

Alma 26:21-22, “Mystery” and “Secret” in the Book of Mormon, LeGrand Baker

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

22 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)

Joseph Smith wrote from Liberty Jail, “the things of God are of deep import; and time, and experience, and careful and ponderous and solemn thoughts can only find them out.” (*History of the Church* 3:295)

Sode is a Hebrew word that means a secret {1} – it usually refers to the deliberations and decisions of a council. {2} In the Old Testament it is frequently translated as “secret.”

A “*sode* experience” is a vision (as in Isaiah 6) in which the prophet is returned to the Council and taught afresh what assignment he was given there, and under what circumstances he is to fulfill it while in mortality. {3} Kingsbury observes, that “These experiences are held in common by many of the pre-exilic prophets as well as by deutero-Isaiah, but are lacking in the experiences of the post-exilic prophets.” {4}

Amos 3:7 says “Surely the Lord God will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret [*sode*] unto his servants the prophets” (Amos 3:7). To do that the Lord, in vision, brings his human prophets back to the Council where they renew their covenants and review conditions of where and how, in human history, they are to fulfil those covenants. Thus a true prophet knows his own place in the past, present, and future; and he can speak of them with certitude and authority.

Psa 25:14 Psa : The secret [*sode*] of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant .

For the people of ancient Israel, a *sode* experience was a necessary criterion for a prophet’s legitimacy. Jeremiah writes that a false prophet was one who claimed to speak for God but who had not had a *sode* experience, and so could only pretend to know God’s will (Jeremiah 23:18-22).

Conversely then, to the ancient Israelites, a true prophet was one who had stood in God’s Council and had heard his counsel; knew the decisions of the Council, and could act, teach, and prophecy accordingly.

The most detailed example of a prophet’s *sode* experience in the Bible is Isaiah chapter 6, where that prophet, in vision, returned to the Council to re-receive the assignment he had been asked to fulfill before he came to this world. {5}

The four necessary elements of a *sode* experiences are: (1) that the prophet returns, in vision, to see his own part in the Council in Heaven, and (2) therefore, he mentions that he sees the other members of the Council who were present. {6} (3) He sees God sitting on his throne

presiding at the Council, and (4) he sees Jehovah who conducts the affairs of the Council and makes the assignments. {7} There are many accounts of prophets who seem to have had a *sode* experience, but not all of them report all four parts of what constitutes a full account. However, all say they saw a vision, and all say they received an assignment from God. {8}

The *sode* experience reviews the reality that is represented in the cosmic myth. There, the hero understands why and what his assignment is, and the difficulties he will encounter in seeking to accomplish it. He is promised that he will be able to succeed and that he will return home triumphant. As that is the same story told in the ancient temple drama, one might describe the drama as a this-world generic version of a *sode* experience. The writers of the psalms understood that relationship.

In some of the psalms, the Temple of Solomon was the place where one went to find the *sode*. Referring to the *sode*-like drama that people experienced in conjunction with the Temple of Solomon, Psalm 111:1 clearly shows that the congregation was regarded as representing the members of the Council. It begins, "Praise ye the Lord. I will praise the Lord with my whole heart, in the assembly [*sode*.] of the upright, and in the congregation." Because the drama of Solomon's temple followed essentially the same pattern, and conveyed essentially the same information that the prophets learned during their actual *sode* experiences, the ancient temple drama might be understood as a kind of generic *sode* experience whose purpose was to teach each member of the congregation where they came from, how they came to be here, and what they must do here to fulfill their covenants and return home triumphant.

In the New Testament, Brown has shown that the Greek *mysterion* denotes the same kind of experiences as the Hebrew *sode*, and the same significance is attached to them. {9} It is more specific that *sode* because *mysterion* describes "religious secrets, confided only to the initiated and not to ordinary mortals. {10}

That concept adds considerably to our understanding of the Saviour's words found in three of the gospels:

11 He answered and said unto them, Because it is given unto you to know the mysteries [*mysterion*] of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given (Matthew 13:11).

11 And he said unto them, Unto you it is given to know the mystery [*mysterion*] of the kingdom of God: but unto them that are without, all these things are done in parables (Mark 4:11).

10 And he said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries [*mysterion*] of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand (Luke 8:10).

It also teaches us what Paul meant when he described the disciples as "the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries [*mysterion*] of God (1 Corinthians 4:1)."

Murray-Jones shows that Paul's own apostolic authority rested upon his having had a *sode* experience. {11}

Paul taught that the Saints that each had made covenants in the Council — "But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery [*mysterion*], even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained

before the world unto our glory (1 Corinthians 2:7).” He also reminded the Ephesians, “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: ... Having made known unto us the mystery [*mysterion*] of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself (Ephesians 1:3-4,9).” He left no question about what he intended to say when he added,

8 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

9 And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery [*mysterion*] , which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ (Ephesians 3:8-9).

