

The Ante-Nicene Mysteries and their New Testament Sources

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The Greek word *musterion* (plural: *musteria*) had a specific meaning in the ancient world during the early Christian era. It is, of course, the etymological source of our English word “mystery,” but *musterion* had a much more specific meaning in the ancient world. Indeed, it is derived from the verb *muo*, “to shut the mouth”—relating to the idea of silence imposed upon those initiated into esoteric rites. It is no surprise, then, that *musterion* was used by the mystery religions to mean a secret rite or ritual given to the initiated. The frequent Latin Vulgate rendering of *musterion* as *sacramentum*¹—sacrament—is, therefore, highly appropriate.

Gnosis is inseparable from the *musteria*. This *gnosis* or knowledge did not have reference to facts and figures, but to spiritual, esoteric knowledge reserved for the initiates. The main purpose of the *musteria* was to acquire *gnosis*. For this reason, *musterion* was also used to denote a “secret.” i.e., it came to refer to the hidden *gnosis* itself bestowed through the *musteria*.

As we shall see, the word *musteria* was used by the ante-Nicene Church in connection with sacraments reserved for the initiated or more “spiritual” Christians. Since the *musteria* were hidden rituals or teachings, it necessarily follows that they cannot be reconstructed with any certainty today. I will not, therefore, try to reconstruct the nature of the Christian *musteria*. Rather, I will (1) survey some of the references to the *musteria* in the writings of the ante-Nicene Fathers, (2) show some possible New Testament sources for *musteria*, and finally, (3) address the fate of the *musteria* in Christianity.

¹ See Latin Vulgate of Daniel 2:18; 4:6; Tobit 12:7; Ephesians 1:9; 3:3,9; 5:32; 1 Timothy 3:16; Revelation 1:20. The Vulgate sometimes renders *musterion* as *mysterium*

Ante-Nicene Fathers

The *musteria* is a reoccurring subject mentioned by the ante-Nicene Fathers. In order to avoid misrepresenting their writings, at times I will use some rather lengthy, but highly interesting, quotations.

While they definitely belong to the ante-Nicene period, there is much controversy about the original sources, authors, and dates of the *Clementia*. They purport to be the writings of Peter's Roman disciple Clement containing Peter's teachings and some of his disputes with Simon the Magician. While it isn't impossible they could accurately report Peter's teachings, it is certain that they report one early Christian perspective—and they have some interesting insights on the ante-Nicene *musteria*.

Peter, speaking to Simon the Magician, says:

We remember that our Lord and Teacher, commanding us, said, “Keep the mysteries for me and the sons of my house.” Wherefore also He explained to His disciples privately the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven. But to you who do battle with us, and examine into nothing else but our statements, whether they be true or false, it would be impious to state the hidden truths.²

This statement is interesting on many levels. First of all, the *musteria*, according to Jesus, were to be kept secret. They are to be had only by Him and “the sons of [his] house.” The *musteria* are clearly given in the context of the sacred space of his house—the temple. These “hidden truths” are not to be given to the contentious anti-Christian or to the non-disciple. These esoteric truths are held sacred. Indeed, the *Clementia* also quote Peter as saying “[T]he most

² *Clementine Homilies* in Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (1885; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 8:336. (Hereafter ANF)

sublime truths are best honoured by means of silence.”³ Peter explains that this doctrine of keeping secret certain teachings can be a stumbling block to missionary work.

But if [Simon] remains wrapped up and polluted in those sins which are manifestly such, it does not become me to speak to him at all of the more secret and sacred things of divine knowledge (*gnosis*), but rather to protest and confront him, that he cease from sin, and cleanse his actions from vice. But if he insinuate himself, and lead us on to speak what he...ought not to hear, it will be our part to parry him cautiously. For not to answer him at all does not seem proper, for the sake of the hearers, lest haply they may think that we decline the contest through want of ability to answer him, and so their faith may be injured through their misunderstanding of our purpose.⁴

According to Peter, to not openly talk about certain teachings can make the critics' arguments the *de facto* truth. On the other hand, to speak openly about such teachings would be a violation of the sacred command of Jesus to “keep the mysteries for me and the sons of my house.” This can be a delicate and frustrating situation. As Lactantius wrote, “[A] mystery ought to be most faithfully concealed and covered, especially by us, who bear the name of faith.”⁵

Clement of Alexandria and his disciple Origen wrote more clearly about the *mysteria* and *gnosis* than any other early Christians. Clement, though considered orthodox, applied the term Gnostic to himself and other Christians who possessed certain higher knowledge. In his view, the so-called Gnostics usurped a title that belonged to the elite of mainstream, orthodox Christianity. A Gnostic is an orthodox Christian trained by the mysteries.

