



Introduction: What Does “Hapax Legomenon” Mean?

Imagine opening your Bible, reading a verse, and encountering a word that appears nowhere else in the entire Scripture. That solitary, unique, unparalleled word is what scholars call a **hapax legomenon**.

The term comes from the Greek ἅπαξ λεγόμενον (*hápax legómenon*), literally meaning “said once.” In biblical studies, it refers to words that appear **only once** in the entire Bible (or in a specific section, such as the Old Testament, the New Testament, or a particular book).

But what importance can a solitary word hold? Why should this matter to your life of faith?

The answer is as fascinating as it is profound: **hapax legomena are like divine whispers, hidden winks of the Holy Spirit that reveal the unfathomable richness of the mystery of God.**

I. Rarity That Speaks: A Historical Look

In ancient times, language was carefully preserved. Writing was expensive, space was limited, and text transmission was sacred. In this context, a word appearing only once in all of Sacred Scripture is no accident. Every word was chosen with surgical precision, inspired by God Himself.

From the earliest Jewish scribes to Christian translators, the presence of these unique terms has always provoked wonder. In the Hebrew Old Testament, there are over 1,500 hapax legomena. In the Greek New Testament, there are about 686.

Some well-known examples include:

- **“Tsebiy” (צְבִי)** in Isaiah 4:2: translated as “glory” or “splendor,” this word appears only there to speak of Messianic beauty.
- **“Epiousios” (ἐπιούσιος)** in Matthew 6:11: the word used in the Lord’s Prayer for “daily bread,” which appears nowhere else in Greek literature, the Septuagint, or the New Testament.
- **“Monogenēs” (μονογενής)** in John 1:14: translated as “Only-Begotten,” referring to the Son. Although it appears more than once in the Bible, its theological weight when referring to Christ is unique and profound.



II. Why Use a Unique Word? The Mystery of Divine Revelation

God doesn't waste words. In the Bible, every term is inspired; every syllable has meaning. When God inspires a **hapax**, He is communicating something **unrepeatable**, a truth that cannot be confined to common human language.

1. Expressing the Ineffable:

There are moments when the sacred authors, moved by the Spirit, face the mystery of God, of grace, or of the Kingdom. Ordinary words are not enough. Then, a new word emerges. A term that breaks molds, like a window opened onto eternity.

*"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable are His judgments and how inscrutable His
ways!" (Romans 11:33)*

2. Emphasizing the Unique:

The unique word serves as a spiritual underline. It's as if the Holy Spirit is saying: "Pay attention here. This is special."

3. Provoking Silence and Contemplation:

Many hapax are not easy to translate or interpret. And that is part of their power. They invite **silence**, **lectio divina**, reverent awe. They draw us out of the comfort of the familiar and into the mystery.

III. The Hapax as a Theological Icon: Three Examples That Open Us to God

Let's look at some hapax legomena that can help us grow in our spiritual life.

1. **Epiousios** (ἐπιούσιος) – Matthew 6:11

"Give us today our epiousios bread"



This word, usually translated as “daily bread,” **appears nowhere else** in the Bible or in classical Greek literature. Some Church Fathers interpreted the term as “**supernatural bread**”, that is, the **Eucharist**. Saint Jerome translated it as *supersubstantialem* in the Vulgate.

Spiritual Application:

When we pray the Our Father, we are not only asking for physical sustenance but for **Christ Himself**, the Living Bread come down from Heaven. Each time we say “give us this day our daily bread,” we are opening ourselves to receive Eucharistic grace.

2. Harpagmos (ἄρπαγμός) – Philippians 2:6

“Though He was in the form of God, He did not consider equality with God something to be harpagmos”

This word appears only here. Modern translations interpret it as “something to be grasped” or “exploited.” But its rarity has led to profound theological debates.

Spiritual Application:

Christ did not cling to His divine glory but **emptied Himself** to become a servant. He teaches us radical humility. What are we clinging to? What are we being called to surrender?

3. Tetragrammaton (יהוה) – the Ineffable Name

Although technically not a hapax legomenon (since it appears many times), it is a **unique word**, without translation, without vowels, without exact equivalent. The Jews replaced it with “Adonai” (Lord) out of reverence. Christians understand it as a revelation of the **very being of God**.

Spiritual Application:

God is both **inaccessible** and **near**. His Name is a mystery not to be pronounced, but to be **adored**.



IV. What Do These Words Reveal About God?

1. That God Is Always Greater Than Our Language

The hapax teaches us **not to reduce God to our categories**. They remind us that His mystery is never exhausted, not even by sacred vocabulary.

2. That God Wants to Speak Personally

A unique word is like a letter written just for you. There are messages from God that are not repeated. They are unique, personal, unrepeatable—like every soul.

3. That the Word of God Is Alive

The use of hapax reminds us that **Scripture is not a dead text** but a **living Word** that continues to speak to us today.

“The word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12)

V. How Can We Apply This in Our Spiritual Life?

1. Rediscover the Word with Awe

Don't read the Bible like just another book. Approach it like someone exploring a garden filled with hidden treasures. If you find a strange or unique word, **stop**. Meditate. Pray.

2. Make Prayer a Place of Listening

The Holy Spirit continues to speak “hapax” in our lives. Have you ever received a unique word, a clear intuition, an inner calling? Receive it with reverence. Write it down. Ruminates on it.

3. Develop Theological Sensitivity

The hapax trains us to **pause before mystery**, not to rush, not to assume we understand everything. It teaches us to **love the silence of God** as much as His spoken word.



4. Strengthen Your Liturgical Life

Many hapax are linked to the **Eucharist**, the mystery of the Name, the act of redemption. The liturgy is the place where these words come alive. Participate actively, internalize, adore.

Conclusion: The God of Unique Words

We live in a noisy world, filled with repetitions, empty words, chain messages. In the midst of this chaos, **God speaks to us with unique words**. Not to confuse us, but to captivate us. Not to lose us, but to lead us into the heart of the Mystery.

The hapax legomenon reminds us that in the spiritual life, there are things that **are said only once**, but that mark us forever.

Perhaps God has already spoken a unique word over your life. Perhaps He is waiting for you to discover it. Don't rush. Open the Bible, and let the God of unique words speak to your heart.

"Heaven and earth will pass away, but My words will never pass away." (Matthew 24:35)