointed by the Lord to be such stewards, dispensing God's mysteries, which are Christ as the mystery of God and the church as the mystery of Christ (Col. 2:2; Eph. 3:4), to the believers" (Recovery Version, 1 Cor. 4:1, note 4).

Mysteries are also mentioned related to knowing mysteries (1 Cor. 13:2) and speaking mysteries in tongues (14:2) as a contrast to the greater and more excellent matters of having love (13:1) and prophesying (14:1).

Paul also relates the mystery of our change at the time of our transfiguration (15:51), in which our body of humiliation will be conformed to the body of Christ's glory (Phil. 3:21), to Christ's resurrection and His transformation, or transfiguration, to become the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45). Again, the mystery is eschatological since this will take place "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we will be changed" (v. 52). This is the consummation of the process of God's salvation carried out in us individually by the indwelling Christ as the life-giving Spirit. The following examples emphasize the corporate aspect of the mystery.

The Mystery of His Will— to Head Up All Things in Christ

In Ephesians 1:9 Paul speaks concerning the mystery of God's will, which was planned in eternity and hidden in God, thus making it a mystery. "In His wisdom and prudence He has made this hidden mystery known to us through His revelation in Christ, that is, through Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension" (Recovery Version, note 2). God caused grace to abound to us in all wisdom and prudence,

making known to us the *mystery* of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself, unto the economy of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things on the earth, in Him; in whom also we were designated as an inheritance, having been predestinated according to the purpose of the One who works all things according to the counsel of His will. (vv. 9-11, emphasis added)

Paul associates the mystery of God's will with His good pleasure, His counsel, His purpose, and His economy, which is to head up all things in Christ, which is the "climax" of the passage (Caragounis 49).⁴ This has eschatological significance since it extends to the fullness of the

times. From God's good pleasure came a counsel in the Godhead (cf. Acts 2:23; 4:28) to set down beforehand His purpose (πρόθεσις) and then to have a household arrangement (οἰκονομία) to carry it out.

The Mystery of Christ

In Ephesians 3 Paul mentions the mystery of Christ:

If indeed you have heard of the stewardship of the grace of God which was given to me for you, that by revelation the mystery was made known to me, as I have written previously in brief, by which, in reading it, you can perceive my understanding in the *mystery* of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in spirit, that in Christ Jesus the Gentiles are fellow heirs and fellow members of the Body and fellow partakers of the promise through the gospel, of which I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God which was given to me according to the operation of His power. To me, less than the least of all saints, was this grace given to announce to the Gentiles the unsearchable

riches of Christ as the gospel and to enlighten all that they may see what the economy of the *mystery* is, which throughout the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things, in order that now to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies the multifarious wisdom of God might be made known through the church, according to the eternal purpose which He made in Christ Jesus our Lord. (vv. 2-11, emphasis added)

This mystery also has eschatological significance, since in other generations it was not made known to the sons of men, and it was hidden throughout the ages in God. It was revealed to Paul and to other holy apostles and prophets in spirit. Paul mentions both the stewardship (οἰκονομία) of the grace of God and the economy (οἰκονομία) of the mystery (vv. 2-3, 9). This refers to God's household arrangement through His stewards to dispense Himself with His unsearchable riches into His household, the church as His Body. The mystery of Christ is a further development in the mystery of God. It concerns the church, the Body of Christ, whose members consist of both Jews and Gentiles. The church makes known, or displays, the multifarious wisdom of God, and it came into being according to the eternal purpose of God. Paul continues in the rest of chapter 3 with his prayer for the church's subjective experience of Christ's making His home in the believers' hearts and that they

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would apprehend with all the saints the vast dimensions of Christ to be filled unto all the fullness of God (vv. 17-19).

Paul combines the two mysteries, the mystery of God, Christ, and the mystery of Christ, the church, when he speaks in Ephesians 5 concerning the mystery of the couple (v. 32). However, there is also a further development here. Human marriage portrays God's desire in Christ to have a counterpart (the church) and His loving relationship and union with her (cf. Gen. 2:24) in the process of salvation—including nourishing, cherishing, sanctifying, and cleansing—consummating in glorification. This is a great mystery.

Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her that He might sanctify her, cleansing her by the washing of the water in the word, that He might present the church to Himself glorious, not having spot or wrinkle or any such things, but that she would be holy and without blemish. In the same way the husbands also ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his own wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, even as Christ also the church, because we are members of His Body. For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall be joined to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh. This *mystery* is great, but I speak with regard to Christ and the church. (Eph. 5:25-32, emphasis added)

The Mystery of the Gospel

And for me, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known in boldness the *mystery* of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in a chain, that in it I would speak boldly, as I ought to speak. (6:19-20, emphasis added)

In Ephesians 6 Paul speaks concerning the mystery of the gospel. The gospel itself is a mystery, and the mystery is conveyed in the gospel. "The mystery of the gospel is Christ and the church for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose (5:32)" (Recovery Version, 6:19, note 2). Paul asks that the saints would pray for utterance and boldness in making known the gospel on behalf of which he is imprisoned.

The Mystery of the Faith

In 1 Timothy 3:9 Paul speaks concerning holding the mystery of the faith in a pure conscience. The faith refers to the things we believe in, the things that constitute the gospel. The mystery of the faith is mainly Christ as the mystery of God (Col. 2:2) and the church as the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:4).

The Mystery of Godliness

"Great is the *mystery* of godliness: He who was manifested in the flesh, / Justified in the Spirit, / Seen by angels, / Preached among the nations, / Believed on in the world, / Taken up in glory" (1 Tim. 3:16, emphasis added). The mystery of godliness refers to the mystery of the manifestation of God's living in the church. What follows the mystery of godliness in the sequence of the verse is a description of Christ and His process of incarnation and human living, including death (manifestation in the flesh); resurrection, ascension, and becoming the life-giving Spirit to indwell (justification in the Spirit and seen by angels); propagation by the church (preached among the nations, believed on in the world); and the final rapture of the church and her glorification (taken up in glory). Being taken up in glory refers to

Christ's ascension into glory (Mark 16:19; Acts 1:9-11; 2:33; Phil. 2:9). According to the sequence of historical events, Christ's ascension preceded His being preached among the nations. However, it is listed here as the last step in Christ's being the manifestation of God in the flesh. This must indicate that the church too is taken up in glory. Hence, it implies that not only Christ Himself as the Head but also the church as the Body are the manifestation of God in the flesh...The church becomes the continuation of Christ as the manifestation of God in the flesh. This is the great mystery of godliness—Christ lived out of the church as the manifestation of God in the flesh! (Recovery Version, 1 Tim. 3:16, note 9)

The Mystery of the Seven Stars and the Seven Golden Lampstands

"The *mystery* of the seven stars which you saw upon My right hand and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches" (Rev. 1:20, emphasis added). John uses the expression *the mystery of the seven stars and the seven golden lampstands*. The seven stars refer to the seven messengers, or angels, of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands refer to the seven local churches.⁵ This is a mystery. The practical expression of the church as the Body of Christ is in local churches, signified by the seven lampstands. As Witness Lee states,

the churches, signified by the seven golden lampstands, are the testimony of Jesus (vv. 2, 9) in the divine nature, shining in the dark night locally yet collectively. The churches should be of the divine nature—golden. They should be the stands, even the lampstands, that bear the lamp with the oil (Christ as the life-giving Spirit) and shine in the darkness individually and collectively. They are individual lampstands locally, yet at the same time

they are a group, a collection, of lampstands universally. They not only are shining locally but also are bearing universally the same testimony both to the localities and to the universe...Positively, in their nature, shape, and purpose, they are absolutely identical and are connected to one another. (Recovery Version, Rev. 1:20, note 1)

The situation and condition in these seven churches actually prefigure seven stages of church history during this age of mystery, the age of the church.

