

THE TERM MUSTERION IN CLEMENT AND GREGORY

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**Mysterion in scripture.**

A thing hitherto hidden but now revealed. 1 Cor 1.51: "Behold, I show you a mystery". Revelation of mystery hidden for ages at Romans 16.25 (cf. Col 1.26); the mystery of God's plan for Israel is revealed at Romans 11.25.

Paul makes known the mystery of God's will at Eph 1.9, having learned it by revelation so that they too may understand it (Eph 3.3-4), and pray that he will continue to preach the mystery of the gospel (Eph 6.19; cf. Col 2.2 and 4.3). The mystery of faith (1 Timothy 3.9) or of piety (1 Tim 3.16) takes a propositional form: "He/God was manifest in the flesh", etc.

But the revealed does not lose its arcane character: mysteries are uttered in the spirit, unintelligibly to humans, at 1 Cor 14.2; to have fathomed them is an unusual feat at 1 Cor 13.1. Cf. 1 Cor 2.7 on speaking the wisdom of God in a mystery. The mystery of lawlessness which is currently being enacted remains obscure at 2 Thess 2.7.

The mystery of the seven stars, which is to come at revelation 1.20 and completed at 10.7, belongs to a book which all early Christians agreed to be obscure. The mystery (Mark 4.11) or mysteries (Matt 13.11) of the kingdom are supposedly revealed to the disciples, but they learn no more than that some are good disciples and some fall away, i.e. the secret lies within the believer and cannot be transmitted in words.

*Mysterion* does not seem to mean a ritual, unless "minutes of the mystery" at 1 Cor 4.1 implies this. At Eph 5.32 the mystery of Christ and his church is symbolised by marriage, but marriage itself is not the mystery.

**Mysterion in early Christian texts**

Justin (*Trypho* 68.6) associates mysteries with parables (cf. Matt 13.11) and at *Trypho* 111 it appears to mean much the same as type. Cf Hippolytus, *On Daniel* 4.24.2 and Hilary of Poitiers' typological treatise *De Mysteriis*. For "mystical" see *Trypho* 24.1 and 81.3.

Secrecy becomes a frequent concomitant of mystery. Ignatius (Ephesians 19.1) speaks of the virginity of Mary, her parturition and the cross as the mysteries prepared by God in silence (cf. Romans 16.25, *sesigêmenou*). Irenaeus intimates at *Against Heresies* 1.13 that this was also a Valentinian usage. *Letter to Diognetus* 4.1 speaks of mysteries of godliness (cf. 1 Tim 3.16), which now are not to be divulged. For Nazianzen (*Oration* 15.5) the unknowable God himself is the *mustêrion*.

*Letter to Diognetus* denies that Christians have a secret *mustêrion*, but at Athanasius, *Apology against the Arians* 31, ministers of the mysteries seem to be liturgical celebrants, while baptism is a mystery for Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical Theology* 1.80, the eucharistic chalice is a vessel of the mysteries for Basil (*Letter* 188), and "mystery" seems to be a word for sacrament at Cyril of Jerusalem, *Homilies* 19.1. (see also Justin, *Trypho* 40.1, on the mystery of the Passover lamb).

See articles in the Kittel's *Theological Word-Book of the New Testament*; Bauer, *Theological Wordbook*; I. Ramelli, "Mysterium and Sacramentum on the Vetus Afra", in A. Dupont (ed.), *The Uniquely African Controversy* (Leuven: Peeters 2014), 349-375.

## Mysteries in Clement

### *(Anti-)Pagan usage*

In the shortest and most polemical of his surviving works, the *Protrepticus*, Clement uses *mustêria* (usually plural) to designate the secret rites of the pagans, whose obscenity and absurdity he undertakes to expose. At 12.1 he says “What if were to rehearse the mysteries to you?”, and at 23.3, “These are the mysteries of the atheists”. After a satirical account of their invention, he denounces in turn the rites of Aphrodite, Deo (Demeter), Pherephatta (Persephone), Dionysus, the Corybants and Kore and Demeter, mingling these Eleusinian disclosures with Orphic matter. C. Riedweg, *Mysterienterminologie beim Platon, Philon und Klemens von Alexandrie* (Berlin: De Gruyter 1987), 118-123 argues that chapters 14-21 are taken from an existing handbook (see parallel to 17.1 at Rabe, *Scholia in Lucianum*, 275.27f).