Wherefore also all men are His; some through knowledge (*gnosis*), and others not yet so; and some as friends, some as faithful servants, some as servants merely. This is the

³ Peter in *Clementine Recognitions* in ANF 8:83

⁴ Peter in *Clementine Recognitions* in ANF 8:98

⁵ Lactantius, *The Divine Institutes* in ANF 7:221

Teacher, who trains the Gnostic by mysteries, and the believer by good hopes, and the hard of heart by corrective discipline through sensible operation.⁶

Clement breaks down all of humanity into three categories: “the hard of heart,” “the believer,” and “the Gnostic.” The mysteries are not given to the hard of heart or even to the believers, but rather only to the Gnostic. The Gnostics are apparently those who have repented of their hard hearts and proven themselves worthy as believers. It follows that these mysteries, according to Clement, “are not exhibited incontinently to all and sundry, but only after certain purifications and previous instructions.”⁷ There are, therefore, two levels of Christians—the believers and the Gnostics.

Origen, the disciple of Clement of Alexandria, expounded further upon these different levels of initiation in the church. In his defense against the anti-Christian Celsus, he wrote:

Now, in answer to such statements, we say that it is not the same thing to invite those who are *sick in soul* to be *cured*, and those who are *in health* to the *knowledge* and *study* of divine things. We, however, keeping both these things in view, at first invite all men to be healed, and exhort those who are sinners to come to the consideration of the doctrines which teach men not to sin. . . . And when those who have been turned towards virtue have made progress, and have shown that they have been purified by the word, and have led as far as they can a better life, then and not before do we invite them to participation in our mysteries. “For we speak wisdom among them that are perfect.” . . . [W]hoever is pure not only from all defilement, but from what are regarded as lesser transgressions, let him be boldly initiated in the mysteries of Jesus, which properly are made known only to the holy and the pure. . . . He who acts as initiator, according to the precepts of Jesus, will say to those who have been purified in heart, “He whose soul has, for a long time, been conscious of no evil, and especially since he yielded himself to the

⁶ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* in ANF 2:524

⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata* in ANF 2:449

healing of the word, let such an one hear the doctrines which were spoken in private by Jesus to His genuine disciples.” . . . [Celsus] does not know the difference between inviting the wicked to be healed, and initiating those already purified into the sacred mysteries! Not to *participation in mysteries*, then, and to *fellowship in the wisdom hidden in a mystery*, which God ordained before the world to the glory of His saints, do we invite the *wicked man*, and the *thief*, and the *housebreaker*, and the *poisoner*, and the *committer of sacrilege*, and the *plunderer of the dead*, and all those others whom Celsus may enumerate in his exaggerated style, but such as these we invite to be *healed*. . . . God the Word was sent, indeed, as a physician to sinners, but as a teacher of divine mysteries to those who are already pure and who sin no more.⁸

Like Clement of Alexandria, for Origen there are three kinds of people—the wicked who need healing, those who have been healed, and the initiated.

Ignatius of Antioch, while on his way to Rome for martyrdom, wrote the Romans that he knew of “heavenly things” that he could not impart to them for fear of harming them by knowledge they were not ready for. He apparently took this knowledge with him to the grave.

I am able to write to you of heavenly things, but I fear lest I should do you an injury. . . . For I am cautious lest ye should not be able to receive [such knowledge], and should be perplexed. For even I, not because I am in bonds, and am able to know heavenly things, and the places of angels, and the stations of the powers that are seen and that are not seen, am on this account a disciple; for I am far short of the perfection which is worthy of God.⁹

One thing is perfectly clear, many of the ante-Nicene Christians recognized that there were mysteries and teachings reserved for only the most spiritual Christians. Now we must turn our attention to identifying the source of these mysteries.

⁸ Origen, *Against Celsus* in ANF 4:487-489

⁹ Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans* in ANF 1:104

New Testament Sources

As noted above, the *Clementia* clearly identify the source of the mysteries as being Jesus himself. “[Jesus] explained to His disciples privately the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.” Origin also maintained that “God the Word was sent, indeed, as a physician to sinners, but as a teacher of divine mysteries to those who are already pure and who sin no more.” Clement of Alexandria, as quoted by Eusebius, identified the resurrected Jesus as the original source of the *gnosis*.

The Lord after his resurrection imparted knowledge (*gnosis*) to James the Just and to John and Peter, and they imparted it to the rest of the apostles, and the rest of the apostles to the seventy, of whom Barnabas was one.¹⁰

Could this be what Luke referred to in his prologue to The Acts of the Apostles?

After his suffering, [Christ] showed himself to [the apostles whom he had chosen] and gave them many indisputable proofs that he was alive. He was seen by them for forty days and spoke about things pertaining to the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3).

