

The  
MYSTERY  
*of*  
GOD

Theology *for* Knowing *the* Unknowable

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*To*  
Heidi Elise Boyer  
*and*  
Debbie Hall,  
in whom the mystery of God  
is so fittingly embodied

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# Introduction

## The Landscape on a Sunny Day

This book is the work of two authors, and we have endeavored throughout to speak with a single authorial voice. Nevertheless, it seems wise to begin with a short anecdote that comes from just one of us, and that introduces a line of thinking that we will be building on quite a bit in the pages that follow.

### A Morning Walk

Like many people, I (Steve) deeply enjoy a peaceful walk on a clear, fresh morning. Since I lived for a time only a couple miles north of the university where I teach, I have often had opportunity for such walks on my way to the office. On one occasion not long ago, I took advantage of such an opportunity, and I found that the pleasure of my stroll that spring morning was so intense that I could barely give attention to the business that the day at the office would include. My senses were bombarded on every side by magnificent invitations to distraction. It was still fairly early, so a delicious coolness was everywhere, even though the day was already bright with streaming sunshine. The song of birds was unbroken and loud enough that my children had already complained about being awakened by it. The air was so fresh and so thick with the scents of a spring morning that I wanted to savor each breath like a bite of a nourishing meal.

Of course, there was a great deal to see on such a bright morning: squirrels running skillfully along telephone wires, small birds pecking in the grass for a bit of breakfast, children waiting for a bus to take them to school, an elderly woman working in her garden before the day became too hot, a man in a tie climbing into his automobile, a procession of cyclists in their colorful biking

attire. My path took me past a local golf course, where I could see several clusters of golfers enjoying the clear day, some of them teeing off not twenty yards from where I walked, others in the distance on other fairways or greens. The trees on the golf course, both nearby and farther away, displayed (when one attended closely) more subtle shades of green than one would have thought possible, with the combination of colors constantly changing as the leaves danced and sparkled in the morning sun. A little farther on, I passed a local school's quarter-mile jogging track, around which three or four runners were proceeding at varying paces, one of them with a black Labrador as an escort. In the middle of the track, the school's football team was just finishing up a morning scrimmage, and I could tell by the dirty uniforms and the coach's red face that they had been hard at work for some time before my arrival.

As I began to approach the campus of my institution, I proceeded south along a fence (on my left) that bordered an open field, and for the first time I found myself under the wide-open sky. I absentmindedly watched the antics of playful birds above me and off to the right (the west), and I marveled at the size and brilliance of the blue expanse in which they cavorted. Coming to the end of the fence, I turned left (east) toward the school, and I found that I could no longer attend to the birds, for the brightness of the sun directly in front of me and above me required me to keep my eyes lowered to the horizon for a few moments until I came to another stand of trees.

Now, at this point, an odd thought occurred to me. I realized that this morning's walk—a little over a mile so far, supremely pleasant, and filled with sights made all the more interesting by their ordinariness—had not included any steadfast attention to one very evident element in this lovely spring day. It was not that this element was unavailable or inaccessible. On the contrary, its ready accessibility was precisely what kept me from attending to it. It also was not that I had overlooked it or taken it for granted, for its presence was a very conscious part of my enjoyment of the day. And yet, though I delighted in it, and though it was available for inspection, I never once looked at it, or even tried to.

The neglected item was the sun. I had, of course, been aware of its rays: I had felt their warmth and had seen the shadows that they cast. And I knew that the bright sun in the sky was the source of those rays: indeed, I remembered telling my wife as I left the house what a “beautiful *sunny* day” it was, and how pleasant the walk would be as a result. If I had been asked, I could have pointed (with eyes lowered) to the spot in the sky where the sun was currently blazing. Yet I knew all of this, and enjoyed it, without ever looking directly at the sun itself.

As I thought about it, and while I was still under the open sky, I offhandedly stole a quick glance upward to look at the sun directly. This was foolish, of course. Even that momentary flash of the sun's brilliance hurt my dazed eyes, and I had to blink and rub them for a moment before looking around

again. When I did look around, I found that I could not quite see clearly for a few moments: the negative image of the sun's disk continued to haunt my vision like a ghost.

By the time I reached the trees a little farther up the road, my eyes were back to normal. The trees themselves helped, by providing a leafy filter through which the sun could shine, but not in its full force. Looking up, one could glimpse tiny bits of the sun for just a split second between the constantly dancing leaves. And even with such protection, the brightness was not always pleasant.

Surely, I thought, this is a rather ironic situation. Not only is the sun a key element in a pleasant spring morning, but it is also the one element that allows me to see all of the other elements that contribute to the pleasantness. On a cloudy day I could not have seen the cyclists or the Labrador or the multiple shades of green nearly so well; in the dark I could not have seen them at all. Yet the very thing that allows me to see this beautiful spring morning cannot itself be seen. This is something of a surprise, isn't it? The sun makes things visible, but it is not visible itself, at least not to ordinary looking. On the contrary, the only way I had found to look *at* the sun was in fact to *hide* the sun behind ever-shifting leaves that could give me just the tiniest, most fragmentary glimpses of what I could not bear to gaze upon.

## Theology and the Sun We Cannot See

Both of the authors of this book have found an experience like this one to be instructive. Of course, our book itself is a work of Christian theology, not one of solar astronomy or of nature lore. But we think that the scenario described above is worth a bit of theological reflection (and perhaps even a reenactment on some beautiful spring morning!), and we are not the first to think so. Perhaps most famously in recent memory, it was in a rich theological context that C. S. Lewis observed, "We believe that the sun is in the sky at midday in summer not because we can clearly see the sun (in fact, we cannot) but because we can see everything else."<sup>1</sup> Lewis's point was clear: there may be certain things that are themselves too great to understand but that nevertheless enable us to understand lesser things with remarkable clarity.

Lewis's image seems to be especially apt when we consider the Christian doctrine of God. Christians from the very beginning have insisted that the God they worship is the one, true, living God—the God who is not one "thing" among others, but the source and end of every "thing" that exists; the God of whom no image may be made, since every image falls short; the God whose thoughts are not our thoughts, whose ways are not our ways. "All the gods of the nations are idols," declares the psalmist, "but the Lord made the heavens"

1. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (1947; repr., New York: Touchstone, 1996), 145.

(Ps. 96:5). This Creator “lives in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:16); before him both heaven and earth flee away, and no place is found for them (Rev. 20:11); this God ominously announces, “No one may see me and live” (Exod. 33:20). This is a God whom philosophers, theologians, and ordinary Christians have recognized as “incomprehensible,” “inscrutable,” “hidden,” “past finding out.”

