

A misty forest path with sunlight filtering through the trees. The path is narrow and leads into the distance, surrounded by lush green foliage and tall trees. The atmosphere is serene and ethereal.

*Geoffrey C. Bingham*

*The*  
**Glory of the Mystery**

*The*  
**Mystery of the Glory**

**The Glory of the Mystery  
&  
the Mystery of the Glory**

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Ah, Strong, Strong Love!*  
*All Things Are Yours*  
*Angry Heart or Tranquil Mind?*  
*Christ's Cross over Man's Abyss*  
*The Day of the Spirit*  
*The Everlasting Presence*  
*Great and Glorious Grace*  
*Oh, Father! Our Father!*  
*The Profound Mystery*  
*The Splendour of Holiness*  
*Sweeter than Honey, More Precious than Gold*  
*The Things We Firmly Believe*

**The Glory of the Mystery  
&  
the Mystery of the Glory**

**Geoffrey C. Bingham**

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# Foreword

Edmund Burke, in his book *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, has a striking sentence, ‘A clear idea is therefore another name for a little idea’. In the context in which he was writing—that of aesthetics—he was making the point of the mystery which comes through poetic utterance. Perhaps he means that the human spirit ascends where there is mystery, but remains static where ideas are clear, prosaic, and therefore not stimulative or evocative of deep thought and wonderment. He quotes a beautiful passage in the Book of Job to support his claim:

In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth  
on men,  
Fear came upon me, and trembling, which made all my bones to  
shake.  
Then a spirit passed before my face; the hair of my flesh stood up: It  
stood still, but I could not discern the form thereof: an image  
was before mine eyes, there was silence, and I heard a voice,  
saying,  
Shall mortal man be more just than God? (Job 4:13–17a, AV.)

Mystery of this kind causes the adrenalin to flow. An otherwise hidden world begins to open up. Job could not discern the image before his eyes. It is often so with art, music, poetry, and the like: we may discern in part, but cannot know objectively. Where there is no apparent

mystery, we would have to invent it, to wit, the allegories and fantasies we devise. No one can legitimately go beyond what is created, but then do we really comprehend all creation?

The Scriptures do not seem to us to be mysterious, since we can read and noetically understand every idea put forward, but in what we think we understand, there is, nevertheless, mystery. Christ said that in certain cases it has to be *given* to understand certain mysteries. That is, such mysteries cannot be understood by intellectual endeavour. Somewhere—and somehow—the heart and the will are involved in true comprehension. This is a baffling thought; namely, that such mysteries are not puzzles to be solved.

God is Himself the great mystery, and He retains the right to open up Himself and all concomitant mysteries, or to close them off. This is a fearful thought—that mysteries may be shut off from us, and we from them! This book is written in the hope of stimulating us to see that the Scriptures are not fragments of writings gathered from many authors, so that they are not essentially a unity, and can, by critical investigation, be shown to be of human origin alone.

Once we enter into the stream of the New Testament writers, it will emerge that there are many mysteries to be discovered. In another sense, it is we who are discovered by the mysteries. So many things which seem dull and factual, now open up as wonderful and stimulating revelations.

I am not at all sure that I have begun to do the subject justice, but at least reading this book may awaken us to seek to discover these mysteries. The conditions for doing this are also mentioned within the book. Whether we are far enough advanced in interest remains to be seen.

Without trying, here, to stimulate that interest, I simply leave it in the hands of the various readers. For myself, I can testify to the difference these mysteries have made in my life and my manner of living.



## CHAPTER ONE

# The Perpetual Puzzlement

There are things in life which puzzle us. That is an evident truism. Sometimes we feel we would like to solve the puzzles we meet, but often we cannot. As children we are often told by adults that when we reach adulthood, then we will understand. For us there was nothing quite so irritating as an adult telling us, 'You cannot understand now, but when you grow up you will'. Well, that may have been the case with some of our puzzles, but certainly not with them all. Some puzzles we forgot; others we ceased wanting to solve.

Many of our puzzles were simply mysteries to us. Many of them are still mysteries. We resign ourselves to remaining baffled. This book is written in the hope that we may at least solve the mystery of why mysteries are mysteries, and can never be solved, as such! At least some of them are mysteries, though not all. We normally see a mystery as something which remains hidden from us because we do not have the capacity to understand it. We recognise certain human limitations, and the limitations which are our personal ones. We think that perhaps someone with brilliance of mind may one day eventually solve what for us

has been a mystery. For example, we once asked, 'Who made God?', which was indeed a childish question, for whoever made God would be more than God. So we left the mystery unanswered.

What irritates or frustrates us is that, when we do come to understand a mystery, others seem not to be able to follow our reasoning and thus arrive at the same conclusions as we did. For our part, we worked hard to solve our puzzle, and others cannot grasp our understanding of it. This can be frustrating.

The human race, throughout its existence, has generally had a high regard for hierophants. A hierophant is a person who has been taught in the mysteries so that he can expound them and pass them on to others. Every culture has its hierophants, who go under the names of pundits, shamans, gurus and doctors. By 'doctor' we mean someone who is so learned that he can impart knowledge to the benefit of his hearers. We have witchdoctors and sorcerers who fall into this category, and whilst many of other cultures despise them, those within their cultures are often eager to lap up the learning given out by their hierophants. In some cultures they are called 'elders' because they have been initiated into the ancient wisdom of their tribes, and understand rites and ceremonies, and can impart their meaning. So, then, we conclude that human beings have always admired wisdom and sought to live by it. No culture can really be understood without the teaching of its leaders.

How leaders came by such knowledge, and whether it is true or not, will depend on the way the wisdom has been gathered. In many cases, secret knowledge has been accrued by experimentation such as in the use of herbs and medications. Rites may signify the ways of appeasing or pleasing the deities or spirits which are said to control the destinies of the human race. Superstition may arise from

strange happenings and the resultant interpretations of those happenings. Some rites or ceremonies make no sense to those trained in rational thinking and rational behaviour, even though they are intelligible to hierophants and their followers. Modern science seeks to establish a phenomenology of cultures and ancient wisdom in order to determine whether this wisdom contain some truth. For example, acceptable pharmacology is these days utilising herbal medicines and practices once said by it to be ineffective. We are surely correct in concluding that the garnered wisdom of millenniums cannot be wholly futile for the modern way of cultural living and indeed—in some cases—can be accepted as a useful and authentic source of knowledge for today. This is not to say that all that appears to be wisdom is necessarily true wisdom, that there is not quackery, manipulation, tyranny and overlording of us by elders, doctors and other hierophants. It has been said that attacking another person's cultural core assumptions will be received with hostility by the one attacked. We can live with most elements by which we have been acculturated. We rarely question them, or the hierophants who teach us. Cultural comfort can dull us to a reasonable, critical view of the way we live.

### **THE UNRESOLVED MYSTERIES**

It has been said that the greatest mystery, and the perpetual question for all humanity, is that of death. Death is the greatest certainty of life. It is the inevitable end. Some philosophers and religionists have proffered solutions, but



since these wise people all die, and in much the same way as do the most elevated hierophants, no rationalisation of death has ever carried much weight. Only one of these great teachers has claimed to have come through death to life, and that is the man Jesus of Nazareth. Later we will look at his claims in regard to his own person and works, but for the moment we will set him aside as the only one who could possibly provide some answer concerning death. Whilst death stands out prominently as a mystery, and as an unsolvable entity, yet there are other mysteries we would like to puzzle out to their solution.