The term *musteria* alternates with others, e.g. *kekrummena* (hidden things) at 14.1, *orgia* at 15.1, *hagia* (sacred things) at 22.4. The purpose being to attack the pretensions of the and especially the philosophers, he does not introduce any barbarian practices. At *Stromateis* 5.41.1, however, he alludes to the concealment of the Egyptian mysteries from the uninitiated and at 5.58.4 he asserts that the founders of mysteries, “being philosophers, steeped their teachings in myth. So that they would not be clear to all”. He demonstrates here his acquaintance with the Platonic appropriation of the term *mustêrion*, e.g. at *Phaedrus* 275; as Riedweg and others observe, he is also familiar with the adaptation of this vocabulary in Philo, whose *On the Cherubim* 94 he quotes at *Protrepticus* 22.1.

### *Christian prophecy and typology*

The true mysteries are announced at *Protrepticus* 120.1, with many foregoing allusions to the Bacchae (Riedweg, 148-156). See also *Rich Man's Salvation* 37.1 on the mysteries of love. The content of these is expounded more fully in the *Stromateis*, the principal aim of which is to show that true philosophy is the understanding of the deep sense of scripture, hence not to be feared by Christians or vaunted by pagans as their own monopoly,

Evidence for the presence of this deep sense is derived from the parables of Jesus as well as from prophecy; nevertheless (and in spite of Mark 4.11), *mustêrion* is only one of the terms employed for the hidden object of exegesis, alternating with others which are of Platonic or Philonic rather than biblical provenance. When it is employed it tends to signify prophetic utterance whose meaning is fully discovered only in Christ. See *Stromateis* 5.90.3, 56.127.5 and 6.61.1 (an unusual use of the singular, evoking Colossians 1.26). Prophecies are both *mustêria* and parables at *Stromateis* 6.124.6). Parabolic discourse in scripture is described by the locution *theia musteria* at *Stromateis* 1.13.1. By contrast, pagan *musteria/teletai* etc. are mentioned without blame at *Protrepticus* 34.1-2, *Paedagogus* 3.73.1, *Stromateis* 3.17.2 and 5.30.5.

At *Stromateis* 5.371. Clement appeals to the mystical exegesis of the seraphim at Isaiah 6.1; at *Eclogae* 14.1 he contrasts the superficial meaning (*sêmainomenon*) with the mystical sense; the mystical meaning of the bread which signifies the flesh of Christ (itself, of course, no ordinary flesh) is stressed at *Paedagogus* 1.46.1, 2.29.1, 2.62.3 and *Stromateis* 5.33.4. At *Paed.* 2.29.1 it is juxtaposed with *sumbolon*, a word which can also mean sacrament. For baptism as *epopteia* see *Paedagogus* 1.26.2 and 1.8.1 (using also imagery of illumination), while congregations of epopteues have a more general sense at *Paedagogus* 1.54.1 and 2.80.4.

*Christian esotericism.*

*Katharmoi* is one of Clement's terms for pagan mysteries, e.g. at *Stromateis* 5.20.1. At *Stromateis* 5.71.2, he distinguishes a "cathartic" from an "epoptic" mode of exegesis, the second proceeding by *analysis* from the literal substrate (*hupokeimenon*) of the text substrate. For *katharos* cf. *Phaedrus* 250c4 and *Symposium* 211d; on the frequency of verbs of seeing in Plato see Riedweg, 23-26, although it is Heraclitus, *Homeric Questions* 53.2, who is cited as the literary precursor for the use of a term which denotes the climactic spectacle of the pagan mysteries (which Clement, of course, had almost certainly never witnessed, even if Plato had). Philo borrows *epoptês* from the Septuagint, but this means overseer, not witness of the Eleusinian drama.

