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MYSTERIES OF GOD

College of Religious Instruction Lecture Series

Noel B. Reynolds, author and copyright holder

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ABSTRACT:

LDS discourse commonly uses the term *mysteries* to refer to truths that we don't know or shouldn't worry about. But the scriptures—and particularly the Book of Mormon—speak of the mysteries very positively, as something we should seek to know. The scriptural terminology appears to refer to the things of God that the faithful come to know—things that nonbelievers never understand.

KEY WORDS:

mysteries of God, revelation, the Spirit, the Holy Ghost,

OUTLINE:

Scope: Textual interpretation only. I bring no special competence in languages or history to bear. Propose a simple exercise in the kind of scriptural analysis that can be performed by every Latter-day Saint.

Reasons for selecting this topic:

- (1) Prevailing use of this key term in the church reflects a serious ignorance of scriptural usage.
- (2) An understanding of scriptural usage greatly enhances an appreciation of Nephi's thesis in the Book of Mormon. It is central to the Book of Mormon.

The Problem:

- (1) We ordinarily use the term "mysteries" to refer to
 - a. interesting theological questions which the Lord has not settled with revealed knowledge, and
 - b. the temple ordinances. (The ancient world generally referred to secret religious rites and initiations as mysteries.)
- (2) We are constantly being cautioned to avoid discussing either of the above publicly and to avoid wasting time or creating confusion by speculating or investigating the former.
- (3) Yet, the scriptures repeatedly admonish us to seek to know the mysteries, and even to teach them! I'll refer to these passages in due time.

How do we reconcile these things?

Proposal:

I propose that careful examination of the scriptures may

- (1) resolve the conflict and
- (2) show us which mysteries we need to pursue, and
- (3) which mysteries are still "none of our business."

The Book of Mormon seems to be a particularly promising starting point. What author of scripture other than Nephi confesses to "having great desires to know of the mysteries of God" in his youth. And what other book of scripture begins with the portentous remark, ". . .having a great knowledge of. . .the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record. . . ."

Here Nephi seems to imply that we should expect his record to present these mysteries to his children--and fortunately, to us. Though other interpretations of his indirect comment are possible, this seems correct to me and fits well with two further textual observations:

- (1) The book of Mormon prophets treasured their scriptures precisely because they contained the mysteries of God.

- a. Alma

And these plates of brass, which contain these engravings, which have the records of the holy scriptures upon them. Behold, it has been prophesied by our fathers, that they should be kept and handed down from one generation to another, and be kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord until they should go forth unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people, that they shall know of the mysteries contained thereon.

Alma 37:3-4.

- b. King Benjamin

And he also taught them concerning the records which were engraven on the plates of brass, saying: would that ye should remember that were it not for these plates, which contain these records and these commandments, we must have suffered in ignorance, even at this present time not knowing the mysteries of God. I say unto you, my sons, were it not for these things, which have been kept and preserved by the hand of God, that we might read and understand of his mysteries, and have his commandments always before our eyes, that

My sons, I

even our fathers would have dwindled in unbelief.

Mosiah 1:3,5

c. King Limhi on 24 gold plates

And now, when Ammon had made an end of speaking these words the king rejoiced exceedingly, and gave thanks to God, saying: Doubtless a great mystery is contained within these plates, and these interpreters were doubtless prepared for the purpose of unfolding all such mysteries to the children of men.

Mosiah 8:19

(2) Other prophets justified their ministries by reference

to the mysteries of God.

a. King Benjamin:

. . .For I have not commanded you to come up hither to trifle with the words which I shall speak, but that you should hearken unto me, and open your ears that ye may hear, and your hearts that ye may understand, and your minds that the mysteries of God may be unfolded to your view.

#3 b. Paul: (New English Bible often translates mystery as "secret".)

To this end keep watch and persevere, always interceding for all God's people; and pray for me, that I may be granted the right words when I open my mouth, and may boldly and freely make known his hidden purpose, (mystery) for which I am an ambassador--in chains. . . .