It seems incredible that Christ’s post-resurrection teaching would be so quickly passed over by one of the authors of the Gospels unless some things are simply too sacred to commit to writing—the *mysteria* and the *gnosis*. It may be that these are the things that the mortal Jesus said his disciples could not yet bear, but that they needed to understand (See John 16:12).

In his night-encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus taught that a man must be born of water and of the Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Early Christians understood this to

¹⁰ Clement of Alexandria as quoted by Eusebius. *The Church History of Eusebius* 2.1.4. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series Two*. 14 vols. [1885; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004.], 1:104.

refer to the most basic Christian sacrament—baptism.¹¹ It is interesting, therefore, that Jesus, after teaching about baptism, would upbraid Nicodemus saying, “If I have told you earthly things, and you do not believe me, how are you going to believe if I tell you about heavenly things” (John 3:12)? If He referred to baptism and being born again as “earthly things,” what are these “heavenly things?” Is this what Ignatius had in mind when he told the baptized Romans they were not ready for “the heavenly things” which he knew? Clearly, “the heavenly things” were not given to all of the baptized Christians.

Paul refers to the esoteric tradition in his first epistle to the Corinthians. After upbraiding the proud Corinthians for their contention and divisions, he frankly states that “[he] came not declaring unto you the *musterion*¹² of God with eloquence or wisdom” (1 Cor. 2:1). Rather, he “determined to not to know anything among you but Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). He continues,

However, we do speak wisdom among the *teleios*: not the wisdom of this world or of the rulers of this world who are coming to nothing, but we speak the wisdom of God in a *musterion*, even the secret wisdom, that God has ordained before the world unto our glory (1 Cor. 2:6-7).

What is this “wisdom of God in a *musterion*” that Paul didn’t declare to the Corinthians but that he does speak among the *teleios*? Who are the *teleios*? This word is usually translated as “the mature” or “the perfect” in our Bibles, but it had another meaning in the mystery religions—

¹¹ See, for example, Justin Martyr, *First Apology* in ANF 1:183; *Clementine Homilies* in ANF 8:223–347; Irenaeus in ANF 1:574.

¹² The better texts read *musterion* while other texts read *marturion* (Metzger, Bruce M., *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. [Germany: Freiburger, 1994], 480). This change in the text may have been intentional to weaken the argument of the Gnostic Christians who claimed possession of secret rituals.

“the initiated.” Taking into account the meaning of *musterion* and of *teleios*, this passage could be rendered:

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not declaring unto you *the secret ritual* of God with eloquence or the wisdom. For I determined to not know anything among you but Jesus Christ and him crucified. . . . However, we do speak wisdom among *those who are initiated*: not the wisdom of this world or of the rulers of this world who are coming to nothing, but we speak the wisdom of God in a *secret ritual*, even the secret wisdom, that God has ordained before the world unto our glory.¹³

Why didn't Paul teach the Corinthians these things? He says it is because they were “babes” who could not yet endure “adult food” but only “milk” (1 Corinthians 3:1-2). The division here must be much like the division mentioned by Origen between those who are sick in soul needing to be cured and the healthy who are invited into the study of the mysteries.

Where Did They Go?

I have demonstrated that there existed a tradition in the early church consisting of *musteria*—sacred, secret rituals—and *gnosis*—esoteric knowledge—reserved for the mature, spiritual Christians. I have given some very likely New Testament sources for this tradition. What happened to the *musteria* and the *gnosis*? To this question we can only give informed speculation.

One possibility is that the *musteria* lost their identity as such. Since, in the time of greatest persecution, all of the sacraments became *musteria*, being performed in secret to avoid the scrutiny of outsiders, eventually the separate esoteric rituals were absorbed into the common rituals of baptism, confirmation, and the Lord's Supper and thus lost their separate identity.

¹³ Interestingly, Paul at first only refers to the *musterion* as though there is only one. However, shortly after Paul clearly states that he, as a minister of Christ, is “entrusted with the *musteria* of God” (1 Cor. 4:1).

Eventually, after the cessation of persecution, the *mysteria* reemerged as the “seven sacraments” of the west and the “seven great mysteries” of the east.¹⁴

Another possibility lies with the fight of the early Church Fathers against the different Gnostic sects. In her campaigning against these heretical groups, the Church may have abandoned the esoteric traditions all together in order to clearly distinguish orthodoxy from heterodoxy. “Victory over Gnosticism thus meant the eradication of esotericism from Christian doctrine” altogether.¹⁵

Whatever the cause, the division between the babes and the mature, the outsiders and the insiders, the initiated and the uninitiated, the gospel of the Healer and the gospel of the Teacher, was largely lost.

¹⁴ In Eastern Orthodoxy there also are many other “mysteries” that are not part of the “seven great mysteries.” These include incense burning, prayer, candle lighting, the blessing of holy water, etc.

¹⁵ Stroumsa, Guy G. *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism*. (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), 157.