

Part I

Mystery

Mystery is a Greek word, *mystèrion*, which means ‘that which is hidden, secret’. The Eleusinian Mysteries were an initiatory cult, of agrarian origin, in honour of the goddess Demeter who symbolises nature’s rebirth in spring and its decaying in autumn. This term was therefore used in a pagan Greek milieu before being taken up by Apostle Paul.

The mystery of God is impenetrable to human beings even though they try all along, from the moment they are born into the world, to reunite with it, for they are created in His image and likeness and they carry in their hearts the desire to know the origin of the world, their own origin and end.

The mystery of God is hidden and revealed to us in Christ (Colossians 1:26). This affirmation by Saint Paul delivers to us the whole meaning of the mystery: Christ is inseparable from his Father, whose only Son he is; he is inseparable from his body, the Church, whose head he is (Ephesians 4:12, 15); and he is in us the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27). The *magnum mysterium* (Ephesians 5:32) is the union of Christ and the Church and it is in the Church that we are incorporated into him. It is in the Church that we receive the Word of God and it is in the Church that we commune with him in the Spirit because it is the same Spirit that inspired the Word and who made us understand it, and it is again the Church that shows us the spiritual sense of the Scriptures.

That is why I extended the study of the sense of the mystery in Saint Paul (Chapter 1) with the study of the meaning of Scripture in Origen and in Father Henri de Lubac (Chapter 2), because the Church

Fathers have become accessible to us through the theologians of the twentieth century. The Word manifests itself in different ways which can be summed up in two principal meanings: the literal meaning and the spiritual or mystical meaning. The mystical meaning elevates the spirit towards the mystery hidden in the words. Another Jesuit, Frédéric Bertrand wrote about the 'mysticism of Jesus' in Origen in order to show the relationship between the reader and the text: the reader who identifies with the different actors/agents or persons in the Gospel.

It is through a spiritual reading of the Scriptures that we are able to discover the mystery of Christ and of the Church, both in the Old and New Testament. Thus, the Song of Songs is the poem of the *magnum mysterium*, of the love between Christ and the Church represented by the Lover and the Beloved in the Song. The mystical meaning of the Scriptures paves the way for a nuptial mysticism (Chapter 3), adopted in the twelfth century by the Cistercians Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry in their commentaries on the Song of Songs.

The discovery of the mystery of Christ and the Church in the Scriptures has led us towards a mysticism, that is, towards a loving experience of *Christ in us, the hope of glory*.

The Mystery of Christ According to Saint Paul

Introduction: Mystery and the Mysteries¹

The Definition of Mystery

Mystèrion comes from the verb *myeo* which primarily means to shut and to close the eyes (cf. *MT* 1.1, 997B). *Mystès* is the mystic, the initiate (Heraclitus, *fr.* 14).² He is the one who closes his eyes or his lips, who does not repeat anything, who keeps the lips shut. The derived adjective *mystikos* (in Greek) that pertains to the mystics and the mysteries, takes the meaning of ‘mystic’ in Proclus and in Neoplatonists. *Mystèrion* has the same evolution: from initiatory cult in Heraclitus, it takes the meaning of ‘secret’ in general in Plato and, in Christian literature, of the mysteries of the faith. Linked to the

-
1. Cf. George Emmanuel Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961); Dario Sabbatucci, *Saggio sul misticismo greco* (Rome: Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1965).
 2. Heraclitus, Fragment 14 (Diels-Kranz): ‘Night-roamers, magi, bacchantes, Lenean revellers, initiates of the mysteries. ... For to those things considered by men as mysteries, they are initiated in unholy fashion’ (cited by Clement of Alexandria, *Protreptikos* [*Exhortation to the Greeks*] 22.2). The magi are Persian priests of Mazdaism; the bacchantes, celebrants of the cult of Dionysos; and the initiates, adepts of the Eleusinian mysteries.

religious meaning of *mystès*, the verb *myeo* was created, ‘to initiate into the mysteries’, *myeomai*, ‘to be initiated’, and *myesis*, ‘initiation’.³

Iamblichus in his *On the Mysteries of Egypt*⁴ expounds his Neoplatonic doctrine within the framework of a ritual theurgy to which he links the terminology of the mysteries; he is enthusiastically followed by the emperor Julian the Apostate who sees in it a way of reinforcing the old pagan religion.

The Eleusinian Mysteries⁵

The mysteries are secret cults that embrace mystical ideas. The Eleusinian mysteries are the most famous. Initially, it was an agrarian cult that originated in the Mycenaean era at the time of sowing (September, October). Following the union of Eleusis with Athens, 600 BC, Athens took charge of these mysteries and the objects of cult were returned to Eleusis.

The rites started in the sanctuary at Eleusis, illuminated by torches.