The mysteries (“secrets confided only to the initiated”) Paul describes are not only secrets in this world, but have always been, and always will be. He taught the Romans:

25 Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery [*mysterion*], which was kept secret since the world began,

26 But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith (Romans 16:25-27).

Paul described his authority in terms of his being able to teach the *mysterion*:

25 Whereof I am made a minister, according to the dispensation of God which is given to me for you, to fulfil the word of God;

26 Even the mystery [*mysterion*] which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints:

27 To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery [*mysterion*] among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:23-29).

Even though the Greek word *mysterion* could not have been part of the Nephite language, its English equivalent, “mystery,” is found throughout the Book of Mormon — and always with the same meaning as the Hebrew *sode*.

In the very first verse, Nephi introduces himself to us by telling us that he has “a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God (1 Nephi 1:1). With that statement is a clear reference to his own *sode* experience, Nephi defines himself --- in a way his contemporaries could not help but understand --- as a true prophet of God. Then, almost immediately thereafter, Nephi shows us that his father is also a true prophet by describing Lehi’s *sode* experience in enough detail that we have all four defining characteristics of a *sode* experience (1 Nephi 1:9-15).

Beginning with those first pages, the Book of Mormon shows a remarkable consistency in its use of the word “mystery.” It almost always uses the word to describe either a real *sode* experience or else the ancient temple drama that represented a kind of generic sode experience. {12}

Examples are:

18 For he [God] is the sa me yesterday, to-day, and forever; and the way is prepared for all men from the foundation of the world, if it so be that they repent and come unto him.
19 For he that diligently seeketh shall find; and the mysteries of God shall be unfolded unto them, by the power of the Holy Ghost, as well in these times as in times of old, and as well in times of old as in times to come; wherefore, the course of the Lord is one eternal round (1 Nephi 10:18-19).

9 And now Alma began to expound these things unto him, saying: 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.
10 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.
11 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 12:8-11).

22 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 26:22).

In the Old Testament where sode means the secret deliberations of a council, the use is not limited to the decisions of the Council in Heaven. It may be used to describe a as well. Three examples are:

6 O my soul , come not thou into their secret [*sode*]; unto their assembly, mine honour , be not thou united: for in their anger they slew a man , and in their selfwill they digged down a wall (Genesis 49:6).

2 Hide me from the secret counsel [*sode*] of the wicked ; from the insurrection of the workers of iniquity (Psalm 64:2).

3 They have taken crafty counsel [*sode*] against thy people , and consulted against thy hidden ones (Psalm 83:3).

This is where we find another evidence of the care and consistency with which the Book of Mormon was translated. As in the Old Testament, sode could represent the secret deliberations of any council, so, we assume, on the brass plates the word sode was used to represent the decisions of councils both good and bad. The remarkable thing is the way sode was translated in the Book of Mormon. There the New Testament equivalent of mysterion (“mystery”) is always used to represent a sode experience or the temple drama version of a sode experience. However, whenever sode was found on the plates to represent evil or conspiratorial councils, the Old Testament word “secret” was used. Two examples are:

22 And there are also secret combinations, even as in times of old, according to the combinations of the devil, for he is the founder of all these things; yea, the founder of murder, and works of darkness; yea, and he leadeth them by the neck with a flaxen cord, until he bindeth them with his strong cords forever (2 Nephi 26:22).

5 But as many as there were who did not enter into a covenant, and who did still continue to have those secret murders in their hearts, yea, as many as were found breathing out threatenings against their brethren were condemned and punished according to the law.

6 And thus they did put an end to all those wicked, and secret, and abominable combinations, in the which there was so much wickedness, and so many murders committed (3 Nephi 5:5-6).

27 And it shall come in a day when the blood of saints shall cry unto the Lord, because of secret combinations and the works of darkness (Mormon 8:27).

The uses of the words “mystery” and “secret” in the Book of Mormon are further evidence that Hebrew was the original language on the brass plates and remained a major component of the Nephite language for the next thousand years. They also evince the great care with which the Book of Mormon was translated into English. Because sode was translated as “secret” in the negative context, and “mystery” in the temple context, its readers are not left to wonder about either the meanings of the passages or the correctness of the translation.

ENDNOTES

1} *Sode* (Strong's definition # 5475 reads:)

1) council, counsel, assembly

a) council (of familiar conversation)

1) divan, circle (of familiar friends)

2) assembly, company

b) counsel

1) counsel (itself)

2) secret counsel

3) familiar converse, intimacy (with God)

2} A discussion of the meaning of *sode* is found in Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 2-6.

Brown, Raymond E., "The Pre-Christian Semitic Concept of 'Mystery'," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 20 (1958): 417-443.

3} In his explanation of the significance of the Council, H. Wheeler Robinson gave several examples of Old Testament references to *sode*, *Inspiration and Revelation*, 168-69.

