Mysteries of God

"Mysteries of God" is a scriptural phrase in which the word "mysteries" refers to knowledge about God that is often hidden from mortal understanding. It does not refer to something incomprehensible in principle. Like many people of other religions, Latter-day Saints deem a knowledge of some mysteries to be necessary (D&C 76:5–10), and acquire such knowledge in part through ordinances and in part through revelation (cf. TPJS, p. 324).

As found both in the Bible and in latter-day scripture, the term "mystery" describes a doctrine revealed only to the faithful but not given to the "world" or to the uninitiated. (Matt. 13:11; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 3:1–7; 1 Ne. 10:11; D&C 42:61, 65).

The terms "mystery," "mysteries," "mystery of God," and "mysteries of Godliness" appear more than a dozen times in the New Testament, always with the sense of something known to God but unknown to humans who have not yet been divinely instructed. Although none of these terms appears in the Old Testament, the word "secrets" in Daniel 2:28 ("But there is a God in heaven that revealeth secrets") and the term "secret" in Amos 3:7 ("Surely the Lord God...revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets") are equivalent to "mysteries," especially because they are associated with divine revelation (cf. D&C 76:10).

The Book of Mormon prophet Nephite (c. 570 B.C.) equated the plain and precious truths of the gospel with the mysteries of God, noting that those who were stiff-necked and hard of heart, including some members of his own family, found them difficult to believe. But the faithful accepted such truths willingly, under the heart-softening influence of the Holy Ghost (1 Ne. 2:11–16; 10:17–22; 15:1–11). Nephi and his followers believed that Jesus Christ would come, that men and women should be baptized and receive the Holy Ghost, and that God speaks to those who inquire, answering their prayers. In fact, Nephi cites his knowledge of these mysteries in the opening statement of his record as part of his qualification to write it (1 Ne. 1:1).

In latter-day scripture the word "mysteries" typically has three interrelated meanings. First, the mysteries consist of significant truths about God and his works. Second, faithful, obedient members of the Church will be given this sacred knowledge through revelation. Finally, those who are not made partakers of this special understanding will not attain the same glory as those who are. Understanding the mysteries of God is a gospel privilege for the reverent who serve God faithfully (D&C 76:1–10; cf. 1 Ne. 10:17–19; Moses 1:5).

The Prophet Joseph Smith was given the "keys of the mysteries and the revelations" (D&C 28:7; 35:18) in connection with the Melchizedek Priesthood (D&C 84:19; 107:18–19). Thus, obtaining the hidden truths is bound up with the power of the Melchizedek Priesthood, which priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God" (D&C 84:19).

Paradoxically, the term "mystery" encapsulates a dual meaning, both to reveal and to conceal. For the initiated, it designates something believable and understandable. For the nonbeliever its significance is obscure. In other words, the belief and faith of the potential knower determine in great part whether the knowledge is comprehensible or not (Alma 12:9–11).

The knowledge alluded to in the phrases "mysteries of God" or "mysteries of Godliness" may be received in ways other than exclusively verbal. Throughout history, divine knowledge also has been communicated in ceremonies, rites,
purifications, and so on. Such is the case in the temples of the Latter-day Saints, where faithful members of the Church gain knowledge and understanding of heavenly truths as they receive ordinances by covenant.

The broad meaning of “Godliness” embraces the state of being like God, of approximating God’s nature or qualities. The possibility is suggested in the so-called Law of the Harvest. Just as apple seeds produce apple trees, so the offspring of deity, human beings, when they are fully mature—that is, holy, knowledgeable and virtuous—are like their divine parents.

Jesus’ statement in John 17:3, uttered as he petitioned his Father, takes on a more profound meaning in light of the scriptural references to the mysteries of God: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.” The “knowing” to which the Savior refers is that higher knowledge often designated “the mysteries of God” or “the mysteries of Godliness.”

BIBLIOGRAPHY


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