The Mystery of God Finished

Revelation 10:7 speaks concerning the mystery of God being finished at the time of the seventh trumpet at the end of the church age. This age is the age of mystery. In the Old Testament times everything (at least in the physical realm) was unveiled and manifested, and there was no mystery. In the dispensation of the millennial kingdom and in the new heaven and new earth, everything will be unveiled and there will be no more mystery.

In the dispensation from Christ to the millennial kingdom, everything is a mystery.

The incarnation of Christ, as the beginning of this dispensation of mystery, is a mystery (1 Tim. 3:16). Christ Himself (Col. 2:2), the church (Eph. 3:4-6), the kingdom of the heavens (Matt. 13:11), the gospel (Eph. 6:19), the indwelling of Christ (Col. 1:26-27), and the coming resurrection and transfiguration of the saints as the end of this dispensation of mystery (1 Cor. 15:51-52) are all mysteries that were hidden in the times of the ages (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:5; Col. 1:26). All these mysteries will be completed, finished, and will be over at the trumpeting of the seventh trumpet. (Recovery Version, Rev. 10:7, note 2)

In addition to the above mysteries showing the positive outworking of God's economy in the church age, there are two negative mysteries that are going on at the same time as the positive mysteries of God's economy and in contrast and competition with them. They follow on from the other negative mystery of the image of the four empires of human government in Daniel 2.

The Mystery of Lawlessness

The mystery of lawlessness is an evil mystery consisting of the lawlessness that is already operating among the nations and in human society (2 Thes. 2:3). It is the operation of Satan to deceive people and to oppose God and His interest on the earth. It will consummate in the man

of lawlessness, or Antichrist (prophesied in Daniel 7:20-21, 24-26; 9:27; 11:36-37; Revelation 13:1-8, 12-18; 19:19-20), who "will change laws, destroy and corrupt many to an extraordinary degree, blaspheme God, and deceive men" (Recovery Version, 2 Thes. 2:3, note 3).

The Mystery of Babylon the Great, of the Woman and the Beast

The other negative mystery is revealed in Revelation 17. Here it mentions a woman on a beast with MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF THE HARLOTS AND THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH written on her forehead (v. 5). John is told that the woman refers to the great city (Rome with her seven hills), especially in the aspect of her religion, that of the apostate church (implied by the words *harlot*, *abominations*, and *unclean things*). Indeed, the church incorporated a number of the elements of the mystery religions in its teachings, practices, and traditions, many of which can still be seen in the Roman Catholic Church today. The beast refers to the man of lawlessness, the Antichrist, mentioned in 2 Thesalonians, who will ultimately destroy the apostate Roman Church (Rev. 17:16). We could

say that the consummation of the mystery of lawlessness occurs when the man of lawlessness (Antichrist, or the beast) destroys the woman, the mystery of Babylon the Great.

Summary and Conclusion

The positive mystery[ies] of God can be subsumed under two main mysteries, the mystery of God and the mystery of Christ, which can be viewed from a number of perspectives. These genitives can be interpreted as subjective genitives as well as genitives of apposition.

The mystery of God, Christ (Col. 2:2), interpreted as a subjective genitive implies that God *has* hidden something in Himself, a hidden mystery, and what is hidden in God is Christ. Christ in His person and work was hidden (1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:27) in Old Testament times (only indicated in types and prophecies) until the New Testament times, when God unveils Christ through the processes of incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and becoming the life-giving Spirit.

On the other hand, the mystery of God, Christ, can be understood as a genitive of apposition with the sense that God *is* a mystery. God is hidden and mysterious, and you need to be "initiated" into God by coming to the right

The mystery of godliness refers to the mystery of the manifestation of God's living in the church.

place through the proper means to understand and participate in Him. Christ is the place and means for someone to enter into God.

While it may seem strange that Christ could be the place of initiation into God, this notion is not foreign to the New Testament. Christ is set forth as a propitiation place, the place where God and man can meet, having all the problems between both parties solved (Rom. 3:25). *Christ* also occurs as the object of many locative prepositions such as ἐν (e.g., *in Christ*) and εἰς (e.g., believe *into Him*). We can walk in Him as the reality of the good land and be rooted and grounded in Him (Col. 2:6-7). For us to be initiated into the mysterious God, it is necessary to come to Christ as the place and the means to get into God.

