

Everybody Loves a Mystery!

by

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A Biblical Mystery is not a “Whodunit”

The New Testament word “mystery” is almost a transliteration of the Greek μυστηριον. This Greek term had in classical usage the meaning of religious secrets “confided only to the initiated, and not to be communicated by them to ordinary mortals.”¹ George Abbott-Smith states clearly the original meaning of the word, “That which is known to the μύστης (*initiated*), a mystery or secret doctrine.”² This use is not found in the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Christ and the biblical writers used the word in a unique way.

What is a Biblical Mystery?

What does the term “mystery” mean? The word is derived from the Greek word “*muo*” which means “to shut the lips”. Its root “*mu*” has been carried over into our English language from which we have “*mum*.” The root meaning then is secrecy or concealment. But as used in the New Testament it has the added sense of present revelation. Thayer states that a mystery is a hidden purpose, counsel, or secret will.³ Dr. H. A. Ironside defines a mystery as follows: “The mysteries are those truths which in the Old Testament days were kept in silence, but are the common property of all believers.”⁴ Dr. C. I. Scofield says, “A ‘mystery’ in Scripture is a previously hidden truth, now divinely revealed, but in which a supernatural element still remains despite the revelation.”⁵ Abbott-Smith says simply that the word refers to that which was, “once hidden, now revealed....”⁶

A mystery, then, has two parts: 1) something previously hidden, and 2) something now revealed and therefore made known. The content of the mystery cannot be previously “partly revealed” or “prophesied, but not explained” as some have it. It was totally unknown until such time as it was revealed. In fact, even the idea that something was to be revealed was unknown. Old Testament believer had the idea that they had all the revelation necessary. *A mystery, then, is only a mystery once it has been revealed* (Ephesians 3:4,5; Romans 16:25-27).

Lightfoot correctly states, “. . .The idea of *secrecy* or *reserve* disappears when μυστηριον (*musterion*) is adopted into the Christian vocabulary by St. Paul: and the word signifies simply ‘a truth which was once hidden but now is revealed,’ ‘a truth which without special revelation would have been unknown.’ . . . Hence μυστηριον (*musterion*) is almost universally found in connection with words denoting revelation or publication.”⁷

Conclusion

A mystery is not some incomprehensible or unknowable fact. It is a revealed fact that was *previously* unknown. Second, a mystery is not as Oswald T. Allis understands, concerning which he says, “. . .It was new and unknown in a relative sense only, being in its essentials an important theme of prophecy from the time of Abraham. . . .”⁸ This is simply an attempt to get around the clear meaning of the word and avoid the New Testament truth of the distinctiveness of the church. Allis and others wish to make the church an extension of Israel and thereby apply Old Testament truth for Israel to the believer today. Using simple inductive methodology, such an application is simply not possible.

A mystery is a truth about a specific topic that was previously unrevealed, but has been revealed through the agency of New Testament prophets and apostles.

¹ J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the N.T.*, p. 420.

² George Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, p. 298.

³ Thayer, p. 420.

⁴ Harry A. Ironside, *The Mysteries of God*, p. 14.

⁵ *Schofield Reference Bible*, Note on Matthew 13:11

⁶ Abbott-Smith, p. 298.

⁷ Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Colossians*, p. 166. (Emphasis added.)

⁸ O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 97.