

Τὸ Μυστήριον: The Pauline Concept of Mystery, the Unity of Salvation History, and the Imputation of Divine Righteousness

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Abstract

This article examines the Pauline usage of the Greek term *μυστήριον* (*mystērion*) as it appears across the Pauline corpus, with particular attention to the mystery of Christ (*τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ*), the mystery of the kingdom (*τὸ μυστήριον τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ*), and the broader theological architecture of salvation history. In the context of Second Temple Judaism and Hellenistic religious language, it is asserted that Paul's understanding of *μυστήριον* denotes not secret rituals but the divine salvific plan, previously concealed yet now unveiled, a plan whose method of salvation has been uniform throughout all periods of redemptive history. Central to this investigation is Paul's insistence that justification before God has always been obtained *ἐκ πίστεως* ("by faith") through the imputation of an alien righteousness (*δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*), rather than through human moral achievement. The article draws extensively on the Greek New Testament to demonstrate that the revelation of the mystery does not introduce a new *soteriological* principle but rather discloses the fullness of the one divine plan that has undergirded God's saving activity from Abraham to the present age.

1. Introduction

The Greek noun *μυστήριον* occupies a position of singular importance in Pauline theology. Appearing twenty-one times in the letters attributed to Paul, the term carries a freight of meaning that reaches far beyond its surface association with secrecy or hiddenness.¹ In classical Greek usage, *μυστήριον* referred to the secret rites of Hellenistic mystery religions—cultic ceremonies to which only initiates were admitted. However, Paul’s deployment of this term is decisively shaped not by pagan cult but by the apocalyptic and revelatory traditions of Second Temple Judaism, particularly the Danielic vision in which God reveals *μυστήρια* to His servants (cf. Dan 2:28–29 LXX). For Paul, *μυστήριον* denotes God’s eternal redemptive purpose, formerly concealed in the divine counsel, now disclosed in the fullness of time through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The present study pursues three interrelated lines of inquiry. Initially, this analysis delves into the semantic scope of the term *μυστήριον* as employed by Paul, with meticulous attention to the original Greek. Furthermore, the text examines the distinct elements of the Pauline mystery, specifically Christ’s mystery and the kingdom’s mystery, asserting that these descriptions allude to interconnected aspects of a singular divine orchestration. In conclusion, and of greatest significance, this paper argues that the revelation of the *μυστήριον* does not inaugurate a distinct approach to salvation. Rather, it unveils the fullness of a redemptive economy that has operated on an identical soteriological principle from the beginning: justification before God *ἐκ πίστεως* (“by faith”) through the reception of an imputed righteousness that is not the believer’s own.

2. The Semantic Field of Μυστήριον in Paul

2.1. Background: From Pagan Cult to Apocalyptic Revelation

In pre-Christian Greek literature, *μυστήριον* (plural *μυστήρια*) was associated primarily with the Eleusinian, Orphic, and Dionysiac mysteries—secret rites promising initiates a share in divine life. The term derives from the verb *μύω* (“to close,” especially the eyes or mouth), indicating

¹The term *μυστήριον* (*mystērion*) appears twenty-eight times in the New Testament, of which twenty-one occurrences are in the Pauline epistles. See BDAG, s.v. *μυστήριον*.

that which is kept shut from the uninitiated. While some scholars in the history-of-religions school (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) sought to derive Paul's usage from these Hellenistic antecedents, contemporary scholarship has largely abandoned this thesis. Paul's conceptual framework is far more indebted to Jewish apocalypticism, in which divine secrets are stored in heaven and disclosed to chosen recipients by revelation (*ἀποκάλυψις*).

In the Septuagint, *μυστήριον* translates the Aramaic *רז* (*rāz*) in Daniel 2, where Nebuchadnezzar's dream is a divine secret that only God can disclose. This Danielic pattern—concealment followed by divinely initiated revelation—becomes the structural template for Paul's usage. The *μυστήριον* is not secret because it is inherently inaccessible, but because it awaits the appointed moment of God's self-disclosure.

2.2. The Pauline Definition: Hidden, Then Revealed

Paul consistently defines *μυστήριον* along a two-stage temporal axis: (1) the mystery was hidden (*ἀποκεκρυμμένον*) in past ages, and (2) it has now been revealed (*ἐφανερώθη* / *ἀπεκαλύφθη*) in the present age. This pattern is explicit in several key passages.