At *Stromateis* 6.102.1 the *katharos* is initiated into the blessed vision. At *Stromateis* 1.15.2, it appears that before arriving at the epoptic stage one must be initiated into the mysteries before the mysteries, being purified beforehand by an apprehension of the *phusikê theoria*. Cf. the contrast of *phusiologia* and *epopteia* at *Stromateis* 4.32. One who has first become *katharos* in heart is ready to enjoy the vision (*epopteuein*) at *Stromateis* 7.56.7-57.1. Cf. *Strom.* 4.152.3; 2.47.4 (and 7.68.3-4 for *epoptikê*) and 6.108.1 (for *katharsis*).

At *Stromateis* 1.176.1-2, The Mosaic law has for levels of interpretation: the historical and the nomothetic (both of which are ethical), the hierurgic (which counts as physical) and the *theologikon eidos*, which is also called epoptic. The term *theologikon eidos* resembles *theologikon meros*, the sixth division of philosophy according to Cleanthes (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Philosophers* 7.23). The equation of sacrifice with physics and the compression of the historic and the nomothetic into the ethical seems trained, and may betoken an attempt to fit the law into a pre-existing scheme. Such a scheme is suggested by the division of philosophy into the ethical, the physical and the theological at Iamblichus, *Commentary on the Arithmetic of Nicomachus*, 125.20-22 Klein, if we can attribute this to Nicomachus himself.

In Evagrius, *Praktikos* 1, 8 and 84, the three stages of the ascetic life are the practical, the physical and the theological. In Origen, *Commentary on the Song*, p. 75 Baehrens, the three books of Solomon (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs) correspond respectively to the ethical, physical and enoptic/epoptic/theoric branches of philosophy. Since the word "enoptic" is dubious Greek (not in LSJ or Lampe), Origen will have written either epoptic or theoric. "Epopitic" would echo claim, while "theoric" would both echo him and anticipate Evagrius if Origen has in mind the supposed etymology of *theos* from *theân*, "to see", which is the linchpin of Gregory of Nyssa's *Ad Ablabium*.

See further P. Hadot, "Les divisions des parties de la philosophie dans l'Antiquité", *Museum Helveticum* 36 (1979), 202-223; B. Bucur, "The Place of the Hypotyposes in the Clementine Corpus", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 (2009), 313-335; Jane Heath, *Clement of Alexandria and the Shaping of Christian Literary Practice* (Cambridge 2020), 304.

### Mystery in Gregory of Nyssa

#### *As content of Christian belief and proclamation*

The term *mustêrion* seems to denote the propositional content of faith when associated with truth, e.g. at *To Theophilus*, GNO III.1,119.5, *Panegyric on Gregory Thaumaturgus*, GNO X.1, 17.15 and *On Basil*, GNO X.1.114.7, or when the phrase “mystery of *eusebeia*” is cited from 1 Timothy 3.16, e.g. at *Against Eunomius*, GNO II, 110.6, 150.23 and 285.10 and at *Commentary on the Song*, GNO VI, 381.17. Propositional content is implied again when Gregory celebrates the *akribeia*, or precision, of faith and the mysteries at *On Ecclesiastes*, GNO V.433.9 (cf. *Panegyric on Gregory Thaumaturgus*, GNO X.1, 16, 7). So also *Against Eunomius*, GNO II, 19.20, where Solomon expounds the mystery of the divine economy by stages.

The same holds for the locution “mystery of the proclamation (kerygma)” at *Against Eunomius*, GNO 1, 74.13 and *Panegyric on Gregory Thaumaturgus*, GNO X.1, 45.4; also for the “teaching (*didascalia*) of the mystery” at *On S. Stephen*, GNO X, 81.9 (cf. *Life of Moses*, GNO VII.1, 38.15; for the “word (*logos*) of the mysteries” at *Catechetical Oration*, GNO III.4, 44.20; and for the praise of the apostles as “servants of the mystery” at *Life of Moses*, GNO VII.1, 85.21. At *Panegyric on Greg. Thaum.*, GNO X.1, 56.25, verbal proclamation of the mystery is complemented by works (cf. GNO X.1, 22.13-15 and 36.7-13). Unbelievers are outside the *logos* of the mystery at *On Virginity*, GNO IX, 282.22 and strangers to the “evangelical mysteries” at *ibid.*, 294.11. Cf. *Premature Deaths of Infants*, GNO III.2, 81.4; *Commentary on the Song*, GNO VI, 267.7 and 308.6; at *Commentary on the Song*, GNO VI, 371.11 Moses promulgates the mysteries of the Law.