The greatest mystery is God, and this is acknowledged by all except atheists and agnostics. Many seem to have simply dropped the idea of God, seeking to live to themselves and from themselves. They recognise, in a way, that if there be God, then He will be able to carry on unattended by the human race. Such thinkers prefer to do their thinking for themselves. Even so, circumstances, happenings, and even stray and unaccountable thoughts, often bring them to think about God. A recent writer titled his book, *God As the Mystery of the World*.<sup>1</sup> He was, of course, correct, but as a person who had delved into the mystery of God, he was able to write a book which can be read by many with a certain amount of satisfaction. I doubt whether he would think of himself as an outstanding hierophant. Probably he would set out one criterion for seekers like himself, namely the condition of humility of mind and heart. Listening with that humility, especially listening to the word which he would claim comes from God, might open another world to him.

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<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Jungel, *God As the Mystery of the World*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1983.

This leads us on to the heart of this book, the need to hear what is spoken by God, whose wisdom and knowledge outpaces that of any person, and whose love alone helps to make sense of the mystery of both life and death, of the creation and its innate catastrophes, as well as its beauties and surprises.

Having said this, I admit to being puzzled why it was that I, myself, could be satisfied with the mysteries which unfolded themselves to me, and yet why, when I delighted to tell them to others, most listeners would return only blank stares and even hard hostility. As far back as I can remember, that has been the case with me. Relief came only when I realised that mysteries are not puzzles to be solved, but realities in which to live. Humankind sometimes seems to have an inner awareness of being approached by a mystery, and discovers that it has an inner disposition to refuse such mysteries confronting it. Mysteries are most enlightening when they open up, but there is a problem with them. They make demands of responsibility upon the listeners, an accountability to live in and by the reality unveiled.<sup>2</sup>

So, then, mysteries may be fascinating, but they can also be threatening. The mystery of the mysteries is, 'How can these things be thus, and why should they draw us into a way of living which is fully accountable for the wisdom it has thus gained?'

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<sup>2</sup> I believe we shall discover that a mystery is a reality hitherto unseen, but now seen by revelation. The revealing brings us to the reality, but is not the reality itself. Reality once seen demands the viewer now live according to it.

## CHAPTER TWO

## Coming to the Mysteries

**APORIA AND ALL THAT**

Some folk are not really interested in mysteries. It does not occur to them to ask questions or see situations and problems which, to them, warrant seeking a solution. There may have been a time in their lives when they took up problems with a view to clarifying and even solving them, but they have since developed an immunity to problems and problem solving. Yet it seems generally that we are so made that we cannot altogether and always avoid living in doubt. *Aporia* is the Greek word for doubt, but doubt can be a sign that we lack assurance and conviction in regard to various things. So, eventually, each doubt worries us, and in some way urges us to get answers to our self-addressed questions. The scope of modern science is such that we believe we can clarify troubling matters and bring a measure of peace to ourselves. That is, we can find solutions for our puzzling questions.

*Aporia* is mainly about God, and especially God as the prime mystery of the world. Of course, ‘the mystery of the world’ may also be our problem, in which case we will need firstly to resolve our difficulties concerning God. When it comes to the hard question of death, we may be

forced to recognise that we will need to know something about God and also the world, for in both together must lie part of the answer regarding death. *Aporia*, then, will act as a motive and incentive to solve mysteries.

## **DISILLUSIONMENT WITH MYSTERIES**

Most of us have, long ago, rejected the idea of there being genuine mysteries. We may have come to this conclusion because of training we have received from family backgrounds of increasing atheism and agnosticism, or simply from reasoning humanism. Enquiry, we say, is just not worth the trouble. Again, many of us have been brought up within churches, and have concluded at some time or other that there is nothing about religion which warrants our attention, much less breed a loyalty to it. So we have drifted away from the heart of the matter of religion and its claim to solving problems.

On this score many have experienced, at one time or another, the disillusionment which comes from contact with religious enthusiasts and persons of a mystical cast. Perhaps we have linked the idea of 'mystery' with mysticism, enthusiasm with blind faith, and the like. That has hindered us from trying to tackle what may be a genuine mystery, and perhaps one capable of easy solution. Even so, sooner or later, we may find ourselves needing afresh to understand what is hidden, and even believing that puzzling out a mystery can be a worthwhile exercise. It is to such that this small piece of writing addresses itself. So we go straight to what we may call the primary mysteries, which are God, the creation around us, the matter of our origins, our identity, our destiny and other elements which

belong to the future. There is something crass in being persons who do not think about such matters, and there must be questions which give meaning to life and some understanding of that meaning.

### **THE PLACE OF FAITH IN LISTENING AND UNDERSTANDING**

It is right that we should question the matter of religion—seeing there are so many groups with their various value systems and their forms of worship which we call ‘cultus’. It is rightly said that culture comes from cultus; that is, that our worship systems set the patterns of our culture. The outward, artefactual elements of a culture are linked with the heart of it; namely, what is worshipped, the way of worship and the ethics or behavioural practices which issue from it.

It would be natural for the wisdom which comes through hierophants to be linked with the culture, and since all cultures seem to have religious beliefs of one form or another, to link hierophantic wisdom with religion. So inbred are these elements in a culture, that to be critical of them would be to rouse animosity in those loyal to their cultures. As we have already noted, it is unwise to attack cultural core assumptions, seeing that such attacks raise defensive reaction, and establish folk in their beloved culture. In the ultimate, very few, if any, have ever been wholly liberated from the system in which they have been enculturated. So, then, it is the business of their religions and cultural wisdom to raise and answer the questions which universally are asked by people, especially by those in *aporia*. Faith is thus linked with the deities, spirits or

lords which are worshipped or revered within a given culture.

Western Christianity was once dependent upon its apostolic beginnings and the changes and adaptations which took place over the first few centuries. It had its apostolic church Fathers, and later Doctors of the Church who helped to hammer out its dogma and cultuses. Church history shows that changes in cultus and accompanying belief took place quite quickly from the initial apostolic flush of proclamation, teaching and worship practices. East and West became somewhat divided in their emphases of belief and practice, but, on the whole, Christianity developed a culture which was the life and practice of the Christian nations which, together, came to be called 'Christendom'. The upsurge of Islam drove the Christian nations together as they fought to defend and maintain their religion. In North Africa, Islam decimated the churches, especially those whose doctrine of God and Christ did not comport with that hammered out in the early Church Councils, particularly the Trinitarian Formula of the Council of Chalcedon.

The Reformation brought a change in doctrine and practice from that of the church of Rome. Even so, both Catholic and Protestant churches maintained a Christian culture, varied though its elements were. It took the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment in the 18th century to bring rational criticism to bear on the Christian Church and its writings. In many ways the Enlightenment was the continuity of the Renaissance which—being humanistic—had to some degree brought changes to worship and culture. It also gave rise to the new ways of thinking which, in turn, helped to bring about the Industrial Revolution. Theology was deeply affected with the advent of historical criticism

and new forms of textual criticism and hermeneutics. This revolution was all part of the changes which led to what we call 'modernity', behind which is the idea that Man can handle his world without dependence upon a Deity or deities. This clarified thinking about mysteries, and any need for their solution. Modernity, however, has failed to assure humanity that just by human reason alone can all difficult matters be solved. At least the Western world has entered into what it calls the 'post-modernity era'. This is the era when materialism may be the way of life of most, but with materialism there is a dissatisfaction in regard to its being an end in itself. There is a drive for a supramaterial understanding of the world, hence the drive towards the extrasensory, psychical and supernatural elements, such as are found in many 'New Age' formulations of cultus. Ancient gnosticism is also being revived, along with its alliance with mysticism and naturalism.