Yet this God is also the center of all things, the fount of life, the God of all truth, the Father of lights, the Light that enlightens every person. How can Life be the occasion of death, or Light dwell in dazzling darkness, or Truth be beyond understanding? Yet such paradoxical formulations have been used to describe God from the beginning. In an early twentieth-century study of the universal human experience of God, German philosopher of religion Rudolf Otto summarized this very paradox when he described God with the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which may be roughly translated as “mystery that overwhelms and yet attracts.”<sup>2</sup> There seems to be something profoundly right about this characterization of God, especially in its insistence that God is, in some quite remarkable sense, a *mystery*. The full meaning and import of this term will be the subject of the rest of this book, but we can recognize right from the outset that to speak of God in this way is to speak of him as blinding, crushing, devastating, overpowering. To approach God is to approach an unfathomable depth of reality and truth that, like the sun in the sky, is too intense, too bright to look at, but that nevertheless brings meaning and coherence and beauty to everything else. God is a mystery.

The task of this book is to investigate this notion of divine mystery and to investigate it in a way that is explicitly theological. To describe our goal in this way might strike some readers as odd. Isn't theology, someone might ask, the attempt to *overcome* mystery? Aren't theologians exactly the people whom we ask to solve the perplexing puzzles and oddities of religious life, so that we can all understand God better?

There is a kernel of truth to this intuition, for we do indeed expect theologians to help us to know God better. But there are confusions here as well. One of the confusions has to do with the notion that a “mystery” is primarily a puzzle or a riddle that has to be solved. This is a very understandable assumption, since the term “mystery” is used in a bewildering variety of ways, even when one considers only its religious or ecclesiastical applications. In chapter 1, we will explore this variety of meanings and try to make clear the sense in which we are using the term in this book. For the moment, let us say simply that the “mystery” that the Creator must be, by virtue of his status as Creator, cannot in the nature of the case be “solved,” like a puzzle. The mystery of God is not a question to which we must find an answer; it is itself the answer—and an answer into which we are invited to enter ever more fully in Christ.

2. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed., trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), esp. 12–40.

A second confusion, and one not unrelated to the first, concerns not the nature of mystery but the nature of theology. Particularly in the modern West, where Theology (note the capital *T*) may be best known as one discipline among many others in the curriculum of academic institutions, it is not at all uncommon to treat theologians as those who seek the right answers to religious or theological questions, just as we treat historians as those who seek answers to historical questions or mathematicians as those who seek answers to mathematical questions. Ours is a culture of technicians, whose task it is to understand a problem in order to solve it. Not understanding a problem—that is, having a *mystery* on our hands—means that we will not know how to fix it. Or even if the inquiry is not directed toward a problem that needs to be fixed, still we want to *understand* it as clearly and distinctly as we can. And theologians often find themselves fitted into this mold, especially by students and others who are curious about religion and who want to understand and master it as they have understood and mastered other areas of knowledge.

But we would do well to consider “theology” from another angle. The word “theology” comes originally from two Greek words, *theos* and *logos*. Consider the latter first. *Logos* is the Greek word for “word.” It can refer to the word on a page, or the word whispered in the ear, or the word formulated in the mind but unexpressed. Of course, a word is not simply an arbitrary arrangement of sounds or letters. “Book” is a word because it *means* something: the thing you are currently reading. And “pook” is not a word because it does not mean anything (except in some privately developed language, in which it becomes a word precisely by being assigned a meaning). So *logos* refers not simply to the word as written or spoken or thought, but to the *meaning* of the word. Indeed, since meaning often attaches to words only in particular contexts or clauses or sentences, *logos* implies not just a meaningful word, but a larger meaningful setting in which meaningful words have their meaning. This larger setting could be a sentence, or a paragraph, or an essay, or a focused body of literature. Thus *logos* is extended to refer not just to a meaningful word about something, but also to the whole mass of words that come together to form a coherent arena of discourse that one might study—for instance, “socio-*logy*,” which is the study of social forces, or “psycho-*logy*,” which is the study of the inner person (Greek, *psyche*).

But now let us go one step further. *Logos* refers not only to a word, or to the meaning of the word, or to the larger world of discourse that supports that meaning, but also to the human faculty that is able to grasp that meaning—to reason or rationality. This connection is revealed in the link between the Greek *logos* and our English word “logic.” It is no accident that many human cultures have regarded our capacity to reason, to perceive and work with meaning, as a defining trait of humanity. As we begin to reason, to think in an integrated or coherent fashion, about a thing, we bring to bear on that thing what is central to our humanness. We apply *ourselves* to it in a way that

brings out the fullest understanding, appreciation, and response. The word *logos* suggests this full, complete engagement of me in the rich depth of my humanness. But full engagement with what?

In the case of theology, with *theos*, with “God.” The Greek term need not imply a capital G, since a household deity or an idol may be a *theos*. But when Christians use the word “theology,” no such diminished association is tolerable. Moreover, the one God whom Christians wish to study is no mere item of interest, however complex; no impersonal object, however alive or active. God, according to Christianity, is the supreme Subject, not just a person, but *the* Person, from whom all other persons—including the studier!—are derived. It may be that *logos* rightly applies itself to all sorts of objects to understand and appreciate them, but here human *logos* is summoned to its highest challenge, and it promises to be fully outstripped.

Does this work of theology sound like a simple quest to get the correct answers about a certain subject matter? Or like an effort to understand a thing in order to solve problems? Surely not. Persons are never problems to be solved (even if, in our weaker moments, we are tempted to treat them as if they were). A man wants to understand his wife not so that he can fix her, but so that he can love her. He wants to appreciate her more fully, to perceive intricate subtleties and beauties that are not readily evident to a superficial glance. Indeed, if his marriage needs “fixing,” it is very likely to be because he has spent more time trying to fix his wife than trying to know and love her. If this is true of a relationship between human persons whose life and significance are on par with one another, how much more will it be when we as creatures approach the Person who is the living God, the source of all created personhood?

If theology is really to involve the fullest *logos* applied to the truest *theos*, then it begins to look as if “getting the right answers” or “solving the puzzles” cannot be the authentic task of the theologian. There will, of course, be “right answers.” To abandon the distinction between truth and falsehood would be not to maximize *logos*, but to sacrifice it from the very outset. Yet the rightness of the answers will have to consist in something more than descriptive fidelity, since there will be no ordinary, created object to be simplistically described. God is not a puzzle, and to relate rightly to him is not to analyze or classify or master, but to worship. It is in this spirit that the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition has always insisted that, while correct theological formulations are crucial to one’s being a Christian, no amount of correct formulating can make one a theologian. A theologian, in the technical sense, is a person who has *seen the very face of God*. Following such a definition might quickly thin the ranks of “theologians” in our seminaries and colleges.