At *Against Eunomius*, GNO I.40.15-19, the heretic is mocked as the hierophant of the mysteries which he transmits to his pupils; this might suggest a liturgical meaning if the sacraments were an important subject of the dispute. At GNO II, 206.16-18, the mystery as Eunomius apprehends it is facetiously contrasted with the “error” (i.e. catholic truth) that he fails to controvert. At *Antirrheticus*, GNO III.1,174.7, the term must signify doctrines which Apollinarius holds to be truer than those of his opponents.

#### *As the reality which remains hidden*

On the other hand, more than correct formulation is implied when Moses is said to have beheld the divine mysteries with the pure eye of the soul (*Panegyric on Greg. Thaum.*, GNO X.1, 15.1) and in the invisible sanctuary of the soul (*ibid.*, 19.13). At *Against Eunomius*, GNO II, 297.9, the Holy Spirit employs our limited powers to communicate mysteries that lie beyond words. At *Life of Moses*, GNO VII.1, the tabernacle is the *mustêrion* which typologically signifies the incarnation (John 1.14); cf. *On the Nativity*, GNO X.1, 236.7. Both passages hint that Paul’s tent-making at Acts 18.3 is also a mystery.

Again the *mustêrion* informs not only the speech but the life of the believer. At *Against Macedonius*, GNO III.1, 102.6, faith in the Trinity is the form of one who is formed according to the mystery (cf. *ibid.*, 101.15). The philosophy (i.e. dogmatic content) of the God-breathed scripture (2 Tim 3.16) imparts *katharsis* or purification to those schooled in the mysteries at *Premature Deaths of Infants*, GNO III.2, 86.21. While it is obviously in words that the Psalms proclaim the evangelical mystery (*Inscriptions to the Psalms*, GNO V,91.28), they are indicative of the mystery of *eusebeia* in a mystical manner (*ibid.*, 103.4), disclosing the height and depth of the evangelical mysteries (*ibid.*, 92.18 and 113.16). At *Against Eunomius*, GNO II, 165.7, David is said to have gone out of himself and to have no longer spoken according to human nature when he unveiled the heavenly mysteries, although at GNO I, 341.21 Gregory concedes that he had only human words as a vehicle for their noetic content.

Thus we need more than philological tools to excavate the mystery of mysteries from the Song of Songs (*Commentary on the Song*, GNO VI, 26.15 and 27.4), which will be revealed without jealousy by the one who has already vouchsafed us hidden mysteries according to Colossians 1.26 (GNO VI, 135.12 and 368.5). Although he exhorts his audience at the outset to hear the mysteries of the Son (VI, 15.2), Gregory admonishes them that the sanctum of these mysteries (VI.44.17) can be entered only by those who have received guidance from above (VI, 147.4 and 261.1). Although the Son contains a mystical *logos*, which is opened to us only by the Spirit (VI, 193.8), it is not by knowledge only but by virtue that the bride becomes worthy of the mystery of the chamber (VI, 39.3, 116.1). It is a mystery in itself that the Ethiopian bride should leave her kin to come to Solomon (VI, 204.15).

Nature itself is a mystery, bearing witness to the inscrutable majesty of its Creator: *On the Nativity*, GNO X.1, 238.19 and *Letters* III.2, 29.19. "Mystery" in these contexts acquires the sense of a thing still unrevealed. At *On the Beatitudes*, GNO VII.2, 86.13, the mysteries of nature are the object of faith; cf. *On the Pasch*, GNO IX.269.15, where the mystery according to which things on earth imitate their archetypes in heaven. What plants grew in Eden is a mystery (*Commentary on the Song*, GNO VI, 10.15), as is the final destruction of the demons (GNO VI, 11.12), together with such miracles as the parting of the Jordan by Joshua (VI, 194.6) and of the "evangelical rock" at 1 Cor 10.4 (VI, 164.3).