Ephesians 6:19-20

Preserve in prayer, with mind awake and thankful heart; and include a prayer for us, that God may give us an opening for preaching, to tell the secret of Christ (mystery); that indeed is why I am

now in prison. pray that I may make the secret plain, as it is my duty to do.

Colossians 4:2-4

As we proceed to examine Nephi's record we find that he seems to be using the word "mystery" to refer to those sacred truths that are knowable only through divine revelation. They are truly mysteries only to those, who like Laman and Lemuel, cannot receive revelation.

This is clearly the sense of 1 Ne 2:16-18:

#4 And it came to pass that I, Nephi, being exceeding young, nevertheless being large in stature, and also having great desires to know of the mysteries of God, wherefore, I did cry unto the Lord; and behold he did visit me, and did soften my heart that I did believe all the words which had been spoken by my father; wherefore, I did not rebel against him like unto my brothers.

And I spake unto Sam, making known unto him the things which the Lord had manifested unto me by his Holy Spirit. And it came to pass that he believed in my words.

But, behold, laman and Lemuel would not hearken unto my words; and being grieved because of the hardness of their hearts I cried unto the Lord for them.

Daniel uses "secret" in the same sense.

#5 Blessed by God's name from age to age, for all wisdom and power are his. He changes seasons and times; he deposes kings and sets them up; he gives wisdom to the wise and all their store of knowledge to the men who know; he reveals deep mysteries; he knows what lies in darkness, and light has its dwelling with him. To thee, God of my fathers, I give thanks and praise, for thou hast given me wisdom and power; thou hast now revealed to me what we asked, and told us what the king is concerned to know.

Daniel 2:20-23

#5a Daniel answered in the king's presence, "The secret about which your majesty inquires no wise man, exorcist, magician, or diviner can disclose to you. But there is in heaven a god who reveals secrets, and he has told King Nebuchadnezzar what is to be at the end of this age. This is the

dream and these the visions that came into your head: the thoughts that came to you, O king, as you lay on your bed, were thoughts of things to come, and the revealer of secrets has made known to you what is to be. This secret has been revealed to me not because I am wise beyond all living men, but because your majesty is to know the interpretation and understand the thoughts which have entered your mind.

Daniel 2:27-30

It is even more explicit where Nephi is so impressed with his father's vision of the tree of life and the ministry and atonement of Christ, that he desires to gain a knowledge of these same things.

#6 And it came to pass after I, Nephi, having heard all the words of my father, concerning the things which he saw in a vision, and also the things which he spake by the power of the Holy Ghost, which power he received by faith on the Son of God--and the Son of God was the Messiah who should come--I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him.

For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost,

1 Ne 10:17,19

Nephi's brother Jacob confirms that it is only through such revelations that the mysteries are known:

Behold, great and marvelous are the works of the Lord. How unsearchable are the depths of the mysteries of him; and it is impossible that man should find out all his ways. And no man knoweth of his ways save it be revealed unto him; wherefore, brethren, despise not the revelations of God.

Jacob 4:8

Other prophets specifically corroborate this point:

#7 I speak God's hidden wisdom, his secret purpose framed from the very beginning to bring us to out full glory. The powers that rule the world have never known it; if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord

of glory. But, in the words of scripture, 'Things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagining, all prepared by God for those who love him,' these it is that God has revealed to us through the Spirit.

I Corinthians 2:7-10

#7a And if thou wilt inquire, thou shalt know mysteries which are great and marvelous; therefore thou shalt exercise thy gift, that thou mayest find out mysteries, that thou mayest bring many to the knowledge of the truth, yea, convince them of the error of their ways.

D & C 6:11.

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, blessed art thou for what thou hast done; for thou hast inquired of me, and behold, as often as thou hast inquired thou has received instruction of my Spirit. If it had not been so, thou wouldn't not have come to the place where thou art at this time.

Behold, thou knowest that thou hast inquired of me and I did enlighten thy mind; and now I tell thee these things that thou mayest know that thou hast been enlightened by the Spirit of truth.