These changes have brought many back to ask questions afresh of the Church and its theology and practices. In fact it is an hour when humanity seems to sense some need for truth beyond the rather dry rationalism it has known. It is true that science fiction and extrasensory studies have changed the climate of our thinking, but there is a hunger in the human spirit to know what it needs for personal fulfilment. Not for nothing did the old preacher of wisdom, Koheleth, say:

He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time; also he has put eternity in man's mind [heart], yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (Eccl. 3:11).

He was the man who also said, 'That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?'

We can now start on our course of seeking to understand the nature of mystery, especially as that word and idea is used in the Scriptures.



## CHAPTER THREE

# The Nature and Meaning of Mystery

## THE USE OF THE WORD ‘MYSTERY’ IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Prior to looking at the term ‘mystery’ in the Old Testament, we should look at Deuteronomy 29:29, where Moses says:

*The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed<sup>1</sup> belong to us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this law.*

In its context, it means ‘the word of this law’, for it was this which had been revealed to them. Whatever mysteries existed belonged to God, and were no business of the people. Warnings against trying to penetrate, via the occult, what belonged to God only, are issued in many places, and particularly strongly in Deuteronomy 18:9–22. Anything else God wishes to reveal, He will do by means of His prophets.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> What is not revealed by God remains secret. What is revealed is no longer secret.

<sup>2</sup> It is fair to say that God reveals new elements of Himself and His works in a progressive way by the prophets. This is clearly so in the New Testament, as later chapters will emphasise.

The literal use of the term ‘mystery’ is confined to the Book of Daniel, but as we have already indicated, the idea of mystery is not confined to this book. For example, many of the ideas stated in the Pentateuch find their full revelation in the New Testament, and particularly in Christ. For example, marriage in Genesis 2:24 is said by Paul to be ‘a profound mystery’, for its full meaning is found not in the immediate reference to the marriage of the first couple, but in the revelation of the marriage between Christ and his church, as seen in Ephesians 5:21–33. Andrew T. Lincoln, speaking of ‘the mystery’ of 5:32, says:

‘Mystery,’ therefore is not *any* deeper meaning of an OT text but precisely *this* meaning of Christ and the Church posited by this writer. Similarly, the mystery is not any marriage or marriage itself, but the special marriage relationship of Christ and the Church. This is not a denial of the straightforward reference of Gen. 2:24 by any means. Indeed, as we have seen, the interpretation of Gen. 2:24 underlies the exhortation to husbands in vv 28–30. But even that use of Gen. 2:24 depended for its force on the ultimate reference the writer believed it had to the archetypal union between Christ and the Church . . . It was because the Church was Christ’s body which was at one with him, a relationship which was the model for human marriage, that wives could be seen in terms as their husband’s bodies.<sup>3</sup>

Again, as Justin Martyr<sup>4</sup> said, the commands given in the Pentateuch regarding the Paschal Lamb really referred to Christ:

The Paschal rite contained a secret [*mysterion*], not to be revealed till Christ came. Thus το μυστηριον [‘the mystery’] is practically a

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 42, Word, Dallas, 1990, pp. 381–2.

<sup>4</sup> Justin Martyr in J. Armitage Robinson, *Ephesians*, Kregel, Grand Rapids, 1979, p. 239.

symbol or a type, with stress laid upon the secrecy of its meaning until it comes to be fulfilled.

In Daniel 12:4, the prophet is instructed, regarding part of his prophecy, ‘But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end’, showing that a secret or mystery relates to the end-time. It is written down, but understanding of it will not come until the end-time, the appropriate time of understanding.

We could also remind ourselves that Ecclesiastes has an implied reference to ‘the mystery’. In 7:23–24 (cf. Rom. 1:33; Job 11:7) we read, ‘I said, “I will be wise”; but it [wisdom] was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out?’ Whilst the term ‘mystery’ is not used here, the idea is certainly present. In passing, we note an important point, which is that God revealed Himself especially to Israel as a covenant-people, so that the mystery of God was unveiled to them, and this was not—generally speaking—for people who were outside the covenant.<sup>5</sup>

In the Book of Daniel we find the term ‘mystery’ nine times (2:17–23, 27, 28, 29, 30, 47; cf. 4:9). The first reference (2:17–23) says that God ‘gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding; he reveals deep and mysterious things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him’. We need to understand that God is not a mystery in that He has

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<sup>5</sup> We are not saying that God did not give understanding of His person and will to those outside the covenant. In the sense that all human beings are under the covenant of God, which was—and is—innate to creation, yet because men and women rejected them, they also rejected His revelation of Himself. It is clear that there have been those in all nations who ‘do what is right and acceptable to him’ (Acts 10:35) and presumably have received revelation from Him.

concealed Himself, but rather that Man-in-innocence did know God, but at the Fall, God became a mystery only in the sense that Man refused to receive what was clearly revealed to him, keeping in mind that knowing God<sup>6</sup> can only happen from being in communion with Him.<sup>7</sup> This is also the sense of Romans 1:18–32. In the case of the Book of Daniel, the prophet is given wisdom to understand the mystery of certain dreams. He was not merely a person with a charisma of interpretation. As for God, Daniel did not see Him as a mystery: he knew God and lived in intimacy with Him. Even so, the principles of Job 11:7 and Romans 11:33 always apply, ‘Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty?’; ‘O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!’ It is interesting to see Nebuchadnezzar said that, ‘only the Spirit of the holy God’ can reveal mysteries.<sup>8</sup> Paul was later to say that only the Holy Spirit could reveal the deep things of God (I Cor. 2:10).

### Old Testament Prophecy and the Mysteries

It seems appropriate here to say that the prophets were the revelators of the mystery or mysteries of God, in that

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<sup>6</sup> The prophet Jeremiah places this relational knowledge of God above all things (9:23–24), and Hosea points to the danger of not ‘knowing God’, asserting it results from a departure into sin and that this departure must be repented of (4:1–3; 6:1–6).

<sup>7</sup> David Broughton Knox in his book *The Everlasting God* (Lancer, Homebush West, 1988), p. 130, says, ‘It follows that the subject matter of theology is not God, but God in his relationship, for the essence of God is in eternal relationship’.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Daniel 4:9; 5:11, 14.

they had stood in the council of God, the place where the counsel of God was made known.<sup>9</sup>

Whilst Moses insisted that the secret things belonged to God, he also emphasised that what was revealed was out in the open for all to *see*, and in fact it was law, something that folk could *do*, rather than contemplate or find to be esoteric. Even Daniel's interpretations are to do with what God has for the future. God has no guarded secrets—His prophecies are for all the world. The Hebrew word of 'secret' (Greek: *mysterion*) is *sod*, but the word used in Daniel is equal to the Aramaic *raz*, which has a different emphasis. A *raz* can be the thing, or things, interpreted.

In the Old Testament, God's power lies in His word (*dabar*), so that when the prophets speak His word, it is effective (Isa. 55:10–11; Jer. 23:28–29). God does not speak in secret, 'I did not speak in secret . . . I the LORD speak the truth, I declare what is right'; 'From the beginning I have not spoken in secret'; 'Surely the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets' (Isa. 45:19; 48:16; Amos 3:7).