There were several degrees of initiation (*myèsis*): the preliminaries (*teletè*) and the highest degree, the vision (*epopteia*), when, as the name indicates, something is seen, a revelation that would remain hidden in the temple, at the heart of the enclosing of the mysteries. The essential element of the higher initiation was the *ear of wheat reaped in silence*. The preliminaries were formed by three elements: the ritual representation of the myth of Demeter following her daughter, Koré-Persephone, abducted by Hades, the god of the underworld; the ritual words which the initiates had to repeat; and the displaying of certain objects. It is almost certain that the representation included a *hieros gamos*, a sacred union between a god and a goddess where the hierophant, the chief priest, replaced the god and the priestess, the goddess. The fertility of the sexual union is the model of the fertility

3. Cf. Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque: Histoire des mots*, 2 vols (Paris: Klincksieck, 1984), vol. 2, p. 728.

4. See the introduction by Édouard des Places to his edition and translation of Iamblichus, *De Mysteriis* (‘On the Mysteries of Egypt’) (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1966). On hermetism, see André-Jean Festugière, *L’idéal religieux des grecs et l’Évangile* (Paris: Gabalda, 1933), pp. 116-17.

5. Cf. Louis Bouyer, *Mysterion: Du mystère à la mystique* (Paris: OEL, 1986), ch. 2, ‘Les mystères païens: Éleusis’, pp. 31-51. (Eng. trans.: *The Christian Mystery: From Pagan Myth to Christian Mysticism*, trans. Illtyd Trethowan [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989].)

of the earth and the seeds. The Church writers mention the sexual union through which the *mystès*, the initiate, becomes the son of the goddess Demeter.

The initiates are promised a happy life in the underworld and even their deification. In fact, the myth is the symbolic expression of the doctrine and the god is the prototype of the human being, suffering, dying and finding a new life. The Homeric *Hymn to Demeter* gives some indications about the preliminary rites. Koré-Persephone's abduction by Pluto is the hymn's main subject. According to the myth, she stays four months in the underworld with him, in the winter, and returns to her mother, Demeter, on the earth, the other eight months of the year. It is meditation on this myth, and not the rites, that gave rise to the religious aspirations which made Eleusis famous.

Louis Bouyer reflects very interestingly on the relation of the myth to the rite:⁶ the myth detached itself from the rite in order subsequently to act upon it. The cult takes place in the sanctuary; the myth is never the primary source for the rite, but it gives the cult the power of evocation and attraction. In the Eleusinian mysteries, the crowning of the ritual is the ear of wheat reaped in silence and it is also the initial cell from which everything else will take shape:

To this ritual of the first-reaped sheaf at the height of summer, when man has passed from the elementary stage of simple picking to this principle of a whole culture, in the broadest sense of the word, which would be agriculture, the sacred marriage (*hierogamy*) must be associated. Thus an intimate meaning manifests itself in man who becomes aware of himself: of an alliance of the cosmic fecundity with this fertilizing act where man discovers himself as the instigator. ... It is also at this stage, essentially ambiguous, that the myth will emerge from the rite as if to restore to it a divine meaning.

Demeter's frantic race in search of her child swallowed up by the earth, ending up at the throne of Zeus himself, will obtain from the sovereign god, mediated by consenting union of Core and Hades, the regular alternance of winter, when the seed swallowed by the furrow dies in order to

6. Cf. Louis Bouyer, *Le Rite et l'homme: Sacralité naturelle et liturgie* (Paris: Cerf, 1962).

germinate, and of summer when the harvest would reap the fruits.⁷

However, the mysteries as such will only appear when Athens annexes Eleusis and when the philosophical reflexion of a Plato, the tragedians such as Aeschylus and Sophocles, and great poets like Pindar will transform the myth:

*Blessed is he who sees them,
and goes beneath the earth
he knows the end of life
and knows its Zeus-given beginning.*⁸

It is Cicero who gives the meaning of every initiation: ‘As the rites are called ‘initiations’, so in very truth we have learned from them the beginnings of life, and have gained the power not only to live happily, but also to die with a better hope.’⁹

We have expanded on the study of the Eleusinian mysteries because, in the pagan world, they testify to the desire of passing from natural fertility (the ear of wheat and the *hieros gamos*) to the hope of a better life after death. Also, there are modern thinkers, from Reitzenstein¹⁰ to Bultmann, who see similarities between the pagan mysteries and the Christian mystery. There is certainly an analogy in the symbol of the ear of wheat fallen to the ground, but not even in the boldest transpositions made by the poets or philosophers could we find ourselves thinking of the way in which the Christian becomes one body with Christ as implied by the Pauline mystery.