In Ephesians 3:3–5, Paul declares that the mystery was made known to him *κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν* (“by revelation”),² specifying that this mystery was not made known to previous generations (*ἐτέραις γενεαῖς οὐκ ἐγνωρίσθη τοῖς υἱοῖς τῶν ἀνθρώπων*) as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit (*ἐν πνεύματι*). Colossians 1:26–27 employs the same framework: the mystery hidden from the ages and from the generations has now been manifested to His saints.³ Similarly, Romans 16:25–26 speaks of the mystery kept in silence (*σεσιγημένον*) through long ages but now disclosed and made known to all nations.⁴

The verbal cluster surrounding *μυστήριον* in Paul is instructive. The concealment phase is marked by verbs and participles such as *ἀποκρύπτω* (“I hide”), *σιγάω* (“I keep silent”), and the adjectival *ἀπόκρυφος* (“hidden”). The disclosure phase is marked by *φανερόω* (“I make

²Eph 3:3–5. Paul writes: *κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν ἐγνωρίσθη μοι τὸ μυστήριον* (“by revelation the mystery was made known to me”).

³Col 1:26–27. *τὸ μυστήριον τὸ ἀποκεκρυμμένον ἀπὸ τῶν αἰώνων καὶ ἀπὸ τῶν γενεῶν, νῦν δὲ ἐφανερώθη τοῖς ἁγίοις αὐτοῦ.*

⁴Rom 16:25–26. The *μυστήριον* kept silent (*σεσιγημένον*) through long ages is now disclosed (*φανερωθέντος*).

manifest”), ἀποκαλύπτω (“I reveal”), and γνωρίζω (“I make known”). This vocabulary demonstrates that *μυστήριον* for Paul is a dynamic concept: it is a divine truth that moves from concealment to disclosure according to God’s sovereign timetable.

3. The Content of the Pauline Mystery

3.1. The Mystery of Christ (τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ)

The most concentrated expression of the mystery’s content is found in the phrase *τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ Χριστοῦ* (“the mystery of Christ”), which appears in Ephesians 3:4 and Colossians 4:3. The genitive *τοῦ Χριστοῦ* is best understood as an exegetical genitive: the mystery *which is* Christ, or whose content is defined by Christ. In Colossians 2:2–3, Paul identifies Christ Himself as the locus of the mystery, asserting that in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.⁵

The specific content of this mystery, as Paul develops it in Ephesians 3:6, is the incorporation of the Gentiles into the covenant people of God: they are *συγκληρονόμα* (“fellow-heirs”), *σύσσωμα* (“fellow-members of the body”), and *συμμέτοχα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας* (“fellow-partakers of the promise”) in Christ Jesus through the gospel.⁶ The three *σύν-* compounds (each prefixed with the preposition meaning “with” or “together”) emphasize the radical equality and full participation that Gentile believers now share with Jewish believers in the eschatological people of God. This was the element that had not been made known in previous generations with the same clarity and fullness with which it was now revealed by the Spirit.

Ephesians 1:9–10 broadens the scope of the mystery to encompass the cosmic plan of God: the *μυστήριον τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ* (“mystery of His will”) is oriented toward the administration (*οἰκονομία*) of the fullness of times, when all things in heaven and on earth are summed up (*ἀνακεφαλαιώσασθαι*) in Christ.⁷ The mystery thus has both a present, ecclesiological dimension

⁵Col 2:2–3. Christ is identified as the one *ἐν ᾧ εἰσιν πάντες οἱ θησαυροὶ τῆς σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως ἀπόκρυφοι* (“in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge”).

⁶Eph 3:6. The Gentiles are *συγκληρονόμα καὶ σύσσωμα καὶ συμμέτοχα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας* (“fellow-heirs, fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise”).

⁷Eph 1:9–10. The *μυστήριον τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ* (“mystery of His will”) pertains to the *οἰκονομία τοῦ πληρώματος τῶν καιρῶν* (“administration of the fullness of times”).