D & C 6:14-15.

#8 And I have given unto him the keys of the mystery of those things which have been sealed, even things which were from the foundation of the world, and the things which shall come from this time until of my coming.
...

Wherefore, watch over him that his faith fail not, and it shall be given by the Comforter, the Holy Ghost, that knoweth all things.

D & C 35:18-19.

#8 If thou shalt ask, thou shalt receive revelation upon revelation, knowledge upon knowledge, that thou mayest know the mysteries and peaceable things--that which bringeth joy, that which bringeth life eternal.

D & C 42:61.

And from time to time, as shall be manifested by the Comforter, (you shall) receive revelations to unfold the mysteries of the kingdom.

D & C 90:14.

#8a With this in mind I make my prayer, I, Paul, who in the cause of you Gentiles am now the prisoner of Christ Jesus. . . . It was by a revelation that his secret was made known to me. I have already written a brief account of this, and by reading it you may perceive that I understand the secret of Christ. In former generations this was not disclosed to the

human race; but now it has been revealed by inspiration to his dedicated apostles and prophets. . . .

Ephesians 3:1-5.

In this light it is very interesting to discover that the very truths that Nephi calls "mysteries" are the same as "the plain and precious things" that the abominable church took away from their record of the gospel of the Lamb.

#9 And after they go forth by the hand of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, from the Jews unto the Gentiles, thou seest the foundation of a great and abominable church, which is most abominable above all other churches; for behold, they have taken away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious. . . .

And after these plain and precious things were taken away it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles; and after it goeth forth unto all the nations of the Gentiles. . . thou seest--because of the many plain and precious things which have been taken out of the book. . .an exceeding great many do stumble. . . .

Never will the Lord God suffer that the Gentiles shall forever remain in that awful state of blindness. . .because of the plain and most precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb which have been kept back by that abominable church. . . .

#9a And the angel spake unto me, saying: These last records, which thou hast seen among the Gentiles, shall establish the truth of the first, which are of the twelve apostles of the Lamb, and shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away from them; and shall make known to all kindreds, tongues, and people, that the Lamb of God is the Son of the Eternal Father, and the Savior of the world; and that all men must come unto him, or they cannot be saved.

1 Ne 13:26, 29, 32, 40.

Perhaps we can explain this seemingly paradoxical shift in terminology by reference to a parallel dichotomy in Book of Mormon language. The prophets continually warn their people not to trust in the arm of flesh--that is, the wealth, wisdom or power of men--but to trust in the arm of God. To those natural men who trust in the arm of flesh, the

plain and precious things of the gospel are truly mysterious. To them, the Sermon on the Mount is a guide on "How to fail in business and politics by really trying." But to the saints who have taken the name of Christ upon them, these mysterious parts of the gospel are "plain and precious things." Nephi, addressing his writings to his often wicked posterity and to modern day Gentiles quite rightly speaks of the "mysteries of God" which they must seek diligently to understand. But the angel speaking to the prophet Nephi in chapter 13 very appropriately refers to the "plain and precious parts of the gospel of the Lamb."

We are given two clear examples of wicked men in Book of Mormon who refer to the teachings of the prophets about Christ as mysteries:

#9b

KORIHOR:

Yea, they durst not make use of that which is their own lest they should offend their priests, who do yoke them according to their desires, and have brought them to believe, by their traditions and their dreams and their whims and their visions and their pretended mysteries, that they should, if they did not do according to their words, offend some unknown being, who they say is God--a being who never has been seen or known, who never was nor ever will be.

Alma 30:28.

#9c

APOSTATE NEPHITES IN 2 B.C.:

And they began to reason and to contend among themselves, saying:

That it is not reasonable that such a being as a Christ shall come; if so, and he be the Son of God, the Father of heaven and of earth, as

it has been spoken, why will he not show himself unto us as well as unto them who shall be at Jerusalem?

Yea, why will he not show himself in this land as well as in the land of Jerusalem?