In the Book of Daniel, it is Daniel, who is a prophet, who reveals the mysteries of God to his rulers, but we are aware that they no longer remain hidden, especially to those who are willing to hear them. Even so, they are to do with the future, not only of Babylon with whom they are immediately concerned, but also with the Kingdom of God

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<sup>9</sup> In Jeremiah 23:18 and 22 it is stated that the false prophets had not stood in the council of God, hence it is inferred (i) that the prophecies of these prophets would be false, and (ii) that the true prophets did stand in the council of God to get their message. Job 15:8 in the RSV has 'Have you listened in the council of God?', whilst the AV has, 'Hast thou heard the secret [LXX: *mysterion*] of God?', and the RV has 'Hast thou heard the secret council of God?'

which is universal. There is always the idea of a secret to be disclosed, where the future is concerned, and hence the need of prophecy or of a teacher, like Jesus, who would disclose to the elect the truth of God's plan for the world, thus making history not arbitrary, but the outworking of God's purpose. So it is that the prophets disclose, portion by portion, those words God would declare to His people. Nothing would be withheld which was not essential to the life of the people of Israel, and also to the community of nations. A mystery is a reality disclosed, a reality which could not be otherwise known.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# The Fact of Mystery: The Mystery of God

The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* meaning for ‘mystery’ is ‘a hidden or secret thing; something beyond human knowledge or comprehension; an enigma’. Whether or not there *is* a hidden or secret thing is a matter of conjecture.

When it comes to the matter of God, we are facing what purports to be a mystery. Psalm 14 opens with ‘The fool says in his heart, “There is no God”’. The word ‘fool’ in the Old Testament signified a person who deliberately despised the good and followed the evil. Hence, says the Psalm, ‘They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds, there is none that does good’. Jesus warned against calling a person a fool, for heavy punishment would be executed against the person calling another a fool. It would seem that when a person said there was no God, he felt free to do what he liked in the absence of the Deity who was said by most of the human race to be in existence.

God may be said to be a mystery in the sense that, by use of our critical faculties, we cannot know who He is. All Scripture is built on the idea that God reveals Himself

by the use of various media. These are creation; special appearances known as 'theophanies'—'God manifestations'—when the Angel of the Lord or other celestial creations or manifestations might appear; prophetic utterances communicating God's mind; His law; sacred writings; actions in history which comported with the term 'the living God', meaning God was known by His actions; covenant-making with promises and injunctions declaring His character; the incarnation of Christ; the presence of the Holy Spirit revealing truths of God by word and actions; and the Church. In this way, God showed Himself as the ever-revealing God. His law and the human conscience were also means of revealing His being present to the human race. Blessings and judgments could also be said to speak of God if they were understood. With all these media, God shows that He is not secretive.

Even so, conditions are laid down for understanding the nature of God. He must be recognised as *being* spirit—not just as *having* spirit—and as having invisibility, though He may use visible acts, creatures and conditions to speak of Himself. He seeks to disclose Himself as faithful to the creation and humanity He has brought into being, and requires faith in Himself from all His creation. The whole earth is full of His glory and is expected to glorify Him by praise and its actions which will *reflect*—though not of themselves *radiate*—His glory. Thus, the heavens *declare* the glory of God, and His invisible nature—eternal powers and deity—can be clearly perceived *in* the things that He has made (Rom. 1:21). Romans 1:20 says, 'For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them'.

Having said this, there are limitations on what we can know of God. Christ told his disciples that knowing God



is primarily a *relational* matter (John 17:3; cf. I John 5:20), as, indeed, knowing each other as humans is largely relational if it is to be true knowing. The primary couple would have had clear relationships, and in that sense can be said to have known God. The limitations of created Man would relate to his creaturehood, a factor which must be clearly taken into consideration. He would know God as a creature knows Him, which is all that a creature is required to do. More cannot be demanded of him. Breaking relationships with God—even though ‘we live and move and have our being’ in Him—means we lose the basis of knowing Him, so that the primeval ability becomes atrophied.

What we also have to take into consideration is that by the fall of Man in the garden of Eden, Man not only broke fellowship with God, but he came into guilt, and guilt is an objective reality affecting the conscience. Guilt brings pain when the conscience operates upon the person. So from guilt comes reaction to God, even to the point of anger, rejection of the Creator, and the action of evil works against the Deity. Paul traces this chain of affects and effects in Romans 1:18–32 and in 3:9–18. Such people become idolaters, rejecting a relationship with God for a relationship with idols. The true worship of God is replaced by a worship of idols, and so a cultus is shaped which then determines the culture of the worshippers-in-community. It is reasonably certain that all cultures have been formed by a common idea of God, but the will to reject knowledge of Him as the true God, brought in devised deities and so the newer cultures.

Following Man’s fall, human beings could know God only by faith,<sup>1</sup> or reject the knowledge of Him. It seems

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews chapter 11 shows that human beings know God only by faith. Abel is the person nominated as a man of faith. In I John 3:10f., he is also the first nominated as a child of God.

there has always been a faith community, and the opponents of it had been a 'faith-in-idols' one, that is, faith-in-alternatives-to-God community. If we take into account the biblical story of the serpent in the garden of Eden, and later information concerning 'that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world' (Rev. 12:9), then we will realise the community which is against God is, along with rebellious Man, also comprised of fallen, rebellious, celestial powers. This point is testified in history by belief in, and worship of, spirits and other supernatural beings.

It seems none can plead being guiltless in the matter of knowing God. All that *needs* to be known *can* be known. That is not to say that there are not elements which Man in this present time is not permitted to know. 'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD' (Isa. 55:8–9), and it may mean simply because we are human and He is divine, or because we are sinful and He is not, or from both these elements.

When it comes to the wisdom of guru, shaman, pundit, or initiated elders of a people, what are we to think of their wisdom? Certainly Man has gathered wisdom of a certain kind over his millenniums of being on earth.<sup>2</sup> Without demeaning or despising this wisdom, but certainly looking at it critically—which does not mean antagonistically—we realise that such wisdom in its richest forms comes out of the way we look at creation and the God of creation. We can seek mystically to know God—as do the mystics—by

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<sup>2</sup> It is freely acknowledged by biblical scholars of the Old Testament Wisdom literature, that much of the literature has wisdom which is derived from, or is parallel with, non-biblical wisdom literature.

our own abilities, or even, negatively, by denying our abilities and seeking to be open to some movement of God. Again, we can think critically—in the best sense of that term—and reason from a horizontal view of things, or alternately, from a vertical point of view, seeking to understand God in either of these two ways, always reasoning from the data we acquire. This data leads us to try to understand these ways of getting knowledge and wisdom.

### **THREE WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING: THE HORIZONTAL, THE VERTICAL AND THE VERTICAL–HORIZONTAL**

The Book of Ecclesiastes is a powerful book, requiring many readings. When we have reasonably understood it, we will know that the writer—a very wise man—has sought to comprehend ‘everything that is under the sun’, first by what we might call the ‘empirical–scientific’ method. Note that the writer firstly sees things on this horizontal dimension—‘everything under the sun’—and seeks to understand them (i) by experimentation, and (ii) by reasoning from his investigations—the method we use in science. He seeks to develop (i) a philosophy (theology?) of life, and (ii) a practice of life, of living in and enjoying this world, which will satisfy him. In other words, he seeks to rationalise the world that is about him and its various operations. The investigating Preacher’s conclusion regarding all this is that it is ‘vanity and a striving after wind’. That is, a satisfactory rationalisation of it all cannot be found.<sup>3</sup> He sees that Man has another

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<sup>3</sup> Note that in positivism and reductionism—among many such rationalisations—some using the empirical–scientific method believe they have an explanation for ‘all things under the sun’, but these rationalisations do not comprehend the fact that Man is not without a spirit, and that ontologically his being demands a fuller, more satisfying explanation.

dimension—the ‘vertical’—for when he mentions God, the pride of human ‘knowing’ is seen to be futile. He says that God ‘has put eternity into man’s mind [heart], yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end’. Each time he mentions God, he is speaking of a fear of God which leads to true wisdom. He concludes, ‘[this is] the end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man.’ We conclude that the writer is saying, ‘There is a horizontal dimension in which Man lives, created by God and good for Man, but when Man sees *only* the horizontal, seeks to live *only* in it, and tries to derive a philosophy (theology?) of it so that it is all rational to his mind, he will find that it is ‘emptiness and a striving after wind’.<sup>4</sup> If Man fears God, then he will do well. In our terms, if he sees that life has a horizontal–vertical reality and perspective, then he will enjoy God and the creation together. Otherwise he will be either a horizontalist (worldly, secular) *or* a verticalist (hyper-spiritual or dualist).