4} It is significant, as Edwin C. Kingsbury observes, that "These experiences are held in common by many of the pre-exilic prophets as well as by deuterio-Isaiah, but are lacking in the experiences of the post-exilic prophets." ("The Prophets and the Council of Yahweh," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83 [1964]: 279).

5} Isaiah 6 is widely recognized as the most complete account of a *sode* experience that can be found in the scriptures. However, it has some problems, all of which are cleared up in the brass plates version that is found in 2 Nephi 16. The best non-canonical description of a *sode* experience is Enoch's in *The Book of the Secrets of Enoch*, from *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, 2 vols., ed. R. H. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976), 2:431-69. Early Christians included at least some of Enoch in their canon. Jude 1:14-16 is 1 Enoch 1:9. For further discussions of the Council, see Stephen D. Ricks, "Heavenly Visions and Prophetic Calls in Isaiah 6 (2 Nephi 16), the Book of Mormon, and the Revelation of John," *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, 171-90.

6} These are called "angels" by Nephi (1 Nephi 1:8).

7} Nephi's account of his father's *sode* experience in 1 Nephi 1:6-10 also contains all four elements. It is discussed in the chapter called, "Nephi's Introduction as a Review of the Festival Temple Drama."

8} AMONG THOSE VISIONS ARE THE FOLLOWING:

Enoch's, recorded in Moses 7:2-4.

7:5-67 are about the call (note v. 63-4).

Abraham's, recorded in Abraham 3:22-28.

Chapters 4 and 5 continue the story.

Moses's, recorded in Exodus 3:1-15.

3:29 to 4:17 the Lord and Moses discuss the call.

Moses chapter 1.

The rest of the book of Moses continues the story (note Moses 4:2-3).

Isaiah's, recorded in Isaiah 6:1-13.

Jeremiah's, recorded in Jeremiah 1:4-6.

1:7 through chapter 19 the Lord and Jeremiah discuss the call, then there is a short break and the dialogue continues.

Lehi's, recorded in I Nephi 1:3-16,19.

See also II Nephi 1:15.

Ezekiel's, recorded in Ezekiel 1:3-28, 3:12-14.

2:1 to 3:11 the Lord explains the call (note v. 7-10).

Alma's, recorded in Alma 36:11-23.

Note v. 14 & 22.

Moroni's, recorded in Ether 12:22, 3.

Verses 23-37, the Lord and Moroni discuss the call.

The Savior's is recorded in many places. Some are: John 1: 1-5 and Joseph Smith Translation, John 1:1-19, 29-33 (page 807-8 of LDS Bible); John 3:11-13; Doctrine and Covenants 93:1-21; Luke 1:69-75; and Isaiah chapter 61.

John the Baptist's is suggested in Luke 1:76-79, and in John 1:33 ("He that sent me to baptize with water, the same said unto me.").

Joseph Smith's, recorded in J.S. History 2:15-20 and Dean C. Jessee "The Early Accounts of Joseph Smith's First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, 3 (Spring 1969): 275-94.

Abinadi's is very concise but interesting. He says to King Noah, "Touch me not, for God [Elohim] shall smite you if ye lay your hands upon me, for I have not delivered the message which the Lord [Jehovah] sent me to deliver; neither have I told you that which ye requested that I should tell; therefore, God [Elohim] will not suffer that I shall be destroyed at this time" (Mosiah 13:3) Abinadi affirms that he is acting under Elohim's protection, but fulfilling the assignment that was given to him by Jehovah.

9} Raymond E. Brown, *The Semitic Background of the Term "Mystery" in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968), 2-6.

10} *mysterion* (Strong's # 3466)

1) hidden thing, secret, mystery

a) generally mysteries, religious secrets, confided only to the initiated and not to ordinary mortals

b) a hidden or secret thing, not obvious to the understanding

c) a hidden purpose or counsel

1) secret will

a) of men

b) of God: the secret counsels which govern God in dealing with the righteous, which are hidden from ungodly and wicked men but plain to the godly

2) in rabbinic writings, it denotes the mystic or hidden sense

a) of an OT saying

b) of an image or form seen in a vision

c) of a dream

11} C. R. A. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1-12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate Part 2: Paul's Heavenly Ascent and its Significance," *Harvard Theological Review* 86, 3 (1993): 265-92. He says that the "seventh heaven" is a later tradition, but it represents essentially the same idea. For discussions on the heavenly ascent, see Lundquist, "Common Temple Ideology," 57-58. Richard D. Draper, and Donald W. Parry, "Seven Promises to Those Who Overcome: Aspects of Genesis 2-3 in the Seven Letters," *Temple in Time and Eternity*. 121-41. Hamblin, "Temple Motifs," 441-50. Thomas, "Hebrews: To Ascend," 479-91. An example where *mysterion* is used to represent initiation into evil systems is Revelation 17:5.

12} An example of a different use is Helaman 16 where the word is spoken by apostates with a negative connotation.