But behold, we know that this is a wicked tradition, which has been handed down unto us by our father, to cause us that we should believe in some great and marvelous thing which should come to pass, but not among us, but in a land which is far distant, a land which we know not; therefore they can keep us in ignorance, for we cannot witness with our own eyes that they are true.

And they will, by the cunning and the mysterious arts of the evil one, work some great mystery, which we cannot understand, which will keep us down to be servants unto them, for we depend upon them to teach us the word; and thus will they keep us in ignorance, for we cannot witness with our own eyes that they are true.

Helaman 16:17-21.

We can return to Nephi's first chapter to develop a more precise understanding of what "plain and precious things" he has in mind when he implies his record will convey his "knowledge of the goodness and mysteries of God (1 Nephi 1:1)." In the final sentence of that chapter he sets forth his thesis:

#10

. . . I Nephi, will show unto you that the tender mercies of the Lord are over all those whom he hath chosen, because of their faith, to make them mighty even unto the power of deliverance.

1 Nephi 1:20.

This thesis of Nephi, sets forth the basic elements of all the sacred mysteries as well as the theme that inspires all the subsequent Book of Mormon prophets. These elements are that the Lord is merciful unto the faithful and will always give them the power needed to deliver them from

their enemies, whatever their difficulties might be. This general truth as well as its numerous specific applications are truly mysteries for the children of men who cannot comprehend either the mercy of God, the power of God in men, or the requirement of faithfulness. Yet to the children of God, these things are both "plain" and "precious."

No sooner does Nephi announce his thesis than he begins cataloguing the evidence. In chapters 3-5 Nephi through his faithfulness has Laban and the brass plates delivered by the power of God into his hands. When they returned to their father's tent, Nephi reports the testimony of his mother Sariah:

#11 And she spake, saying: Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness; yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons, and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them. And after this manner of language did she speak.

1 Nephi 5:8.

Next, the sons of Lehi were required to bring Ishmael and his family down into the wilderness. On this expedition, Nephi's rebellious brethren bound him and sought to take away his life. In this new extremity, Nephi appealed to the Lord's mercy in prayer saying:

#12 . . .O Lord, according to my faith which is in thee, wilt thou deliver me from the hands of my brethren; yea, even give me strength that I may burst these bands with which I am bound.

1 Nephi 7:17.

And it was done.

Having prepared us with these two obvious proofs for his thesis, Nephi is now ready to introduce the great mystery, the almost unbelievable claim that God so loved the world that he would give his Only Begotten Son, that whosoever would repent and believe on him might not perish but might have eternal life. His evidence for this cannot be of the sort given above. But he can give two witnesses. First he reports his father's vision of the tree of life and teachings of the ministry and atonement of Christ (1 Ne 8-10). Then he offers his own testimony. For being desirous that he "might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the Power of the Holy Ghost (1 Ne 10:17)," and knowing that "the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them (that diligently seek him) by the power of the Holy Ghost (1 Ne 10:19)," Nephi sought the Lord and received a revelation of the same mysteries his father had received.

The Spirit of the Lord caught him away into a high mountain and showed him the vision of the tree of life, as well as the interpretation thereof, which was a portrayal of the life and death of Christ and his victory over the world.

Paul was especially clear in the teaching that Christ was the central mystery of the gospel because of his atonement. See for example two passages in Colossians:

#13

I became its servant by virtue of the task assigned to me by God for your benefit: to deliver his message in full; to announce the secret hidden for long ages and through many

generations. . . The secret is this: Christ in you, the hope of a glory to come.

Colossians 1:26-27.

I want them to continue in good heart and in the unity of love, and to come to the full wealth of conviction which understanding brings, and grasp God's secret. That secret is Christ himself; in him lie hidden all God's treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

Colossians 2:2-4.

Nephi discloses a deep interest in many other mysteries which he dispels for us. He was given a knowledge of the future of his own posterity and of the Gentiles. He uses these future events to document his thesis even further.

A specific example of this is to occur in the last days when the saints will appear to be at the mercy of the powerful and hostile great and abominable church. Speaking of that day, the angel said to Nephi:

#14

. . .Behold there are save two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil;. . .