Even if we set aside such a technical designation, we are still aware that the goal of genuine theology is not to solve puzzles, but to know God. And if God is in fact the kind of reality that Christians have proclaimed him to

be, then there can be no conflict between the pursuit of “theology” and the reality of “mystery.” Indeed, it might start to surprise us that the two would ever have been separated in the first place. Mystery must always be reckoned with in theological reflection. Of course, there are different ways of “reckoning” with mystery, some more philosophically nuanced, others more popular or experiential. But whatever approach one adopts, the reason Christians want to understand the mystery of God is not merely that they may set the metaphysical record straight, but that they may live and worship well—and life and worship depend on a right relation to a divine person more than on a right analysis of cosmic metaphysics.

So, to repeat, the task of this book is to explicate the notion of mystery theologically. The goal is not merely that we should get our theological formulations right, but also and more significantly that we should get ourselves right; not that we should master theology, but that we should be mastered by the *theos* whom theology must approach. To borrow another image from C. S. Lewis, we may say that theology is like a map: its purpose lies not in itself but in where it can get us to.<sup>3</sup> In a word, the goal of theology is *worship*, and our contention is that no theology that is not ultimately oriented toward the living, obedient worship of God can be fully or finally satisfying.

## Guiding Assumptions and Overall Plan

It might be wise here at the outset to spell out a few of the guiding assumptions that underlie this book. In the first place, as already noted and as will become clear as the work proceeds, we as authors and (prospective) theologians are committed to the distinction between truth and falsehood in matters theological. We are sensitive to the dangers of a mysticism that, as the old quip goes, begins in “mist,” centers in “I,” and ends in “schism.” In particular, while there may be a certain “mist” in approaching any God worthy of the name, this cannot be a mist that confuses Creator with creature, or that undermines the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy, or that otherwise casts aside the “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3 NKJV). We believe that there is a genuine, full-blooded truth to be articulated, and any approach to mystery that loses the truthfulness of theology has fundamentally missed the mark.

Second, we believe that the truth theology seeks is normatively displayed in the biblical texts that God himself has given to the people of God. No attempt will be made here to defend the divine inspiration of these texts, but we do take it for granted, and we seek an understanding of the mystery of God that grows out of and is faithful to God’s revelation of himself in his Word.

Third, our approach to theological mystery attempts to take seriously not only what God has revealed in the biblical texts but also what God has

3. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (1952; repr., New York: Simon & Schuster, 1980), 136.

explicated in the history and tradition of the church. Neither of us is prepared to say that Tradition (with a capital *T*) is infallible, and in this respect we show our roots in Protestant evangelicalism. Indeed, the book is addressed largely, though not exclusively, to fellow evangelicals. Yet we think it would be very, very surprising if some “self-evident” truth of Scripture, having been overlooked or distorted or obscured by millions of faithful, God-fearing, Bible-believing Christians for two millennia, should suddenly become plain to some solitary Christian who, after reading his or her Bible, is thereby endowed with the authority to correct the historic errors of Christendom. It is *possible* that such a thing could happen, but we think appeal to Scripture *against* the historic testimony of the church ought to be a last resort—and one that we have not been driven to here. Whether one thinks of tradition as a “source” of theology or not, it seems to us that it certainly should be regarded as a crucial “re-source” for theology.<sup>4</sup>

In this respect, our approach to theology is likely to be more irenic in spirit than some readers will appreciate. Convinced of the Spirit’s ongoing guidance of God’s people wherever and whenever they are located, we wish to take seriously the theological conclusions of *all* of God’s people whenever the opportunity presents itself. Part of the reason a proper understanding of divine mystery seems to us to be so valuable is that it allows us to understand why different groups of Christians can see certain theological truths in such wildly different ways, or can even see different theological truths altogether—and it allows us to understand this phenomenon without always having to relegate one or the other of the competing views to the scrap heap, with a pious, “Ah, they must not have loved God as much as we do, or God would not have let them be deluded into such a heinous error.” There is, of course, such a thing as “theological error” (see our first assumption above), and it is undoubtedly possible for Christians to fall into it. Indeed, which of us wishes to insist too confidently that he or she is entirely immune? Nevertheless, it is a grave matter to say of a long-standing, Christ-honoring, fruit-producing tradition that it is really just such-and-such a heresy. Perhaps it is so, but we think it important to ask whether there are other, more plausible explanations of theological diversity.

Partly for this reason, we hope that readers who would not describe themselves as evangelicals will still find the book to be instructive and enriching. Our aim, as we understand it, is not a narrowly evangelical one, but one common to all of orthodox Christianity for the last two millennia.

The overall plan of the book is simple, and it builds directly on the metaphor introduced above. God, according to Christianity of every stripe, is the supreme mystery, a blinding sun too bright to look at, but the source of

4. This formulation is that of Gabriel Fackre, *The Christian Story: A Narrative Interpretation of Basic Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 20.

illumination that allows us to see everything else on the landscape. In part 1, we shall investigate this “blinding sun” and attempt to articulate an understanding of God that does justice to this central feature of the divine reality. In part 2, we shall turn our attention to the landscape that this sun illuminates. From a wide variety of possibilities, we have chosen several theological loci at which we think the nature of God as mystery influences theological conclusions deeply. Some of these loci are relatively standard points at which divine mystery is often invoked (e.g., the incarnation); others are more controversial (e.g., the nature of salvation).

All of part 2 is intended to be suggestive and provocative, to invite conversation and interaction, and in this sense part 2 is less definite or conclusive than part 1. This might seem odd, insofar as it is in part 1 that we deal with mystery itself, and one would expect this discussion to be the less definite one. But it is not so. The *reality* of mystery is very definite indeed. It is the precise *application* of mystery to our intellectual and practical lives that will prompt the real questions for most of us. These questions are made all the more pressing by the distressing fact that it is sinners who are asking them, and to be a sinner is inevitably to be more or less confused and more or less self-destructive. So our effort in part 2 is to examine, sometimes more theoretically and sometimes more practically, how the reality of mystery turns out to be relevant to the concrete ways we redeemed sinners do theology in our families, in our churches, in our academic institutions, and in our world. We hope that perceiving this relevance can lead all of us to a theological posture that is increasingly more humble and confident and reverent: more humble, because it gladly acknowledges that the God it approaches is past finding out; more confident, because it has finally ceased to rely on perfect dogmatic completion for its assurance; and more reverent, because it sees clearly that the aim of all theology is not that our answers may be correct, but that our hearts may be bowed in rightful worship.



Part 1

The  
SUN



# 1

## *The* MEANING of MYSTERY

Mystery is the vital element of Dogmatics. . . . Dogmatics is concerned with nothing but mystery, for it does not deal with finite creatures, but from beginning to end raises itself above every creature to the Eternal and Endless One himself.

Herman Bavinck<sup>1</sup>

We are not now discussing possible ways of understanding the text. . . . It can only be understood in ways beyond words; human words cannot suffice for understanding the Word of God. What we are discussing and stating is why it is not understood. I am not speaking in order that it may be understood but telling you what prevents it being understood.