(the union of Jew and Gentile in one body) and a future, cosmological dimension (the universal reconciliation of all things under the headship of Christ). In addition, Paul elaborates on the mystery within the framework of the Christ-Church relationship. In Ephesians 5:32, the marital union serves as an earthly illustration of a profound spiritual reality, which Paul explicitly identifies as the mystery of Christ and the Church.⁸

3.2. The Mystery of the Kingdom (τὸ μυστήριον τῆς βασιλείας)

While the Synoptic Gospels place the phrase τὸ μυστήριον τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ (“the mystery of the kingdom of God”) on Jesus' lips rather than directly in Paul's epistles, it illuminates the broader New Testament matrix within which Paul's mystery theology operates. In Mark 4:11, Jesus tells His disciples that the mystery of the kingdom of God has been given to them,⁹ while those outside receive everything in parables. The parallel passages in Matthew and Luke use the plural form.¹⁰

The kingdom mystery and the Christological mystery are deeply interconnected. The kingdom of God is inaugurated through the person of Christ; hence, the mystery of the kingdom is effectively the mystery of how God's reign is being established—not through political revolution or angelic warfare, but through the crucified and risen Messiah, and the Spirit-empowered proclamation of the gospel to all nations. Paul's *μυστήριον* is thus the theological elaboration of the kingdom mystery that Jesus introduced in His parabolic teaching.

3.3. Other Dimensions of the Mystery in Paul

Paul applies *μυστήριον* to several additional realities. In 1 Corinthians 15:51–52, the mystery is the eschatological transformation of believers at the resurrection: not all will die, but all will be changed.¹¹ In 1 Timothy 3:16, the mystery of godliness (τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον) is summarized in a confessional fragment celebrating Christ's incarnation, vindication, and

⁸Eph 5:32. Paul applies the term *μυστήριον* to the union of Christ and the Church: τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν· ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω εἰς Χριστὸν καὶ εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν.

⁹Mark 4:11. Ὑμῖν τὸ μυστήριον δέδοται τῆς βασιλείας τοῦ θεοῦ (“To you the mystery of the kingdom of God has been given”).

¹⁰Matt 13:11; Luke 8:10. The Synoptic parallels use τὰ μυστήρια τῆς βασιλείας (plural) where Mark uses the singular.

¹¹1 Cor 15:51–52. ἰδοὺ μυστήριον ὑμῖν λέγω· πάντες οὐ κοιμηθήσόμεθα, πάντες δὲ ἀλλαγησόμεθα (“Behold, I tell you a mystery: we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed”).

universal proclamation.¹² In 2 Thessalonians 2:7, Paul refers to the mystery of lawlessness (*τὸ μυστήριον τῆς ἀνομίας*), the hidden operation of evil that will be fully exposed at the end of the age. Each of these usages shares the common structural feature of a divine truth that operates beneath the surface of history and is revealed according to God's appointed purpose and timing.

4. The Continuity of Salvation: Justification by Faith Across the Ages

4.1. One Soteriological Principle

The central inquiry in Pauline theology is whether the revelation of the *μυστήριον* constituted a new system for salvation or merely revealed the entirety of one already in place. The Pauline evidence decisively supports the latter. Paul makes a concerted effort to establish that the gospel he promulgates, namely justification by faith independent of the works of the law, represents not an innovation specific to the Christian era, but the fundamental principle by which God has perpetually saved His people.

This locus classicus for this argument is Romans 4, where Paul turns to Abraham as the paradigmatic case. Citing Genesis 15:6 from the Septuagint, Paul writes that Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness: *καὶ ἐπίστευσεν Ἀβραμ τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην*.¹³ The key verb here is *λογίζομαι* ("I reckon, credit, impute"), a term from the accounting domain signifying the crediting of something to another's account. Abraham's faith was not itself a meritorious work; rather, it was the instrument through which God imputed (*ἐλογίσθη*) righteousness to him.

Paul reinforces this principle by citing the prophet Habakkuk: *ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεώς μου ζήσεται* ("the righteous one shall live by faith").¹⁴ This Old Testament citation, deployed in both Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11, serves as Paul's programmatic declaration: the righteous standing that leads to life has always been obtained through faith, not through the works of the Torah. The Habakkuk citation thus bridges the testaments, demonstrating that the faith principle operative in the New Covenant community was already articulated by Israel's prophets.