. . .and she had dominion over all the earth, among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people.

And it came to pass that I beheld the church of the Lamb of God, and its numbers were few, because of the wickedness and abominations of the whore who sat upon many waters; nevertheless, I beheld that the church of the Lamb, who were the saints of God, were also upon all the face of the earth; and their dominions upon the face of the earth were small, . . .

And it came to pass that I beheld that the great mother of abominations did gather together multitudes upon the face of all the earth, among all the nations of the Gentiles, to fight against the Lamb of God.

#14a

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld the power of the Lamb of God, that it descended upon the saints of the church of the Lamb, and upon the covenant people of the Lord, who were scattered upon all the face of the earth; and they were armed with righteousness and with the power of God in great glory.

1 Ne 14:10-14.

We could go on at much greater length documenting Nephi's supporting evidence for the thesis that the Lord in his mercy will deliver the faithful through his power. The many mysteries of God are all explained by this general thesis. It explains why men should pray, love their neighbors, be humble, repent of their sins. It explains how the weak things of the world can come forth and break down the mighty and strong ones. It explains the ultimate fall of all those who trust in the arm of flesh or inhabit the "great and spacious building" rather than seeking after the fruit of the tree of life by trusting in the Lord (or holding on to the iron rod). But all these things are mysteries to the world.

The next obvious question is "Who can receive of these mysteries?" It is implicit in what has gone before that the mysteries are given to those who seek them in righteousness. This is explained in several passages,

#15

And now behold, my brethren, what natural man in there that knoweth these things? I say unto you, there is none that knoweth these things, save it be the penitent.

Yea, he that repenteth and exerciseth faith, and bringeth forth good works, and prayeth continually without ceasing--unto such it is given to know the mysteries of God; yea, unto such it shall be given to reveal things which never have been revealed; yea, and it

shall be given unto such to bring thousands of souls to repentance, even as it has been given unto us to bring these our brethren to repentance.

Alma 26:21-22.

And if thou will inquire, thou shalt know mysteries which are great and marvelous; therefore thou shalt exercise they gift, that thou mayest bring many to the knowledge of the truth, yea, convince them of the error of their ways.

D & C 6:11.

#16

Remember that without faith you can do nothing; therefore ask in faith. Trifle not with these things; do not ask for that which you ought not.

Ask that you may know the mysteries of God . . . and according to your faith shall it be done unto you.

D & C 8:10-11.

But unto him that keepeth my commandments I will give the mysteries of my kingdom, and the same shall be in him a well of living water, springing up unto everlasting life.

D & C 63:23.

Seek not for riches but for wisdom, and behold the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto you, and then shall you be made rich. Behold, he that hath eternal life is rich.

D & C 6:71.

In particular we can refer back to Nephi's statement in chapter 2 of First Nephi to find the key difference between those who can and cannot receive the mysteries. There Nephi says he was able to believe because the Lord "did visit me and did soften my heart (v. 16)," but Laman and Lemuel would not hearken unto his words because of "the

hardness of their hearts (v. 18)." Alma explained this critical criterion when he said:

#17

. . . It is given unto many to know the mysteries of God; nevertheless they are laid under a strict command that they shall not impart only according to the portion of his word which he doth grant unto the children of men, according to the heed and diligence which they give unto him.

And therefore, he that will harden his heart, the same receiveth the lesser portion of the word; and he that will not harden his heart, to him is given the greater portion of the word, until it is given unto him to know the mysteries of God until he know them in full.

And they that will harden their hearts, to them is given the lesser portion of the word until they know nothing concerning his mysteries; and then they are taken captive by the devil, and led by his will down to destruction. Now this is what is meant by the chains of hell.

Alma 12:9-11.

We note in verse 9 the interesting caution that these mysteries are not to be published indiscriminately among men, but only as God grants it to them. The Savior has given this same warning in different words.

Give not that which is holy unto the dogs, neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, and turn again and rend you.