Augustine<sup>2</sup>

1. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. and ed. William Hendriksen (1951; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 13.

2. Augustine, Sermon 117.3 (WSA 3 4:210), quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: John 1–10* (New Testament IVa), ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 10.

There are many ways to describe the sort of project that this book undertakes, and the word “mystery” would not necessarily appear in many of them. We have chosen the term both because it is commonly used in theology and also—perhaps even more so—because of its open-endedness. It definitely points to something, but to something that is not immediately clear, or rather to something that is clear precisely in a depth or an intensity or an immensity that makes even its clarity hard to pin down. In this way, “mystery” seems to open us up to . . . well . . . we do not quite know what it opens us up to. To something exciting and stimulating, no doubt, but also to something challenging and perhaps a bit frightening. We do not really know what is in store. And this is exactly where a fully Christian understanding of God should begin.

However, the term “mystery” has certain drawbacks, most notably the fact that it is used very flexibly in the English language. So we must begin by clarifying what we mean by it, so that we can then go on to describe (as best we can) the majestic God to whom it points.

## Not Knowing and Knowing

We may distinguish no fewer than five significantly different senses in which the word “mystery” is used, and these different senses involve very different approaches to the mystery of the living God. All of these different meanings have something in common: they all refer to that which, in the language of Webster’s dictionary, “resists or defies explanation.” But things can resist or defy explanation in many ways, for many reasons, and with many responses expected.

First, and perhaps most obviously, a “mystery” might simply be *an intriguing puzzle*. We already noted this usage in our introduction. In this case, “mystery” refers to a state of affairs in which something is unknown and must be figured out, as expressed paradigmatically in detective fiction. This sort of mystery defies explanation in the sense that we do not yet have enough information to allow us to see the whole picture. We have certain clues, but they are not numerous or detailed enough to allow the sort of comprehensive explanation that would solve the puzzle, so that the true criminal can be arrested. To solve the puzzle, we (or the detectives) must do more investigating—and so we might refer to mystery in this sense as “investigative mystery.” The whole goal is to investigate and thus to solve the puzzle, to know what happened. This sense of “mystery” is often at work even when strange or uncanny phenomena are involved, as when we speak of the Bermuda Triangle or of the origins of Stonehenge as “mysteries” (though there may be other factors at work here as well). These are things that we do not fully understand, but we are trying to understand. By means of available clues and creative thinking, we are trying to solve the puzzle.

Now some people who have a philosophical bent are interested in investigating the “mystery of God” in just this way. There is currently much discussion among philosophers of religion about the so-called hiddenness of God—that is, about the apparent lack of evidence for the existence of God. “Why is God hidden?” they ask. Some critics of Christianity argue that the hiddenness of God is a strong argument that God (in the traditional sense) does not exist at all; many Christians argue that the evidence for God’s existence is available to those who are willing to see it, or that there are good reasons for the evidence to be as ambiguous as it seems to be.<sup>3</sup> Pretty clearly, thinkers on both sides of this debate are dealing with the hiddenness of God as a mystery in the investigative sense. There is something to be discovered, a question to be answered: Does God exist? We have certain bits of evidence, certain clues, that we must put together into a comprehensive explanation, and we are trying to show that one comprehensive explanation (say, the theistic one) is better than the others.

This philosophical discussion is a significant one for many people, both Christian and non-Christian, but we will not be pursuing it here. Our point is simply to note the *kind* of mystery that is involved, namely, an investigative mystery, in which the aim is to solve the puzzle. But let us consider a second and very different sense of “mystery.”

According to the most common (though not the only) biblical usage, “mystery” denotes *a marvelous plan or purpose that God has revealed* for creation. The emphasis on revelation is particularly significant, for in Scripture a “mystery” is almost always something that has been made known. Even in cases where the investigative sense is still present, such as when the young prophet Daniel must interpret the mystery (*rāz*) of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream (Dan. 2:18), the mystery ends up not being solved but being “revealed” (see Dan. 2:19, 30, 47; see also Rev. 1:20; 17:7). This connection to revelation is even more forceful in the New Testament, where, for instance, Jesus speaks of the apostles as those who have “been given the mystery [*mystērion*]<sup>4</sup> of the kingdom of God” (Mark 4:11 NASB). Jesus is not saying that the apostles have been given a puzzle to solve or a question to answer. If anything, the mystery *is* the answer, so that the apostles are, so to speak, “in on the secret.”

Yet oddly enough, the mystery remains a mystery as well, and so it is not just a “secret.” This is both surprising and crucial. If the kingdom were simply a secret in the normal sense, then the apostles, having been “given” the secret, would be among the insiders—they would be “in the know.” Therefore,

3. Recent discussion has been occasioned, or at least given fresh impetus, by J. L. Schellenberg’s *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), which makes the case that the phenomenon of hiddenness itself provides compelling evidence that the Judeo-Christian God does not exist. For a fine sampling of the ongoing debate from many of its most significant participants, see Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul K. Moser, eds., *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

4. Or “mysterries”—see the parallels in Matt. 13:11 and Luke 8:10 (NASB), where the plural, *mystēria*, is used.

although the mystery would still be mysterious *to others*, it would no longer be mysterious *to them*—it would no longer defy *their* reason. Yet this is clearly not what we find in the Gospels, for the apostles go through most of the gospel story utterly confused and befuddled by the mystery that they now supposedly know. True, part of their problem is no doubt that their conventional Jewish expectations about the kingdom continue to lead them astray. But note that even as the story continues, even after the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, even after the apostles have begun to preach Christ with all boldness and authority, the mystery remains a mystery. The apostle Paul, who explicitly insists that to him “the mystery was made known . . . by revelation” (Eph. 3:3 NRSV) and whose whole commission is precisely to make known “the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed” (Col. 1:26 NRSV)—even this apostle is happily ready to confess, “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33 NRSV). For Paul, the marvelous plan of God is not an investigative mystery that is solved once it is communicated. Instead it is communicated precisely *as* a mystery.

This usage persists with some consistency all through the New Testament, as various aspects of mystery, or various related mysteries, are specified: the hardening of Israel is a mystery (Rom. 11:25); the final resurrection of the dead is a mystery (1 Cor. 15:51); the summing up of all things in Christ is a mystery (Eph. 1:9); the inclusion of the gentiles in the church is a mystery (Eph. 3:4, 9); the union of husband and wife as a picture of Christ and the church is a mystery (Eph. 5:32); “Christ in you, the hope of glory” is a mystery (Col. 1:27); “Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” is “God’s mystery” (Col. 2:2–3 NRSV). In every one of these passages, mystery is linked decisively with its revelation, its being made known, and yet the mystery does not cease to be mysterious as a result. The mystery is in some sense established, not eliminated or solved, by its revelation. We shall refer to this somewhat paradoxical biblical usage as “revelational mystery.” A revelational mystery is one that remains a mystery even after it has been revealed. It is precisely in its revelation that its distinctive character as mystery is displayed.