#### *As scriptural motif*

Paul is the great interpreter of mysteries (*Against Eunomius*, GNO I, 356.11, GNO II, 39.18 and *Answer to Eunomius*, GNO II, 359.7), expounding them even where he does not use the word, as when he declares that all live in Christ who died in Adam (*And the Son also*, GNO III.2, 13.14). The greatest of all mysteries, adumbrated at Ephesians 3.18) is that the power of Christ encompasses all things visible and invisible, in the length and breadth and height of creation (*Against Eunomius*, GNO II, 123,12-13). God-filled and God-inspired in all the profundity of wisdom (Romans 11.33), he became a searcher of divine mysteries (*On Perfection*, GNO VIII.1, 187.18), even to the inexpressible *mustêria*, of the third heaven (*On Ecclesiastes*, GNO V, 30.2; *Commentary on the Song*, VI, 245.20).

Although the evangelist John does not use the term *mustêrion*, he too is a preacher of mysteries (*Against Eunomius*, GNO II, 57.5), having imbibed the knowledge of them on Christ's bosom (*Commentary on the Song*, GNO VI, 41.10). The great mystery that he teaches is that God was in the flesh (*Against Eunomius*, GNO I, 120.6). Gregory gives content to the mystery of the kingdom at Matthew 13.11 and Mark 4.11, identifying it with the fall of Satan from heaven (*Against Eunomius*, GNO I, 109.8), and suggesting that what Paul proclaimed in the mystery of wisdom is Christ's precept at Luke 17.20 that the kingdom of heaven is within you (*On Virginity*, GNO IX,300.18).

#### *As revelation in and of Christ*

The mysteries pertaining to Christ himself include the virginity of Mary (*Antirrheticus*, GNO III.1, 23.10, 134.9, 135.3, 160.5 and 171.9; *Commentary on the Song*, GNO VI, 318, 13; *Life of Moses*, GNO VII.1, 39.17 and 77.24; *On the Nativity*, GNO X.1, 247.14 and 249.15); the mingling of God with humanity in the flesh (*Commentary on the Song*, GNO VI, 386.21; *Life of Moses*, GNO VII.1, 41.14), even to the point of being an infant in swaddling clothes (*On the Nativity*, GNO X.1. 256.14). It is a mystery that he accepts birth in order to die (*Catechetical Oratio*, GNO III.4,77.22), that he shuns all sin to expiate our sinfulness (*On Virginity*, GNO IX.354.20), yet he none the less united with flesh sufficiently to grow in body as mortals do (*Catechetical Oratio*, GNO III.4, 36.20, 37.3, 67.14). The *mustêrion* is not, however, such as to be unfitting: he entered in the realm of nature, not into that of evil (*ibid.* 46.12; 16.71.9), uniting to human nature those very attributes by which nature fights

against death (*ibid.*, 72.12), enabling us to overcome by his example those traits and passions which belie our true nature, in order that we may achieve the mystery of *eusebeia* (*ibid.*, 47.11).

The great mystery is that God should not only unite himself to our nature but suffer and die in contradiction to his own. On the passion/*pathos* as mystery see *Inscriptions to the Psalms*, GNO V, 99.7, 111.18, 113.6; Commentary on the Song, GNO VI, 243.15. At 41, 298.21 the Cross encompasses the *noemata* through which the *mustêrion* of the passion is accomplished. The brazen serpent foreshadows the mystery of the Cross at *Life of Moses*, GNO VII.1, 128.10; so do the uplifted hands of Moses at 83.5. At *Catechetical Oration*, GNO III.4, 81.8 the mystery of the Cross includes the devotion of heaven, earth and all between. His death is the consummation of the mystery which begins with the incarnation at *Against Eunomius*, GNO II, 150.23; it makes the Cross a trophy at *On the Ascension*, GNO IX, 326.15, and consecrates the mystery of the sabbath at *Inscriptions to the Psalms*, GNO V, 98.13. At *On the Three Days*, GNO IX, 275.4-13 the lost sheep is the type of this great mystery, and the parable contains the whole mystery of piety (1 Tim 3.16). At *Catechetical Oration*, GNO III.4, 49.8, the economy of his death and the resurrection are a single mystery.