The mystery of Christ (the church as His Body), interpreted as a subjective genitive, implies that Christ *has* something hidden and mysterious in Himself. This hidden matter is the church as His Body. This matter is even more hidden in the Old Testament than Christ is, especially the matter of the “Gentile inclusion in Israel’s participation in Christ as part of the New Covenant community in partial and future fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:31-33 (Eph. 3:6)” (Derickson 439). The Jews and Gentiles constitute the one new man and are fellow heirs, fellow members of the Body, and fellow partakers of the promise (2:15-16; 3:6). In the Old Testament the church is mostly indicated typologically through the tabernacle, the temple, and the priesthood.

To interpret the mystery of Christ as a genitive of apposition implies that Christ *is* a hidden mystery (cf. Col. 3:3). We need to come to the church as the Body of Christ on earth as the place and means to be initiated into Christ. Through His Body on earth after His ascension, Christ has propagated and spread Himself throughout the earth. The church proclaims the gospel (itself a mystery), according to the faith (also a mystery), and lives a life of godliness, manifesting God in the flesh (also a mystery). Although Christ as the Spirit indwells the believers, He is limited by the cooperation of the members of His Body. Through the preaching of the gospel, people believe and are baptized, and they are brought into the teaching and fellowship of the apostles, which is the fellowship of the Body of Christ to build up the Body of Christ on this earth. Paul learned the secret of sufficiency (Phil. 4:12) and enjoyed the salvation of the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ by living in the fellowship of the Body of Christ (1:19).⁶

Ultimately, the positive and negative mysteries consummate in their development and then confront each other in the battle of Armageddon when the mystery of God, Christ, together with the mystery of Christ, the church

as His bridal army, come to destroy the consummation of the mystery of lawlessness, the consummation of Daniel’s mystery of human government, Antichrist with his armies. In this conflict lawlessness is finally defeated. This corresponds to the stone cut without hands that becomes a smashing stone to crush the great image of human government and to become a great mountain, the kingdom of God, that fills the earth (Dan. 2:34-35, 45).

by Roger Good

Notes

¹Other examples of place include θυματήριον “altar of incense” (Heb. 9:4), ἱλαστήριον “propitiation place” (Rom. 3:25), κατοικήριον “dwelling place” (Eph. 2:22), and δεσμωτήριον “a prison, a place of binding prisoners” (Acts 5:21). Other examples of means include φυλακτήριον “phylactery,” the means to guard (φυλάσσω) against something (Matt. 23:5), and perhaps σωτήριον “salvation,” the means to accomplish salvation, make something safe (σάος, σῶς), although others derive the word σωτήριον from σωτήρ “savior” and -ιον “related to or having the quality of” in the same way as the more common σωτήριον “salvation” (Robinson 76-77). A noun with a sense of both place and means is αἰσθητήριον “faculty,” which could be the place, or the power or means of discernment (Heb. 5:14). Some consider that ἱλαστήριον “propitiation place” when referring to Christ in Romans 3:25 could also mean “propitiation,” i.e., the means to accomplish propitiation, but this does not accord so well with its usage elsewhere, which always refers to the place of propitiation, i.e., the expiation cover, or the lid of the Ark (cf. Heb. 9:5; Exo. 25:17, LXX, etc.). Also, Christ is referred to as the means or sacrifice of propitiation using another related word ἱλασμός in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10.

²In these expressions the genitive case (or the “of” expression in English) can indicate a number of relationships. Perhaps the most common or basic relationship is that of *possession*, where the first or head noun belongs to the “of” noun. Another relationship is that of *apposition*, where the head noun and the genitive refer to the same thing, e.g., the city of Jerusalem, with Jerusalem being the city. If the first noun has a verbal notion, then the second noun may function as the subject or object of that verbal notion, e.g., the redemption of Christ, Christ redeems. Christ is the subject, so the genitive is called a “*subjective genitive*.” In the expression *the redemption of our body* the action of redemption is applied to our body, so our body is an “*objective genitive*.” In the expression *cup of water*, water is the *content* of the cup, and in the expression *a table of wood*, wood is the *material* that constitutes or makes up the table.