Now one is immediately struck by the contrast between this second sense of mystery and the first, for an investigative mystery revolves very intentionally around what is *unknown*, whereas a revelational mystery revolves around what is *known*. The whole fascination of a detective story lies in trying to solve the puzzle, and when one knows the solution the mystery is dissolved—it is no longer a mystery; it has lost its mainspring. But the fascination of many of the New Testament mysteries lies in their peculiar character even after they have been revealed. This unusual character explains why the response appropriate to revelational mysteries is so distinctive. A revelational mystery excites

wonder, awe, amazement, astonishment. Think again about the mysteries that pertain to the gospel. We understand the good news, and yet it continues to overwhelm us by its elaborate intricacy, its unanticipated beauty, its stunningly benevolent glory. This is the way a revelational mystery works: we know, and yet the mystery remains.

## Varieties of Revelational Mystery

It is not very hard to see how the mystery of God can be construed as a revelational mystery, since Scripture itself establishes the precedent. Yet we must now go a bit deeper, for it turns out that there are important differences among varying kinds of revelational mystery. Consider this question: What is it that would allow something that is known to remain a mystery nevertheless? The three possible answers to this question will introduce our three remaining senses of “mystery.”

One possibility is that what is made known in the revelation is simply too extensive or too complicated to be drawn coherently together. Thus, we might speak, thirdly, of “extensive mystery” and use this phrase to refer to a *quantitative inexhaustibility*, a magnitude or an internal complexity that puts some proposed objects of knowledge out of reach. The marvelous elaborateness or beauty of the gospel seems to signal a kind of extensive mystery, but we also find this sense in much more prosaic contexts. “The workings of this DVD player are a mystery to me” means that the inner mechanisms of the contraption are so complicated and intricate that we cannot make sense of them. We can probably understand some aspects of the gadget; we might be able to understand any of its particular aspects if it is properly explained. But we find ourselves unable to hold these many particular aspects together in any way that would count as comprehensive “understanding.”

We have referred to extensive mystery as “quantitative” in nature. Of course, an investigative mystery is quantitative too, but only in the sense that an *insufficient* quantity of information is available. This paucity of information is exactly why the mystery is not yet solved. With extensive mystery, however, we have an *excess* of information. It is all available; it has all been made known—but it is too much for us to grasp. Of course, this excess is often relative to the personal characteristics of the knower. The DVD player that is a mystery to an academic may not be too much for an electronics whiz kid. Yet every finite person, however brilliant or gifted, will reach a limit at some point, and it is at just this point that a mystery in this third sense materializes. An extensive mystery, therefore, defies explanation because of our limitation as knowers—because of what philosophers call our “epistemological” limitation (from the Greek word for “knowledge”). Unlike investigative mystery, the difficulty here results not from a lack of information, but from our inability to take it all in.

Now the mystery of God can easily be understood in this quantitative or extensive way too. Christianity insists that God has revealed himself—yet he nevertheless remains “too much to take in.” There are always new and unforeseen facets to be explored, new elements to be considered. And of course, this is hardly surprising. God is, after all, infinite, and we are finite, and so it makes great sense to say that the mystery of God is an extensive mystery.

Yet one wonders whether the quantitative explanation is the whole story. Do we really want to say that knowledge of God is like other knowledge, except that God is bigger or more complex than other things? To put it crassly, do we call God a mystery for the same reason that we call the DVD player a mystery? It seems that something else must be going on. It is not only that there is *too much* of God for us to grasp. There is also something about the *nature* of God that seems ungraspable. Even when we say that God is “infinite,” we seem to mean something more than quantitative extension, for one does not get to infinity by adding a little more and a little more. In this sense, infinity itself is *qualitatively* different from finitude. If this is so, then the thing that keeps us from exhausting the mystery of God cannot be only our epistemological limits. God is not just beyond our limits; God is *limitless*. An adequate account of the mystery of God, then, ought to be not just extensive or quantitative. It must also include qualitative elements.

So let us turn to a fourth sense, one that might be more attractive to many evangelicals. People sometimes use the term “mystery” to refer to a certain *nonrational opaqueness* in some experiences, a qualitative uniqueness that rules out rational explaining or “knowing” in the nature of the case. We might give to this kind of mystery the inelegant name of “facultative mystery,” for its central feature is that it seems somehow to resist rational, analytical investigation and to call instead for some nonrational avenue of approach—that is, for approach by means of a different, nonrational human faculty.

Of course, such a careful, precise description of this sort of mystery already seems too analytical. The whole point is that a mystery like this does not lend itself to *thinking*. Consider, for example, what is sometimes described as the “mystery of suffering.” Everyone “knows” (in the normal, rational sense) what it is to suffer, but “knowing” is not really the point. The mystery that is involved is not connected to a rational “knowing,” but to the existential reality of the suffering itself. Or in the religious sphere, consider what is often referred to as “mystical” experience, what Rudolf Otto has taught us to call experience of the “numinous.” We find ourselves confronted with a distinctive, inimitable, and somehow sacred phenomenon that cannot be mastered by a description or an analysis. Explanation is impossible not because of too little or too much information, not for any quantitative reason, but because the quality of the thing does not allow that kind of approach. The reality cannot be boiled down into neat, rational propositions—or even into words that have definite, clear-cut meanings. The attempt to “explain” the experience, or the

thing experienced, leaves us with the feeling that we have missed its essence. We have not explained; we have explained away—and all of the sweetness has vanished as a result.

Now, this facultative understanding of the mystery of God seems to be very common among evangelicals, and for good reason. Even if we are suspicious of what sometimes passes for “mysticism,” we all want Christians not merely to know facts or doctrines *about* God, but to know God himself, in some sort of personal experience. In this respect, lived experience trumps mere analytical understanding every time. Jesus offers Nicodemus not doctrinal instruction but new birth (John 3); Paul comes to the Corinthians not with intellectual achievements but with spiritual power (1 Cor. 2). Along these same lines, many of the more liturgical Christian traditions have emphasized the significance, for instance, of beauty as a religious category, such that medieval cathedrals or contemporary stained glass, Orthodox iconography or Wesleyan hymnody, all provide nonrational means through which God communicates with his people. All of this reminds us that God is not to be analyzed or explained but received and embraced. The facultative mystery of God is exactly that living, experiential embrace that transcends a dry intellectualism and that engages the whole person with existential depth instead.