3 Ne 14:6.

#18

The disciples went up to him and asked, `Why do you speak to them in parables?' He replied, "It has been granted to you to know the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven; but to those others it has not been granted. . . . That is why I speak to them in parables; for they look without seeing, and listen without hearing or understanding. There is a prophecy of Isaiah which is being fulfilled for them; "You may hear and hear, but you will never understand; you may look and look, but you will never see. For this people's mind has become gross; their ears are dulled, and their eyes are closed.

Otherwise, their eyes might see, their ears hear, and their mind understand, and then they might turn again, and I would heal them."

Matthew 13:10-15.

Furthermore, like the prophets of old modern prophets have been instructed to teach the mysteries as directed by the Spirit:

To this end keep watch and persevere, always interceding for all God's people; and pray for me, that I may be granted the right words when I open my mouth, and may boldly and freely make known his hidden purpose, for which I am an ambassador--in chains.

Ephesians 6:19.

#19

Behold, thus saith the Lord unto you my servants Joseph Smith, Jun., and Sidney Rigdon, that the time has verily come that it is necessary and expedient in me that you should open your mouths in proclaiming my gospel, the things of the kingdom, expounding the mysteries thereof out of the scriptures, according to that portion of Spirit and power which shall be given unto you, . . .

D & C 71:1.

And I will bless him with a multiplicity of blessings, in expounding all scriptures and mysteries to the edification of the school, and of the church in Zion.

D & C 97:5.

We must be regarded as Christ's subordinates and as stewards of the secrets of God.

1 Corinthians 4:1.

In connection with this commandment to teach, we are told that it is the greater priesthood which have not been revealed, the Keys are committed to the President of the Church.

For I have given him the keys of the mysteries, and the revelations which are sealed, . . .

D & C 28:7.

#21

And I have sent forth the fulness of my gospel by the hand of my servant Joseph;

And I have given unto him the keys of the mystery of those things which have been sealed, even things which were from the foundation of the world, and the things which shall come from this time until the time of my coming.

D & C 35:17-18.

This leaves us secure in the knowledge that if and when the Lord wants us to know such things it will not be given to us through revelations or speculations from the memberships of the Church. On such matters the prophet alone has the keys, and we need not be troubled by those among us who profess to have the knowledge of those mysteries.

Conclusion:

The "mysteries" of the Book of Mormon include with "plain and precious truths" that were taken from the Bible.

Corollaries:

- (1) The plain and precious truths of God are mysteries to the wicked.
- (2) The wisdom of men is foolishness to the Lord.
- (3) We must seek out the mysteries of God if we will be saved.

For thus saith the Lord--I, the Lord, am merciful and gracious unto those who fear me, and delight to honor those who serve me in righteousness and in truth unto the end.

Great shall be their reward and eternal shall be their glory.

And to them will I reveal all mysteries, yea, all the hidden mysteries of my kingdom from days of old, and for ages to come, will I make known unto them the good pleasure of my will concerning all things pertaining to my kingdom.

Yea, even the wonders of eternity shall know, and things to come will I show them, even the things of many generations.

And their wisdom shall be great, and their understanding reach to heaven; and before them the wisdom of the wise shall perish, and the understanding of the prudent shall perish, and the understanding of the prudent shall come to naught.

For by my Spirit will I enlighten them, and by my power will I make known unto them the secrets of my will--yea, even those things which eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor yet entered into the heart of man.

D & C 76:5-10.

But great and marvelous are the works of the Lord, and the mysteries of his kingdom which he showed unto us, which surpass all understanding in glory, and in might, and in domination;

Which he commanded us we should not write while we were yet in the spirit, and are not lawful for man to utter;

Neither is man capable to make them known, for they are only to be seen and understood by the power of the Holy Spirit, which God bestows on those who love him, and purify themselves before him;

To whom he grants this privilege of seeing and knowing for themselves;

That through the power and manifestation of the Spirit, while in the flesh, they may be able to bear his presence in the world of glory.

D & C 76:114-118.