The Christian mystery has neither an agrarian nor a cosmic origin, but a theological one: it is the secret of God’s Wisdom or

7. Bouyer, *Mysterion*, 43-44.

8. Pindar, *Nemean Odes, Isthmian Odes, Fragments*, ed. and trans. William H. Race, LCL 485 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), fr. 137.

9. Cicero, *On the Republic, On the Laws*, trans. Clinton W. Keyes, LCL 213 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1928), *De legibus* 2.14.36.

10. Richard Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen*, 3rd edn (Leipzig: Teubner, 1927). Dom Casel does not reassess this comparativist thesis but gives an opposite interpretation. See Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (Milestones in Catholic Theology) (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder & Herder, 1999).

His *economy of salvation*; it is no longer about the cycle of time and seasons, but about the history of salvation whose secret is hidden in God before the ages, and it has been revealed in the fullness of times in Christ who recapitulates within himself the cosmos and history.

The Meaning of Mystery in the Old Testament

The word *mystèrion* appears in the Greek Bible only in a few late books (Tobit, Judith, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus or the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach, Daniel, Maccabees); it is to be seen in the context of the Aramaic *râz* (Daniel 2) which designates ‘something secret’ and thus corresponds to the classical Hebrew word *sôd* (סוד), still used at Qumrân. סוד means: ‘gathering’, ‘deliberation’, ‘advice’, ‘plan’, but also ‘confidence/confession’, ‘discussion’, ‘intimacy’, ‘secret’ (Psalm 55:15; Job 19:19), help or secret protection from God (Job 29:4). The ‘secret [help] of God is for those who fear him’ (Psalm 25 [24]:14). It is therefore a sign of God’s trust and intimacy towards the human being whom He considers His friend, to reveal the secrets of His Wisdom, inaccessible to the human being.

These secrets are about the salvation plan which God realises within human history: ‘Does God do anything without revealing his secret (סוד) to his servants, the prophets?’ (Amos 3:7; cf. Numbers 24:4, 6). This doctrine is that of Second Isaiah: the historical destiny of Israel answers the divine plan revealed by the prophetic Word that announces the coming of salvation at the end of ages (Isaiah 41:21-8). This is the antecedent of the notion of mystery which we find in Daniel and in the book of Wisdom.

The book of Daniel is an apocalypse, that is a revelation of divine secrets (*râz*: Daniel 2:18, 27, 47; 4:6). These secrets refer to what happens within time/history and which will be infallibly fulfilled; God could also reveal them through dreams, visions or through angels (cf. Daniel 2:4; 5; 7; 8; 10 to 12). Only God is the ‘Revealer of the mysteries’ (Daniel 2:28, 47).

The book of Wisdom does not ignore the existence of mysteries in pagan worship:

For a father, consumed with grief at an untimely bereavement, made an image of his child, who had been suddenly taken from him: and he now honoured as a god

what was once a dead human being, and handed on to his dependants secret rites and initiations.

(Wisdom 14:15)

Nevertheless, the mysteries are primarily the secrets related to the origin of divine Wisdom:

I will tell you what wisdom is and how she came to be, and I will hide no secrets from you, but I will trace her course from the beginning of creation, and make knowledge of her clear, and I will not pass by the truth. (Wisdom 6:22)

These mysteries are of a soteriological and theological nature; they concern at once the age to come and the inner being of God. The term, mystery, is found again in the apocryphal literature – Enoch is supposed to *know the secrets of saints* (1 Enoch 106:19) – and in the Qumrân texts where the Teacher of Righteousness gives the explanation for the Scriptures, for ‘God made known to him all the secrets of the words of his servants, the prophets’.

The Pauline Epistles

In the New Testament the term ‘mystery’ is usually linked with a verb of revelation or announcement. It can have three main meanings: the mighty deeds of God, His interventions in the establishment of His kingdom (Matthew 13:11; 13:35; Revelation 10:7); His hidden wisdom, but revealed in Jesus Christ – *the mystery*, par excellence (Romans 16:25; 1 Corinthians 2:7; Ephesians 1:9; 3:3; 6:19; Colossians 1:25-7; Revelation 17:7); and the deep meaning of certain realities like the fate of Israel (Romans 11:25), Antichrist (2 Thessalonians 2:7) or marriage (Ephesians 5:32). In the Synoptics the term is related to the parables and to the revelation by Jesus to the disciples of the ‘mysteries of the kingdom of heaven’ or ‘of the kingdom of God’ (Matthew 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10).

There is a whole theology of mystery¹¹ in the Pauline letters, which talk about *mysterium Dei* (1 Corinthians 2:1; Colossians 2:2), of the *mysteria Dei* (1 Corinthians 4:1), the *mysterium voluntatis Dei*

11. D. Deden, ‘Le Mystère paulinien’, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 13 (1936), pp. 405-42.