Yet common as this approach is, it too has its limitations. For one thing, a facultative mystery, by its very definition, excludes approach by means of reason—and it thereby excludes theology in the traditional sense too, or at least sharply devalues it. Is this move really one that we want to make? Even if some evangelicals find themselves less than enthusiastic about theology as a polemical academic discipline, to question the legitimacy of the theological enterprise in this wholesale fashion would put us seriously out of step with the church throughout the ages. Many of the Christians throughout history who have gone deepest in the spiritual life have also been articulate exponents and ardent defenders of the doctrinal framework that supported their spirituality (one thinks of the apostle Paul, for instance). In other words, it is not as though rationally cogent doctrine were one thing and the mystery of God were another. The two seem to interpenetrate in ways that construing the mystery of God only in the facultative sense cannot account for.

Furthermore, there is an additional loss, and perhaps a surprising one, in understanding the mystery of God exclusively in the facultative sense. For if, in one respect, associating mystery exclusively with nonrational experience tends to devalue theology, yet in another it tends to devalue mystery itself. Consider: Nonrational opaqueness is really an aspect not just of certain extraordinary religious experiences but of *all* experience as such. We can think about what a rose is or about how our noses work when we smell a rose, but that is not at all the same as *experiencing* a rose, as actually smelling it. The concrete experience of smelling is an utterly irreducible, nonrational phenomenon, one that no amount of thinking and analyzing and understanding can ever

provide. And in this sense it is a facultative mystery. Thus we come to the problem. While construing the mystery of God as facultative does allow God to be mysterious, all of our other experiences, even the most commonplace, turn out to be mysterious in just the same way. Strictly speaking, every time we catch the aroma of old sneakers or feel a splinter in our finger or hear the horn of an automobile on the highway, we have run up against what is by definition a facultative mystery, a unique, nonrational definiteness that cannot be reduced to mere logical propositions. But, to parallel a question asked a few paragraphs ago, do we really want to maintain that God is a mystery in the same sense that the smell of old sneakers is a mystery? It begins to look as if the facultative approach, by associating mystery simply with what is nonrational, makes the mystery of God something *outside* of reason, but not really something *beyond* reason.

There is yet another difficulty. By assuming that our encounter with God cannot be mediated by reason, this approach implies that the encounter must be mediated by some other human faculty—by some other aspect of our humanness *that is more adequate to the task*. But is there such an aspect? How could there be? What organ or capacity or element in us could possibly be adequate to perceive or to convey the living God in all his fullness? Feeling? Aesthetic awareness? Conscience? Sensation? Intuition? Some distinctive “religious faculty”? If reason is not adequate to the task, what human capacity is *more* adequate? This is a very important point, for in discussions of divine mystery, one often hears appeal to feeling over thinking, or to the rather indefinite “heart” over the all-too-definite “head”—as if emotional or intuitive or generally “heartfelt” commerce with God were not subject to the same frailness as intellectual commerce. But surely every human faculty that confronts the divine mystery will ultimately prove to be insufficient. The mystery of God, in its truest sense, will be great enough and terrible enough to surpass them all.

And so we come to our fifth sense of “mystery,” one more radical and therefore more elusive and difficult to portray, but one that will be crucial for the remainder of this book. Let us begin with an analogy. Picture in your mind a simple, everyday circle. A circle is not, by ordinary geometrical standards, a very mysterious thing. It does not typically resist or defy explanation. On the contrary, with only a rather minimal knowledge of two-dimensional geometry, you could make all sorts of precise, even exhaustive mathematical statements about it, about its area or its circumference or whatever, and then there would not be much more to know about it. Reason (i.e., the logic of mathematics) clearly does apply here, and with its application mystery is largely eliminated.

But consider now another sense in which a particular circle might be a mystery. Suppose the circle in question is not just a circle; suppose it is one end of a cylinder. And suppose further that we called in an expert geometer

who happened to be what Edwin Abbott used to call a “Flatlander,” that is, a two-dimensional person who lives in and perceives only two dimensions (length and width but not depth). Now we are faced with a very different situation. The two-dimensional geometer can attend with all diligence to the figure before him. He can make all of the same calculations about this figure that we mentioned before. In principle he can know everything two-dimensional that there is to know about it. Yet for this Flatlander, there is still “more” about the figure that remains outside of his two-dimensional perception, namely, the third dimension, which makes this figure not just a circle but a cylinder.

Now this additional dimension constitutes a very peculiar kind of “more,” one not easily susceptible of rational explanation for our two-dimensional friend, and hence a kind of mystery. Indeed, unless he took our word for it, it is hard to see how he could know what this odd thing called a “cylinder” with its additional dimension of “depth” even is. How should we try to explain it? There is here no quantitative excess in the normal two-dimensional sense: This is not the “more” that an additional circle or a nearby rectangle would provide. Neither does this “more” refer to some qualitative otherness that would make geometrical reasoning irrelevant. The “more” of the three-dimensional cylinder involves an unanticipated overthrow of all of the categories that a two-dimensional geometer has available. It is a radical transcendence not just of the individual circle but of two-dimensional geometry itself.

This analogy points us to our fifth and final sense of mystery, which we shall call “dimensional mystery.” A dimensional mystery is characterized by *an unclassifiable superabundance* that transcends but does not invalidate rational exploration. Rational exploration is certainly possible, and yet it is pursued in light of a deeper or denser or more complex substantiality than reason is familiar with.

Clear or uncontroversial examples are harder to come by here than with our other kinds of mystery, for the very good reason that every instance can, in principle, be rejected as simple nonsense—just as a two-dimensional geometer might reject the whole apparently self-contradictory notion of cylinders. Thus the only really *clear* instances of dimensional mystery will be those hypothetical instances that show us how a lesser consciousness—one that lacks some perspective or capacity that normal human consciousness possesses—would be unable to see something that is perfectly obvious to us. The two-dimensional consciousness of a Flatlander is one such hypothetical example.

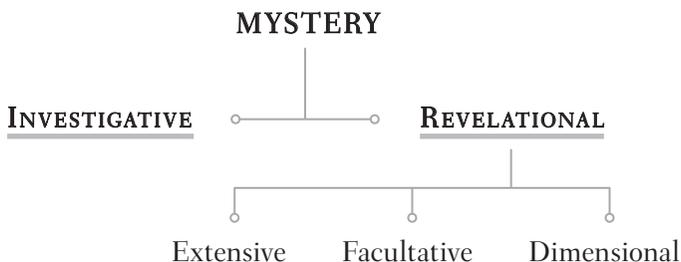
A similar example might be drawn from an imaginative consideration of the symbolism that gives many literary masterpieces their enduring power. Consider Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. One could understand the play simply as a sad story about an ill-fated Danish family—indeed, one could give a reasonable account of the entire story in those terms. But when one perceives as well the inexorable destruction that vengeance wreaks on all who are

touched by it, one sees the story in a new light. The character Hamlet is now not just a man with whom to sympathize; he is also a living embodiment of vengeance, both as perpetrator and as victim. There is a greater significance or substantiality to Hamlet than the casual reader perceives. Thus the character is not just himself; he is also “more.” Of course, careful readers can understand these larger implications; we might even hesitate to think of this symbolism as a kind of mystery. But that is because we are the ones who create or perceive the story’s meaning. The characters in the story, by contrast, *are* the meaning, and that is a rather different thing. It seems likely that if Hamlet himself were ever to get a glimpse of the moral or even metaphysical “density” of his own character, he would find it very difficult to think through in any comprehensive way. For him, the term “mystery” might be a rather exact description.