¹²1 Tim 3:16. *μέγα ἐστὶν τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον· ὃς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί* ("Great is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh").

¹³Gen 15:6 LXX: *καὶ ἐπίστευσεν Ἀβραμ τῷ θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην*. Paul cites this text in both Rom 4:3 and Gal 3:6.

¹⁴Hab 2:4 LXX: *ὁ δὲ δίκαιος ἐκ πίστεώς μου ζήσεται*. Paul cites this in Rom 1:17 and Gal 3:11.

4.2. Imputed Righteousness: Receiving What Is Not Our Own

At the heart of the Pauline gospel stands the doctrine of imputed righteousness—the conviction that the believer is justified before God not on the basis of any inherent moral quality or accumulated merit, but solely through the reception of a righteousness that belongs to another. Paul articulates this with remarkable precision in Romans 4:5: to the one who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness (*λογίζεται ἡ πίστις αὐτοῦ εἰς δικαιοσύνην*).¹⁵

The phrase *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ* (“the righteousness of God”) is the Pauline designation for this imputed reality. In Romans 3:21–22, Paul declares that this divine righteousness has now been manifested apart from the law (*χωρὶς νόμου*), although the law and the prophets bore witness to it. It is received through faith in Jesus Christ by all who believe.¹⁶ The critical phrase *χωρὶς νόμου* does not mean “without scriptural attestation” but “apart from law-keeping as the ground of acceptance.” Indeed, Paul insists that the law (*ὁ νόμος*) and the prophets (*οἱ προφῆται*) themselves testify to this faith-righteousness.

Philippians 3:9 provides the most explicitly personal expression of this doctrine. Paul expresses his desire to be found in Christ possessing not his own righteousness derived from the law (*μὴ ἔχων ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ νόμου*) but the righteousness that comes through the faithfulness of Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (*τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει*).¹⁷ The contrast between *ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην* (“my own righteousness”) and *τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην* (“the righteousness from God”) is absolute. Justification requires a righteousness that originates outside the human subject and is received through faith alone.

Second Corinthians 5:21 supplies the theological ground of this exchange: God made the one who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in

¹⁵Rom 4:5. *τῷ δὲ μὴ ἐργαζομένῳ, πιστεύοντι δὲ ἐπὶ τὸν δικαιῶντα τὸν ἀσεβῆ, λογίζεται ἡ πίστις αὐτοῦ εἰς δικαιοσύνην.*

¹⁶Rom 3:21–22. *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας* (“the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”).

¹⁷Phil 3:9. Paul desires to be found in Christ, *μὴ ἔχων ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ νόμου ἀλλὰ τὴν διὰ πίστεως Χριστοῦ, τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην ἐπὶ τῇ πίστει.*

Him (*ἵνα ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ*).¹⁸ Here Paul articulates the great exchange at the center of the atonement: Christ bears the penalty of sin; believers receive the imputation of divine righteousness. The prepositional phrase *ἐν αὐτῷ* (“in Him”) anchors the imputation in union with Christ—it is not a legal fiction but a relational reality grounded in the believer’s incorporation into the crucified and risen Lord.

4.3. Abraham, David, and the Transhistorical Nature of Justification

Paul’s argument for the continuity of salvation across the ages is not merely inferential; it is exegetical. In Galatians 3:8, Paul declares that the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand (*προεσηγγερίσατο*) to Abraham.¹⁹ The compound verb *προεσηγγερίσατο* is striking: it means “proclaimed the good news in advance.” The gospel itself—the message of justification by faith—was present in seed form in the Abrahamic promise. What was hidden was not the soteriological mechanism but the full scope of its application: that this justifying faith would extend to all the nations (*πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*) through the person of Christ.

Paul further extends his argument to David, noting that the psalmist pronounced a blessing upon the person to whom God credits righteousness apart from works (*χωρὶς ἔργων*), and to whom the Lord will not reckon sin.²⁰ The Abrahamic and Davidic witnesses together demonstrate that justification by the imputation of an alien righteousness was already operative under the Mosaic economy. The law was never intended as a vehicle of self-achieved righteousness but as a pedagogue (*παιδαγωγός*, Gal 3:24) leading to Christ.