The mystery of the resurrection is typified by the sweetening of the waters at Exodus 15.23 (*Life of Moses*, GNO VII.1, 275.5). Nothing prevents us from taking this mystery as a corporeal event (*Antirrheticus*, GNO III.1, 226.7) and those who receive this mystery celebrate it as the restoration of human nature from death to life (*Letters*, GNO VIII.2, 28.9). If the resurgence of a buried seed helps us to understand it (*On the Soul*, PG 46, 152.26), that is because the rebirth of the seed is itself a cause of wonder (*ibid.*, 153.36). By this mystery human nature was united to the Logos (*To Theophilus*, GNO III.1, 125.3), and even the attestation (logos) of it is salvific (*Commentary on the Song*, GNO VI, 460.17). Perhaps this is linked to the mystery of repentance at *Life of Moses*, GNO VII, 126.5. Apollinarius however, turns mystery into myth with his impenetrable distinction between the *prolepsis* and *analepsis* of human nature (*Antirrheticus*, GNO III.1, 193.24, 215.1-6).

#### *As sacrament and thing typified*

At *Life of Moses*, GNO VII.1, 104.3, pagan rites are derisively called *mustêria*. At GNO VII.1, 71.17 the mystery of hyssop “teaches beforehand” the (Platonic rather than scriptural ) theory of the tripartite soul: here the word means simply “type”, but when we read of the mystery of the passover (VII.i, 72.17), the sweetening of the waters (VII.1, 71.1 and 75.16), the stream from the stone (VII.1, 80, 21) and the Cross (VII.1, 81.20), it is not clear whether the mystery might also reside in the potency of the miracle and/or the sublimity of the thing that it prefigures.

At *On Pentecost*, GNO X.2, 288.7 food or nourishment of the mystery enabling us to ascend through stages of grace to perfection. This is not explicitly eucharistic, but at *On the Day of Lights*, GNO IX, 225.22 the term *mustêrion* is applied to this sacrament and at *On Perfection*, GNO VIII.1, 191.16 we read that those who contemplate the mystery will understand how the Lord can be properly our flesh and blood. Baptism is a mystery or “the mysteries” at *On Deferred Baptism*, GNO X.2, 36.2.19 and 366.29 and at *Day of Lights*, GNO IX, 222.14. At *Letters*, GNO VIII.2, 75.9 Gregory echoes Titus 3.5 in styling baptism the mystery of rebirth at *Against Eunomius*, GNO II, 69.12 this mystery of rebirth is the second of three generations, the first being our embodiment and the third our resurrection. Cf. *Catechetical Oration*, GNO III.4, 8.217 and Day of Lights, GNO IX.228.23 on the invocation of the three hypostases, which is said at *Against Eunomius*, GNO I, 120.8 to be the mystery of divine knowledge, while at *Letters*, GNO VIII.2, 32.11 it is once again the mystery of piety.

If this formula is a mystery, so *a fortiori* is the Trinity itself (*Inscriptions to the Psalms*, GNO III.1, 119.21). In baptism the Spirit cleanses us in the font of this mystery (*On Christian Education*, GNO

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VIII.1, , 42.12). Although this mystery is foreshadowed in the vision of the Seraphim at Isaiah 6 (*Against Eunomius*, GNO I, 118.25), the Jews fall into error by failing to grasp that the Logos is other than the one who utters it (*Catechetical Oration*, GNO III.4,11.7; 15.14.).

### *Conclusions on Gregory*

1. Gregory is more attentive than Clement to the scriptural sense of *mustêrion* as thing revealed, yet remaining arcane, and often applies the term to the propositional content of preaching.
2. He also applies the term regularly to the fact or thing in the world which s revealed, emphasizing in this case that which remains inscrutable.
3. In particular, he can apply the term to the natural world, which is not one of its objects in scripture.
4. He applies the term to the sacraments, but sparingly by comparison with reference to texts and the subjects of Christian teaching.
5. The texts which he cites do not always contain the word *mustêrion*, though most of them are of an arcane character (Son of Songs) or depict a progress from the known to the unknown (see Life of Moses).
6. With regard to Christ, all things from the incarnation to the resurrection are mysteries, in at least three senses: they are miraculous, they are means of revelation, they remain incomprehensible. They are particularly so when they seem to contradict the nature of God, as in his passion, but less so when they are merely miraculous, e.g. the initial assumption of flesh without moral corruption.