### **KNOWLEDGE OF GOD IS PERSONAL, GIVEN BY GOD THROUGH REVELATION**

The knowledge of God—and hence of His divulged mysteries—is not primarily noetic (of the mind), propositional (reasoned theology) or mystical (seeking to know God by

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Emptiness and a striving after wind’ sounds very much like our modern philosophy of nihilism.

direct contact, through whatever rituals and methods may be used). True knowledge of God is of Him as living, personally revealing Himself, inhabiting the one He knows so that the one who knows Him inhabits Him also. Man, in falseness, deliberately rejects that intimate, personal knowledge (Rom. 1:28). In other words, true knowledge is relational. At the same time he ‘lives and moves and has his being’ in God (Acts 17:28), even whilst denying that fact, and certainly refusing that true relationship! That is why the ‘mystery’ (secret: *mysterion*) is always hidden from him. Jesus made it clear that only those who wanted to hear would hear: hearing and knowing are a matter of the will which is willing to hear God Who is revealing Himself. It is axiomatic in theology that God always reveals Himself. He has always used the following media— creation, theophanies, His word, the law, the prophets, dreams and visions, His acts as ‘the living God’—acts of providence, redemption and judgments—His chosen people, His Son and his acts, His apostles, the Holy Spirit, the Church and the Scriptures. Paul said (i) that he knew the gospel by the personal revelation of Jesus Christ, to him and in him (Gal. 1:15f.), and (ii) that he was given special revelations concerning ‘the mystery of his will’ (Eph. 3:2–6). These are the revelations which are given to us, and of which we are expected to be stewards. If we know the mysteries listed above, then we know a vast amount concerning God, His being and His works, and *can communicate such*.

### **CONCLUSION: COMING TO KNOW GOD**

If we work on the basis on which our chapter began, that God is a self-communicating God, and if we read the

biblical history fully, then we will have no doubt that to come to know God is possible. Indeed, to seek *not* to know God is more difficult as an exercise. Whatever the case, we need to understand that the self-communicating word of God is dynamic in breaking through our fallen state and bringing us to a true knowledge of God, and, of course, His mysteries.

## CHAPTER FIVE

## Mystery in the New Testament

As we have indicated, the Greek word *mysterion* has the meaning we would understand as a secret or a mystery, something which remains concealed until it is revealed. In the Mystery Religions contemporary with the early church, one became an initiate by being trained to learn certain of the divulged secrets. Bit by bit, the neophyte was drawn into the secrets and the ceremonies which attended these. The mysteries he learned were heavily guarded and were not to be divulged to others. By contrast, the Christian mysteries were plainly spoken so that by commonsense one could know what was said. However, since the truths the mysteries spoke were spiritual, they could be spiritually understood. No training in esoteric penetration was required. What was required was new birth. When Nicodemus who had believed on Jesus came to him, Jesus saw that this Pharisee had entirely missed the point, and told him, 'Except a man be born again, he cannot *see* the Kingdom of God'. He then told him that unless he—Nicodemus—were to be born of water (the baptism of repentance) and the Spirit he could not *enter* the Kingdom of heaven.

A mystery, then, in the New Testament, is a truth which is revealed to the initiated—the person who is born anew of the Spirit—but which remains closed off from the uninitiated, that is, those unable to receive the truth. ‘Unable’ must include those ‘not willing’, for a mystery, where there is willing hearing, may be the very thing which will bring new birth, and thus a flood of spiritual understanding. We repeat that there is nothing about a mystery which is unintelligible in the words it uses, but its real significance is not available to the hearer where there is not a will to hear. One example of this is seen in I John 4:7–10. There John the writer enjoins all to love one another, saying, ‘love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love.’ The writer then goes on to show that two things prove God is love: (i) that He sent His Son into the world that all may have life, and (ii) that God sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. The person who does not understand these words has not been born again. The person who does understand has been born again.

When we think of this ‘mystery’—although it is not named as such—we see that the proofs of God’s love are strong, and a reader ought thereby to be born again and come to know God *is* love, and God *as* love. The one who does not realise the truth from the heart and the will, is, of course, unwilling to really hear, and to act on what has been heard. If we can grasp this principle, then we can proceed to those parts of the New Testament where the word ‘mystery’ is used. One of the most useful is the same incident which is mentioned in the three Synoptic Gospels. The references are Matthew 13:11, Mark 4:11, and Luke 8:10, but it is their contexts which are important.



## MATTHEW 13:11, MARK 4:11, LUKE 8:10, AND CONTEXTS—THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING MYSTERIES

In the above references, we have Jesus giving his disciples an answer to their puzzlement about his teaching in parables.<sup>1</sup> His explanation is in Matthew 13:11–16. In verse 11 he says, ‘To you it has been given to know the *secrets*<sup>2</sup> [plural; *ta mysteria*] . . . but to them it has not been given’. He adds (v. 12), ‘For to him who has will more be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away’. He then explained why it was he spoke in parables. In verses 13–15 he explains:

This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. With them indeed is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah which says:

‘You shall indeed hear but never understand,  
and you shall indeed see but never perceive.  
For this people’s heart has grown dull,  
and their ears are heavy of hearing,  
and their eyes they have closed,

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<sup>1</sup> On the night of the betrayal of Jesus, his disciples said, ‘Ah, now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure! Now we know that you know all things, and need none to question you; by this we believe that you came from God’ (John 16:29–30). At this point Jesus questioned their belief. All through his ministry the disciples had failed to see who he was. This ‘mystery’ they were yet to understand, but they must be credited with having ears to hear. Only the coming Holy Spirit could lead them into all the truth (cf. John 16:13).

<sup>2</sup> Note that in Mark 4:11 the word is singular—mystery. In Luke 8:10 it is plural. Doubtless, when Jesus likened the Kingdom of heaven to many and varied things, the plural could be used; each, in that sense, being *a* mystery within *the* mystery.

lest they should perceive with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their heart,  
and turn for me to heal them.'

He is quoting from Isaiah 6:9–10, where God is telling the prophet that he will preach long, and all his preaching will do will be to harden the hearts of his hearers. Referring to his own preaching, Jesus says, 'This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand'. That is, he knows his ministry will produce only judgment of the so-called hearers. The parable he had been teaching was that of the sower going forth to sow his seed, and the results which came from the sowing. Having told the parable he then 'called out' (Luke 8:8: 'cried out', AV), 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear' (Mark 4:9).

The point of the parable of the sower was *hearing*. All four soils are likened to 'those who heard the word', but only one of the four really heard, namely those of the good soil. In Matthew 13:23, the good hearer is reported as 'he who hears the word and *understands* it; he indeed bears fruit, and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty'. In Mark 4:20, the good soil are those 'who hear the word and *accept* it' (etc.). In Luke 8:15, the good soil are 'those who, hearing the word, *hold* it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience'.

By contrast, the disciples are told in Matthew 13:16–17:

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

This means they will understand mysteries when these are told to them.