Three times in the New Testament *mystery* is in the genitive case, “the revelation of the mystery” (Rom. 16:25), “the economy of the mystery” (Eph. 3:9), and “the riches of the glory of this mystery” (Col. 1:27). *Mystery* in the first two expressions probably functions as an objective genitive, i.e., [God] reveals

the mystery, [the stewards in cooperation with God] dispense the mystery, and in the last perhaps a possessive genitive, i.e., “how full...is the richness of the glory” (Alford III.212) (the expression of God) belonging to the mystery, or perhaps content, i.e., how rich is the glory contained in the mystery.

³The notion of mystery associated with Christ may also be indicated by the use of singular neuter pronouns (as opposed to masculine pronouns) to refer to Christ or something of God’s economy that is mysterious or difficult to explain. For example, in the conception of Jesus Matthew and Luke refer to Him as “that which has been begotten in her” τὸ...γεννηθὲν (Matt. 1:20) and as “the holy thing which is born” τὸ γεννώμενον ἅγιον (Luke 1:35). These refer particularly to the divinity of Jesus. Perhaps the neuter referents are used due to the difficulty in describing the divine being. First John 1:1 mentions “that which [neut.] was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life” (so also v. 3). As Witness Lee states,

Here John used the expression *that which* to open his Epistle and unfold the mystery of the fellowship in the divine life. That he did not use personal pronouns in reference to the Lord implies that what he was about to unfold is mysterious. (Recovery Version, v. 1, note 1)

⁴There is debate whether the force of ἀνακεφαλαίωσασθαι is just to sum up all things in Christ or whether to draw on the etymological connection between κεφάλαιον “main principle” and κεφαλή “head” and understand the word to mean “to head up all things in Christ.” The notion of *heading up* fits the context, especially since Christ was given to be Head over all things to the church (Eph. 1:22), and Paul is not averse to using the literal etymological sense of a word and paronomasia to strengthen his point (e.g., the play on the word profit ὄνησις and the name *Onesimus* (Philem. 1:20, 10).

Also in chapter 1 of Ephesians Christ as the Head is mentioned, in chapter 2 the bringing of the Gentiles into the Body, and in chapter 3 the constituting of the Body. See Kerry S. Robichaux for a further discussion on the use and translation of this word (but cf. Barr 237-238).

⁵The grammar is difficult. It seems that the word *mystery* should govern both of *the seven stars* (τῶν ἑπτὰ ἀστέρων) and *the seven golden lampstands* (τὰς ἑπτὰ λυχνίας τὰς χρυσαῖς) although *the seven stars* is in the genitive case, and *the seven golden lampstands* is in the accusative case. Perhaps *the seven golden lampstands* is attracted to the accusative case of the relative pronoun in the clause *which you saw upon My right hand* as the second object of the verb of seeing. Alford treats it as an “elliptic construction for ‘and the mystery of the seven candlesticks’” (IV:560), and other commentators emphasize that these

two expressions refer to the heavenly and earthly aspects of the churches.

⁶Later Christianity even went so far as to include baptism and the Lord’s table, or communion, as rites or sacraments of the Christian mystery with μυστήριον translated “*sacramentum*” in the Vulgate (Dan. 2:18; 4:6; Eph. 1:9; 3:3, 9; 5:32; 1 Tim. 3:16; Rev. 1:20). “The original cultic concept of mystery found rejuvenation in the early Church when μυστήριον became a fixed term for the sacraments” (Bornkamm 826). However, the performance of these sacraments in the physical realm themselves does not necessarily constitute the initiation into the mystery but points to or symbolizes an entrance into and participation in the divine and mystical realm of Christ Himself with the church as His Body, which are the unique place and means to enter into the mysteries of God.

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The church proclaims the mystery of the gospel, according to the mystery of the faith, and lives a life that manifests the mystery of godliness in the flesh.