What about actual, nonhypothetical instances of dimensional mystery? Even if they are likely to be disputed, we can recognize various cases where the word “mystery” is used in this fashion, especially in the sphere of religion. For example, the secretive cults of ancient Greece and Egypt known as “mystery religions” seem to have approached mystery in this way. Their mysteries were not just truths or propositions; they were in some sense powers, which granted the initiate access to higher worlds. Again, when Roman Catholics speak of the “mysteries of the rosary,” they have in mind events in the career of Christ (such as the nativity or the crucifixion) that serve as the subject for meditative prayer precisely because they have a kind of inexplicable and inexhaustible depth or power. Or again, many Christian traditions readily refer to sacramental practices and rites (especially the Lord’s Supper or Eucharist) as “mysteries,” and they mean that these practices are bearers of a significance or a power or a depth that goes beyond their obvious rational content. What one makes of any of these claims is an open question that will depend on one’s own theological leanings. But the kind of mystery that lies behind these claims is evidently dimensional.

With this last label in place, our proposed taxonomy of the various “kinds” of mystery is now complete, and it can be handily summarized in the following diagram.

Figure 1 – Kinds of Mystery



And now we are in a position (at last) to think with some degree of clarity about the subject of this book. When we speak of “mystery” from now on, we are speaking of a revelational mystery that is dimensional in character—that is, of a mystery that is impenetrable even after it is revealed, not by virtue of its quantitative magnitude, nor by virtue of its existential uniqueness, but by virtue of an unimaginable depth or density that transcends our rational capacities and all of our other capacities as well. And to speak of the “mystery of God” is to insist that, for finite creatures like ourselves, God the Creator, the living God of Christian faith, is just this kind of mystery.

## A Hopeless Endeavor?

But wait. It seems that we have a problem. If God really is this sort of mystery, this “unclassifiable superabundance,” then a book whose subject is this God looks to be a very precarious enterprise indeed. For we must admit from the outset that we have no capacity, no resource of any kind, for bridging the gulf between ourselves and that unimaginable “other” that we wish to know. In fact, it appears that our whole interest in “knowing” God has been utterly sabotaged by the nature of the God we must know. On this view, God turns out to be not just mysterious but sheerly and absolutely unknowable. If God is a mystery in this radical sense, must we not simply confess our ignorance and remain silent?

The answer is no. Human reason *can* and *should* be applied to God. If this sounds like an audacious claim in view of what we have discussed so far, then read on, for the next several chapters will investigate the claim more carefully. But even now, consider three points.

First, recall that the dimensional mystery of God is a species of revelational mystery. That is to say, our affirmation that God is a mystery depends not on what we do *not* know (this would be an investigative mystery), but on what we *do* know. The mystery of God has been revealed. It is true that it has been revealed *as* a mystery, but its ongoing character as mystery in no way undermines the efficacy of the revelation itself. We might find it difficult—indeed, we *shall* find it difficult—to understand exactly how “knowledge” and “mystery” relate to one another in the matter called “knowing the mystery of God,” but the one thing we cannot do is to begin using “mystery” in a despairingly investigative sense, as describing our sheer, hopeless ignorance. In the nature of the case, a revelational mystery cannot be hopeless in this fashion. It carries within it the hint that mystery and rational knowledge are not opposed in quite the obvious, straightforward way we might initially expect.

Second, as we have noted above and will see in more detail in chapters 2 and 3, both Scripture and subsequent Christian history are chock-full of men and women whose zealous commitment to God involved exactly this

juxtaposition of mystery and knowledge. From the books of Moses, from the Prophets, from the Gospels, from the Epistles, from the church fathers, from medieval theologians, from the Protestant Reformers, from contemporary evangelicals, the overwhelming picture one gets is of a faith that knows God and simultaneously confesses that God is beyond knowledge. Once again, it might be hard to pull these two elements together with unqualified consistency, but that they belong together the whole Christian witness seems to demand.

Third, perhaps surprisingly, Scripture and traditional Christian theology give us some important tools for understanding how the gulf between finite knowers and the infinite God can be faced with good hope. As we will see in chapter 4, the God who is beyond knowledge *intends* for us to know him and offers no little guidance in this provocative endeavor. To regard real knowledge of God as impossible would be to ignore much of what God has told us about ourselves and how we should live our lives.

All three of these considerations suggest that, while we have good grounds for expecting that reason will be unable to master God the Creator, we also have good grounds for believing that reason should not be abandoned as vain or worthless. No doubt one could say the same about emotion, or about intuition, or about sensation, or about any other human faculty. None will straightforwardly apply, yet none is straightforwardly ruled out. Or, to put the same thing in a more positive light, every faculty may approach God. But every faculty must approach God as God—and this means that every faculty should expect to be overwhelmed and undone by a supremacy that cannot be mastered. Since this is a book of theology, we focus on the rational faculty that engages in theological reflection. Reason, too, comes before the mystery legitimately, but she comes as a petitioner seeking her Lord's bounty, not as a judge demanding a satisfactory explanation.

This odd juxtaposition of legitimacy and humility challenges us to be on the lookout for two opposite theological errors as we proceed. We will need to avoid *both* an arrogant rationalism that denies the unspeakable greatness of God and thus loses mystery altogether, and an anti-intellectual irrationalism that affirms mystery so quickly and uncritically that reason itself is undermined. Most of us probably judge one of these two errors to be the more pressing danger for contemporary believers, but it is worth noting that either one seriously cripples historic Christianity.

Furthermore, note that these two errors tend to feed upon each other in a perilously polarizing fashion. Some Christians, disenchanted with a lifeless dogmatics in which Scripture is taken as a divine fact-book that provides quick, final answers to every question, tend to be wary of "doctrine" and "theology" and to prefer the joyous life of the Spirit. Fearing the first error (rationalism), they have fallen into the second (irrationalism). Other Christians, perceiving the volatility and creeping relativism that lie hidden in experience-driven "spirituality," tend to emphasize ever more vehemently the historic, doctrinal

center of the faith and are hesitant about any kind of “vision” that goes deeper. Trying to avoid the second error (irrationalism), they have been ensnared by the first (rationalism). Each group sets out, quite rightly, to defend the real lifesaving gospel against the misreading perpetrated by the other side. They are like sailors battling to right a listing ship. The question is, to which side is the ship leaning? If to starboard, then those sailors who are shifting cargo to the port side of the deck are rescuing the ship. But if to port, then those same sailors moving the cargo to port are not the solution but the problem! In the same way, there are plenty of evangelicals in the twenty-first century on both sides of the theological ship, denouncing their counterparts on the other side. We tend to rush madly to our own side of the swaying deck, not perceiving that a ship can capsizes in either of two directions.