In Luke 8:16–18 (cf. Mark 4:21–25), the parable of the man who lit a lamp and hid its light speaks of a person who maintains he has heard and received light, but his actions show he does not give out that light—undoubtedly from cowardice or sloth—and it is he who thinks he has what he has shall find it is taken from him. The warning to such is, ‘Take heed *how* you hear; for to him who has will more be given, and from him who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away’.

The whole matter of the mystery is thus made clear. If anyone lives with a willing heart, he will hear, will understand (Matt. 13:23) the mystery, for it will be plain to him. Others *think* they hear, but they do not, *if they do not act on what they hear*. The Lukan account closes with the story of Jesus’ mother and his brothers coming to see him, whatever was their intent—good or bad—as various commentators will have it; Jesus words are, ‘My mother and my brothers are those who *hear* the word of God and *do* it’.

We now have the key to understanding all mysteries. It is hearing with a good heart, doing what we understand is told to us, or to put it in a phrase I have come to appreciate —‘always living in the mystery’.

## THE SUBSTANCE OF THE SYNOPTIC MYSTERY

We must see from the passages we have lightly examined above, that Jesus was not only saying that crass listening would further harden the minds and hearts of his audience, but that what he was saying had to do with the mystery of

the Kingdom of God. The sower's parable, then, refers not only to true *hearing*, but also the *substance* of what is heard. So many of the parables are of the Kingdom, as we see in Matthew chapter 13. In fact Jesus' incarnation, his ministry, and his final Cross and Resurrection were of the essence of the Kingdom. No Cross, then no Kingdom. The same applies to the Resurrection. In Matthew 16:13–20, we have Peter confessing with wonder that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. He had broken through to the truth of the mystery. We note that Jesus said it was only by the revelation of the Father to Peter, personally. Yet this understanding of the mystery was inadequate to further comprehend that 'Messiah' and 'Son' could have no valid meaning without the indispensable act of the Cross and Resurrection! Does this, then, have to do with Luke 8:17, 'For nothing that is hid shall be made manifest, nor anything secret [*kruptos*: 'cryptic', 'hidden'; *RSV*, 'secret'] which shall not be known and come to light'. This surely links with Matthew 10:26–27, 'So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be made known. What I tell you in the dark, utter in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim upon the housetops.'

It is evident that the whole mystery of God was being given to the disciples, even though they, as yet, did not know it. When it comes it will be with a great impact. That is why the Epistles are so necessary to interpret and proclaim the whole of the truth. So Jesus tells them in Matthew 13:16–17:

But blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. Truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.

## CHAPTER SIX

Various Mysteries in the New  
Testament**AN EVALUATION OF PERSONAL  
UNDERSTANDING OF THE MYSTERY OF GOD**

God, so to speak, is the great Mystery. He hides not Himself, but is wholly hidden from the person who will not hear His word. To refuse to hear His word, which in the Old Testament is *darbar* and is dynamic—creating, sustaining, redeeming, transforming—and in the New Testament is *logos* or *rhema*—dynamic command, utterance, prophetic, creative, proclamatory, redeeming and transforming—means that God Himself is hidden.

The question is whether we have listened to this word and—receiving it in submission—obeyed it or not. No word: no life. No listening with all one's being, then all one's being lapses from reality. We have seen the sad case of the man who thought he had listened, and in the moment of crisis was to discover he had nothing. Have we taken the *form* of the mystery, but never received its *substance*, its life? Have we acted out the matter of listening, but, in fact, have heard nothing? How treacherous the

self-deception which tells us we are in order, godly order, when all sin has done is deceive, and we have been the victims of its deadly act, our own self-inflicted wounding by which we think we can escape the wounding of God!

We need to pause and evaluate with all the humility we can summon, and with all the supplication we can give to the Great King, imploring His mercy and pleading for His voice to come again that we may listen truly and enter into His mystery. Otherwise what is the point of us reading *about* mystery when we have deceived ourselves away from it under the illusion that we have not? It is the last great blank and emptiness which we have to fear, when, but for a good listening, we could live in the mystery, not simply capturing its *form* in our mind, but living it out in all our beings.

This pause for evaluation may stimulate us to press on to the unveiling of the rich mysteries within God's word, especially those of the New Testament, as nominated by Paul the Apostle, or described by John the Divine.

## OTHER GOSPELS' MYSTERIES

We have already dealt with the only use of the term 'mystery' in the Synoptic Gospels. There is, however, a further hint of the *principle* of 'mystery' in Matthew 11:25–30, where it is written:

At that time Jesus declared, 'I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will. All things have been delivered to me by my

Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Verse 25 shows us that 'these things'—the things he has taught and the prophecies he has given—are hidden from 'the wise and understanding', that is, the more intellectually intelligent ones, but the babes have been given to understand them. Then follows the declaration that no one knows the Son except the Father, nor the Father except the Son who alone can reveal Him, and who makes his choices to give such revelation. The Son has Lordship over all things so that all events are in his hands. On the basis of this, he gives an invitation to join him in his being and work, thus relieving ego-centred souls of their own, fruitless endeavours—their pointless labours, to say nothing of the labours of their sins.

There is no reference to 'mystery' in John's Gospel, but as we see, Jesus' emphasis is on new birth, and the fact that his teaching is the only real revelation of the mind and will of God. To know God, one has to come to Him, so that John 14:1–10 is a Johannine replay of Matthew 11:25. All the Gospels are delivering truth on a quality and scale which outpaces Man's ability to comprehend. No wonder many have been involved in the fruitless endeavour to analyse and puzzle out 'the historical Christ'. That he was a person in history is not to be doubted, but to discover who he was essentially, without first an entrance into the mystery and then a personal living in it, means the pursuit will be futile.

## THE PAULINE MYSTERIES

Paul is the one who twenty times uses the term ‘mystery’ as against writers of the other Epistles who do not. We need to prepare ourselves for these mysteries. This we did partly in chapter 3 when we looked at Paul’s use of the term ‘mystery’ in Ephesians 5:32. There we quoted Andrew Lincoln:

‘Mystery,’ therefore is not *any* deeper meaning of an OT text but precisely *this* meaning of Christ and the Church posited by this writer. Similarly, the mystery is not any marriage or marriage itself, but the special marriage relationship of Christ and the Church. This is not a denial of the straightforward reference of Gen. 2:24 by any means. Indeed, as we have seen, the interpretation of Genesis 2:24 underlies the exhortation to husbands in vv 28–30. But even that use of Gen. 2:24 depended for its force on the ultimate reference the writer believed it had to the archetypal union between Christ and the Church . . . It was because the Church was Christ’s body which was at one with him, a relationship which was the model for human marriage, that wives could be seen in terms as their husband’s bodies.<sup>1</sup>

Others have interpreted Ephesians 5:32 and context by also referring it to Genesis 2:24. In commenting, they have also spoken of the nature of mystery. We include these because their views are helpful.