Hebrews 11, while not Pauline in authorship, corroborates the same theological trajectory. The patriarchs and heroes of Israel are commended because they lived and died in faith (*κατὰ πίστιν*), not having received the fullness of the promises but embracing them from afar.²¹ Their faith was

¹⁸2 Cor 5:21. *τὸν μὴ γνόντα ἁμαρτίαν ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν ἁμαρτίαν ἐποίησεν, ἵνα ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ.*

¹⁹Gal 3:8. *προϊδοῦσα δὲ ἡ γραφή ὅτι ἐκ πίστεως δικαιοῖ τὰ ἔθνη ὁ θεός, προεσηγγερίσατο τῷ Ἀβραάμ* (“The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham”).

²⁰Rom 4:6–8, quoting Ps 32:1–2 LXX (Ps 31:1–2 LXX numbering). David pronounces the blessing upon the one *ᾧ ὁ κύριος οὐ μὴ λογίσσεται ἁμαρτίαν* (“to whom the Lord will not reckon sin”).

²¹Heb 11:13. The patriarchs died *κατὰ πίστιν* (“in faith”), not having received the promises but having seen them from afar.

directed toward a future realization that they did not yet see clearly—the very reality that the Pauline *μυστήριον* now reveals.

4.4. Romans 3:25–26: The Retroactive Efficacy of the Cross

Perhaps the most theologically dense statement of the continuity of salvation is found in Romans 3:25–26. God put forward Christ as a propitiation (*ἱλαστήριον*)—a term also denoting the mercy seat of the tabernacle—to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His divine forbearance He had passed over (*πάρεσιν*) the sins previously committed.²² The noun *πάρεσις* (as distinct from *ἄφεσις*, “forgiveness”) denotes a passing over or suspension of penalty, not a full remission. God’s justice was not satisfied by the Old Testament sacrificial system in itself; rather, the sins of the faithful under the former economy were “passed over” in anticipation of the definitive atoning sacrifice of Christ. *The cross is thus retroactively efficacious*: it is the objective ground upon which Abraham’s faith was credited as righteousness, even though the historical event of Calvary lay millennia in the future.

This means that there is, and has only ever been, one mechanism of justification: faith in God’s promise, resulting in the imputation of a righteousness that the believer does not possess inherently. What varies across the ages is not the *soteriological* principle but the degree of revelatory clarity. Abraham believed in a promise dimly perceived; David trusted in a forgiveness whose full basis was not yet disclosed; Paul and the apostolic church believe in a mystery now fully revealed in the crucified and risen Christ. The object of faith becomes progressively clearer, but the nature and instrument of justification remain unchanged.

5. Conclusion

The Pauline *μυστήριον* is not a departure from the theological trajectory of the Hebrew Scriptures but its divinely intended climax. Paul’s usage of the term—shaped by Jewish apocalypticism rather than Hellenistic mystery cults—designates the once-hidden, now-revealed purpose of God to unite all things under the headship of Christ, incorporating both Jew and Gentile into one

²²Rom 3:25–26. God set forth Christ as a *ἱλαστήριον* (“propitiation” / “mercy seat”), demonstrating His righteousness in passing over former sins.

eschatological people through the gospel. The mystery of Christ and the mystery of the kingdom converge in the revelation that God's reign is established through the cruciform Messiah, and that admission to the kingdom has always been by grace through faith.

The salvation disclosed in the mystery is not a new salvation. It is the full revelation of the ancient salvation that has been operative since God first credited righteousness to Abraham on the basis of faith. The *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*—the righteousness of God, imputed to the believer and received by faith—has been the sole ground of justification in every epoch of redemptive history. Under the old economy, this righteousness was received through faith in promises not yet fulfilled; under the new, it is received through faith in promises now accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The instrument is the same: *πίστις*. The righteousness received is the same: *δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ*. The result is the same: *δικαίωσις* (“justification”) before the holy God.

What was *ἀποκεκρυμμένον* has been *φανερωθέν*. What was *σεσιγημένον* has now been proclaimed to all nations. The mystery has been revealed—not as a new way of being right with God, but as the full and final disclosure of the only way there has ever been.

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