### Enlisting the Imagination

But what else is one to do? How can one apply reason appropriately without applying it idolatrously? How can one bow before the mystery of God without simply acquiescing to every bit of nonsense that happens to have a bowed head? The narrow path between these two errors will no doubt prove difficult to stick to, and we as authors of this book are not at all certain that we have stuck to it perfectly at every turn. But it might be helpful to have in mind an imaginative picture or two that can bring both sides of our dual affirmation together and that can therefore remind us of both errors by reminding us of both truths. Let us suggest two such images, one very ancient, the other more contemporary.

The ancient image, which has made very common reappearance throughout the history of Christian thought, is based upon the metaphor of “seeing.” It is interesting to note that, while in principle every visible object can be seen (for that is what it means to be visible), it is another thing to say that *we can see* every visible object. In fact, there are some objects that we cannot see in any clear and prolonged sense, not because they are invisible, but because they are too bright for our gaze. The most common example is, of course, the bright noonday sun. The sun is visible, or at least it is not *invisible* in the common sense. Yet (as we noted in the introduction) this does not mean that we can readily see it, for its brightness dazzles our eyes, and if we do not turn away promptly we find ourselves unable to see anything whatsoever.

Now in every corner of Christian history, we find faithful Christians insisting that what the sun is to our eyes, God is to our reason. The living God is too bright for our minds to see. He dazzles us, and we are overcome. Does this make God “irrational” or “unintelligible”? Perhaps so, but only in the sense that the sun is “invisible.” If we say that the sun is “invisible,” we mean not that it is unavailable to our vision but that it overpowers our vision; not that

it cannot be seen but that it cannot steadfastly be looked at.<sup>5</sup> So also we might say that God is “irrational,” not in the sense of being below reason but in the sense of being beyond it. God is “unintelligible” only by virtue of a supreme intelligibility that is too great for our finite intellects to take in. The brilliance of the divine light makes all of our knowing into a mysterious “unknowing,” but it is an unknowing that is also a real knowing, just as having our eyes blinded by the noonday sun is the *result* of seeing, not the *absence* of seeing. Here is a metaphor that provides us with both of the elements that we need, both real knowledge and real mystery. Bearing it in mind might remind us that it is absolutely right for us to “look” rationally upon God, that God himself intends for us to look—yet we will not be surprised when we quickly have to look away as well.

The second imaginative picture is the metaphor of spatial dimensions referred to a few pages earlier, the image of two-dimensional persons trying to understand a three-dimensional figure. As we saw before, Flatlanders have none of the experiential machinery that would allow them to process sensibly the notion of a cylinder or a sphere or a cube. For them, such oddities will appear logically impossible—indeed, they *are* logically impossible so long as one is considering only two dimensions. Of course, we who live in three dimensions can easily understand these figures, but it is not hard for us to see why Flatlanders cannot, and so we are not surprised when they reject our three-dimensional “mysteries” as sheer nonsense.

But let us think now about a second group of Flatlanders who tend to be of the less skeptical variety. Suppose they simply took our word for it that there is a third dimension and that (say) six two-dimensional squares can come together to form a single three-dimensional figure called a “cube.” They do not understand how this is possible, but they are willing to recognize the limits of their reasoning and to accept this “mystery.” Might they not be tempted to take this revelation in the wrong way? “Ah,” they muse. “We always suspected that something like this was going on. The problem with that other group (silly rationalists!) is that they don’t realize that reason applies only in two dimensions. It is perfectly legitimate to combine and connect things in ‘irrational’ ways. Of course six squares can be combined into one figure! Or seven squares can be, or ten squares, or two hundred squares! Reason just doesn’t apply in that higher dimension.” Hearing a response like this, we might think that this second group has rather missed the point. They have imagined that three-dimensional space is a kind of irrational free-for-all in which “anything goes” because the restraints of reason are cast aside. In actuality, of course, this is not true. By strict rational necessity, six and only six squares can be combined into a single three-dimensional figure. The problem with Flatlanders’

5. This contrast is derived from Louis Bouyer, *The Invisible Father: Approaches to the Mystery of the Divinity*, trans. Hugh Gilbert (Petersham, MA: St. Bede’s, 1999), 140.

attempts to understand three dimensions is not that reason does not apply but that they do not know how to apply it.

Let us return to the mystery of God. If God himself is the supreme or foundational instance of dimensional mystery, then it seems that we ought to expect God to be both reasonable and beyond reason in some way analogous to this. The problem we will face as we address the reality of God is not that reason does not apply but that we do not know how to apply it. The things of God are not internally self-contradictory, but what we say about God *would* be self-contradictory if we were speaking of the ordinary things of this world. Now this is an awkward position to be in. For it means, on the one hand, that we cannot simply dispense with reason: We should not blithely tolerate any and every bit of foolishness that happens to cloak itself in the mantle of mystery. Yet on the other hand, it means that we cannot uncritically rely on reason either, for “God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom” (1 Cor. 1:25 NRSV), and we may very well encounter theological truths that are simply beyond reason, that appear to us as simply irrational.

Yet how can we tell the difference? There is no easy formula to answer that question. Certainly we shall have to consider the authority of any claim, how directly it is supported by God’s own revelation. We shall have to consider as well how it might be related logically to other truths that involve mystery. Perhaps above all, we shall have to ask how any proposition that claims to be beyond reason helps to make sense of larger matters, allowing us to grasp more of the truth of God with depth and coherence. In other words, does it “fit”? Recall C. S. Lewis’s observation that we know the bright noonday sun is in the sky not because we can see it but because by means of it we can see everything else. Does some purported theological mystery similarly allow us to “see everything else”? Would its being true shed light on other aspects of God and Scripture and the world and ourselves? When the answer is yes, we may (paradoxically) have good reason to say that we are dealing with something beyond reason.

Another way of saying the same thing, and of drawing this chapter to a close, is to say that while the mystery of God is by definition beyond rational comprehension, the *appeal* to mystery need not be. On the contrary, since God is not less than rational but more, our intention is never simply to jettison reason but to see—rationally—how God is exalted beyond it. If our argument is successful, we will often find ourselves saying, “Hmm. It seems that the acknowledgment of ‘mystery’ here really does make sense. If God is really God, then recognizing a limitation of reason at just this point is really the most rational thing we can do.”

But before we make particular claims like these, about particular aspects of Christian doctrine, we need to consider more fully how a Christian framework invites—or even requires—us to think in ways that include mystery. Is mystery really necessary? We turn next to a biblical answer to that question.