Helmut Thielicke, in referring to Paul’s words, says:

On the basis of this ‘symbolic’ character of marriage, Ephesians 5:32 speaks of a ‘mystery’ . . . In the New Testament the term ‘mystery’ is always used in the sense that a visible, earthly reality or process becomes a similitude of the transcendent sphere of

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<sup>1</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, pp. 381–2.



salvation, that ‘nature’ thus points to the ‘supernatural’ . . . This kind of pointing or reference is called a ‘mystery’ because it cloaks and reveals at the same time: the mystery reveals itself to faith, whereas unbelief cannot understand it; ‘to him who has, will more be given . . . , but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away’ . . . Because marriage points to the order of creation and redemption it is a similitude of this kind and it also exhibits the same double meaning; for those who stand in faith within the order of redemption it *has* this symbolic character, whereas for others it can be merely a contract, a biological phenomenon, or at most a human bond. This is why the letter to the Ephesians calls it a ‘mystery’.<sup>2</sup>

Notice Thieliicke’s description of a mystery as that which ‘cloaks and reveals at the same time’, ‘a visible, earthly reality or process becomes a similitude of the transcendent sphere of salvation’. This surely fits what we have seen of the parable of the sower and the difficulty of understanding it. Markus Barth, who has a detailed comment on the word ‘mystery’, says:

It is impossible to demonstrate that at any place in the New Testament it signifies an insoluble puzzle or incomprehensible—and yet believed—mystery, though the English translation ‘mystery’ may suggest this meaning.<sup>3</sup>

With these elements of comprehension of the meaning of ‘mystery’ or ‘secret’ we can proceed to look at Paul’s uses of the term.

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<sup>2</sup> Helmut Thieliicke, *Sex, Theological Ethics*, vol. 2, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1964, pp. 125–6.

<sup>3</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Translation and Commentary on Chapters 1–3*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 34, Doubleday, New York, 1974, p. 124.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## Pauline Ideas of Mystery in I Corinthians

### **‘THE MYSTERY’ (*TON MYSTERION*); ‘THE MYSTERIES’ (*TA MYSTERIA*)**

#### **I Corinthians 1:17 – 2:14**

This is a pericope which deals with ‘the mystery’ in two sections, so to speak. The first section takes up 1:17 – 2:5. In 2:1, Paul is telling his readers that when he came preaching the gospel, he came ‘declaring to you the mystery of God’. He does not primarily mean that God is a mystery and that this was opened by him, though virtually that is what he does whenever he preaches the gospel. No: he is out, from 1:17 onwards, to show that no human reasoning can correctly rationalise the Cross event. It is possible by use of ‘enticing words of man’s wisdom’ to rationalise the Cross into being an acceptable event, a mentally credible happening.<sup>1</sup> Down through the Christian

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<sup>1</sup> How can one use human wisdom to show that the Cross is a valid Christian happening and worthy of belief? There are many methods, such as taking an emotional and romantic view of the happening, and showing it to be on a high level of moral suffering for others, laying down one’s life in love—and so on. None of these is valid, but all are misleading. They are intended to

centuries, there have been many who have done this, but Paul wishes to proclaim the gospel as it is, and so let 'the word of the Cross' do its own work. He knows it will always represent a scandal to the unbelieving Jew, and foolishness to the unbelieving Greek.

Paul is wary of human wisdom. He is wary of it on two accounts, (i) that by such wisdom some in the Church may try to make the Cross acceptable to their hearers, and (ii) that the enemies of the Cross—both Jews and Greeks—will seek to discredit the gospel of the Cross. Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14 to show that God will not let human wisdom get away with its rationalisations or attacks. In I Corinthians 3:18–19, he says that God will 'catch the wise in their craftiness'. Here, in 1:19, he says God will destroy the wisdom of the—so-called—wise, and thwart their cleverness.<sup>2</sup> Such false wisdom will not be allowed to get away with its opposition and remain unexposed and unpunished.

Paul's amazing claim is that true power and true wisdom are found in the Cross, that is, in 'Christ crucified'. God's seeming foolishness is in fact wiser than Man's,

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deviate from the 'scandal to the Jew; and folly to the Greek' of the Cross. By nature of the case, they render the Cross of no effect. Properly preached, the word of the Cross is the power and the wisdom of God.

<sup>2</sup> Here we are reminded of Jesus speaking to his Father in Matthew 11:25–26, 'I thank thee, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to babes; yea, Father, for such was thy gracious will'. The brilliant in Galilee and Judea have not understood Jesus, for all he spoke, though given in plain words, was mystery to them since they were not willing to hear.

and His seeming weakness is strength greater than that of Man. To believe that the entire wisdom of God and the entire power of God reside in the Cross is an unbelievable claim, but it is true! Only by the Cross will God work out His wisdom in history and thereby show His power. The power and wisdom of God are two great themes throughout Scripture. Chapter 1:26–29 testifies to the way in which the power and wisdom of Christ crucified worked in the lives of the humble and despised folk in Corinth. Chapter 1:29–31 shows that God had made Christ to be His wisdom to the Corinthians ‘in righteousness, sanctification and redemption’. Apart from the Cross, he could not be such.

Now we see that what we have traced from 1:17–31 is a mystery. Christ crucified could not, surely, be all that—wisdom in righteousness, sanctification and redemption! Yet that is how God works by means of the Cross. This is the mystery Paul comes to Corinth to proclaim (2:1f.). Do we, likewise, today, proclaim such an idea or system? Chapter 2:2–5 proves that Paul refused clever arguing for the matter of the Cross—normally a malefactor’s horrible and demeaning death! So he refuses brilliant reasoning, but states the bald and horrifying death of the Cross ‘so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God’.

To this point then—2:6—Paul has simply preached the gospel, and the ‘mystery of God’ has opened to the hearers and they stand in the power of God. We might conclude that Paul had finished his word of the Cross and, thus, his opening of the mystery. No! As we see in our quotation, he has to go on further:

None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the heart of man conceived,  
what God has prepared for those who love him,’

God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit (I Cor. 2:8–13).

He is yet to impart ‘a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification’, and it is part of the gospel, the filling out of ‘the whole counsel of God’, and what we might call ‘the eschatological wisdom of God’, since it has to do with the glorification of the saints.<sup>3</sup> So rich and powerful is this matter of glorification, that it is beyond that which Man has seen, heard or thought! The Spirit so works in the hearts of hearing folk of faith that they actually now know what is beyond human understanding! In this matter of mystery,

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<sup>3</sup> It is here we should recall that, in Ephesians 1:3–8, Paul spoke of what the gospel does for believing Man, namely the sanctification, adoption and redemption of the believer. This is the gospel, yet the rest of this mystery is Christ being made to head up all things ‘in the fullness of time’. In 1:15–19 Paul prays that the believers at Ephesus will have such a ‘spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him [the Father]’ that they will have understanding of the hope to which they are called—the riches of God’s glorious inheritance in Christ Jesus and God’s power working towards them. We seem to have two sections of the gospel, one which deals with full redemption, and the other with the eschatology of hope, glorification and power. Paul evidently prays for mature understanding, that they may not stop at the matter of redemption, but go on to the matter of glorification.

the Spirit searches the deeps of God and reveals them to the saints—that they ‘might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God’. Such things are only spiritually understood,<sup>4</sup> that is, are the revealed things of the mystery.

We need to keep reminding ourselves that (i) a mystery cannot be penetrated by unaided Man; (ii) it has to be revealed by God through the Spirit; (iii) that what is revealed is the mystery; and (iv) the revelation is of the *substance* of the mystery, but revelation per se is not the mystery. Thus we conclude that the mystery is the reality that always is, whether we see it or not. To see it is not to make it reality. We cannot rationalise reality; only live in it with humility of knowledge.

### Note on I Corinthians 3:1–23

It can be seen in I Corinthians 3:1–3 that many of the Christians at Corinth are not the mature ones of 2:6. They may have partly grasped the salvation that is theirs in the Cross, but as for the ‘mystery of glorification’, they have not yet seen it. Nor, it seems, do they desire to see it. To desire to understand and live in a mystery must mean the person is surrendered to God. Verses 18–23 show that some at the Church are still giving credence to human ‘wisdom’ and not to the wisdom and power of the Cross. Just as in 2:12, it is only by listening to the Spirit that we know the gifts that are given to us by God, so in 3:18–20,

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Spiritually understood’ might seem to point to a mysticism in understanding, or an understanding divorced from reasoning. This is by no means the case. ‘Spiritually’ here surely means ‘the understanding given by the Spirit’, and that will involve the reasoning of the mind and heart together.

those who depend on worldly wisdom do not discover that ‘all things are yours’. The ‘all things’ speak of a remarkable possession of gifts—nothing remains unforgiven! To quote Peter along with Paul, ‘He has given us all things that pertain to life and godliness’ that we might ‘become partakers of the divine nature’.

### **I Corinthians 4:1ff.**

Paul speaks of the apostolic band as ‘stewards of the mysteries of God’. This is quite a high claim as it is about equivalent to his claim in Acts 20:27, ‘the whole counsel of God’, which in turn is equal to the following—‘testifying both to Jews and to the Greeks of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ’ (20:21), ‘to testify to the gospel of the grace of God’ (20:24), and ‘preaching the kingdom’ (20:25). This is another high claim, as it opposes the gospel to the teaching of Judaism. To be stewards of such mysteries is a high calling and responsibility.

### **I Corinthians 13:2**

In I Corinthians 13:2, understanding ‘all mysteries’ is obvious, in this context, and it means that no mystery should be known and expounded *without love*. We will make reference to this passage later, but it makes common-sense, now, to say that to open the mysteries of God’s love, without love, is contradictory and must be ineffective. We have to remember that Paul is not saying that one *does* such things, but *if* one were to do such things, that is, it is a possible eventuality, but scarcely likely to happen.

### **I Corinthians 14:2**

The mention in I Corinthians 14:2 that a person speaking in tongues ‘utters mysteries in the Spirit’ is capable of being variously understood. What seems to be paramount is that the person, in his spirit, by the Spirit, receives intimations of the mysteries and that somehow they may be printed, or imprinted deeply down, by the Spirit. This may be a clue to the self-edification which Paul attributes to the use of glossolalia. In verse 4, Paul is saying that a person speaking in tongues edifies *himself*, but the one who utters prophecy edifies *all* listeners. This is seen in verses 20–25 where tongue-speaking is unintelligible to a stranger who might enter the assembly, but if all prophesy, then, ‘he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all, the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so, falling on his face, he will worship God and declare that God is really among you’. It could then mean that Paul is saying, over all, ‘You speak in tongues and utter mysteries, but it would be better to utter those mysteries in ordinary speech, for then listeners would receive them, and not hear unintelligible tongue-speaking utterances’. One could draw the conclusion from this chapter that mysteries are also presented in plainly spoken prophecy.

### **I Corinthians 15:51ff.**

From verse 51 to verse 56, Paul is opening a mystery. Just as most mysteries are linked with the eschatological, so here Paul is telling what will happen in the end-time. It is written plainly enough to understand what Paul is saying, but to grasp the *reality* of the mystery requires faith in the substance of the description set forth. It is the



transformation from this earthly body to the heavenly one which shall be given (cf. Phil. 3:21). Thus great hope is offered that the perishable shall put on the imperishable, the mortal shall put on immortality, and the grave—death — will be defeated. Again we see that a mystery is not provable nor solvable, but simply something we must receive, living always in the light of it.

We are reminded that Paul in Romans 8:17–30 speaks in clear terms of ‘the hope of glory’. In Colossians 1:27 it is ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’. In Ephesians 1:17–18, Paul is praying that they will receive the ‘spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him’, so that their understanding will come, heart-wise, and they will ‘know what is the hope’. In Romans 8:21 this hope and mystery is to obtain ‘the glorious liberty of the children of God’, and in 8:29 it is being ‘conformed to the image of his Son’ so that they will be like him (cf. I John 3:1–3), that is, in the very glory and character of the Son. Thus ‘the mystery’ here, of I Corinthians 15:51–56, is the culmination of the mystery climaxing in Christ’s glory and having ‘the body of his glory’, the splendid and universal outcome of ‘Christ in you, the hope of glory’.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Pauline Ideas of Mystery in  
Ephesians**EPHESIANS 1:3–23**

In Ephesians 1:3–23 we do not have the word ‘mystery’ introduced until verse 9, where there is ‘the mystery of his will’, which seems to be a parallel statement for ‘the counsel of his will’ in verse 11; but evidently the mystery begins in verse 3 and continues to verse 9 in giving us the first part of that mystery, namely (i) the choosing us before the foundation of the world that we be sanctified; (ii) the choosing us before the foundation of the world that we be sons of God, that is, adopted; and (iii) that we be to the praise of the glory of His grace, because through Christ’s blood He had intended to redeem us, giving us the forgiveness of sins.

What should we call these three things, on the one hand ‘the whole spiritual blessing’ (v. 3)<sup>1</sup> and, on the other, claim it to be ‘the mystery’? In 3:1–13, Paul speaks of the

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<sup>1</sup> This can be translated ‘every spiritual blessing’, or ‘every kind of spiritual blessing’, or ‘all spiritual blessings’, but Markus Barth (*Ephesians*, p. 78) suggests ‘the whole spiritual blessing’.

mystery as something not hitherto disclosed to the prophets and apostles (cf. Col. 1:26; Rom. 16:25–26), but now—in the apostolic age—being made known to Paul (Eph. 3:3f.), to the saints (Col. 1:26), to the apostles and to the prophets (Rom. 16:25–26; Eph. 3:5). The three things—sanctification, adoption and redemption—were all planned before creation and *were not revealed in the Old Testament writings*. Anything not revealed in the Old Testament writings is necessarily a mystery, that is, something that was yet to be revealed and now, apostolically, is being revealed.

In other references, we find the mystery to be ‘the whole counsel of God’, ‘the will of God’, ‘the plan of the mystery’, and thus is ‘the mystery of God’ (I Cor. 2:1), ‘the gospel’ (Eph. 6:19, cf. I Cor. 1:17 – 2:5), as also it is the substance of the truth (I Tim. 3:16).

In Ephesians 1:9, Paul claims, ‘He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will’. Unless one has the ‘spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him’ (1:17), one cannot understand the mystery. The *RSV* describes this mystery ‘as a *plan* for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth’, but the word ‘plan’ is not technically present, as such. Rather it means ‘for the administration [*eis oikonomian*] of the fullness of time’; that is, that administration of God’s purpose which will bring about the heading up of all things in Christ. It could be understood as ‘the stewardship of the fullness of time’; that is, the time when he administers the fullness of bringing all things to be united as one unitary whole, that is, in forming all things into one heading-up. Now this ‘plan’, or ‘administration’, which is the mystery of His will, must include the three elements we have seen above as the gospel (vv. 3–8), as it also includes the summing up of all

things in Christ. Thus all of 1:3–11 constitutes ‘the gospel’ or ‘the mystery’.

As we proceed in 1:11–12, we see as part of ‘the counsel of his will’ our belief in the gospel, God’s sealing of the Holy Spirit as the guarantee of the inheritance of the saints as they are sealed unto it, so that eventually they will acquire the possession of it.

Paul then makes special prayer for ‘a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him [God]’, that the Ephesians, thus having the eyes of their understanding enlightened, may now know the hope to which they are called, what are the riches of His glorious inheritance and the power that is presently working towards and in them, with a view to the climax or *telos* of the mystery. This power sets Christ at God’s right hand and gives his fullness to the Church.

The bridge to chapter 3 is chapter 2:11–22. Here we have the bringing together through the Cross of both Jew and Gentile in a new humanity—often called ‘the third race’—and this opens the way for Paul to state what ministry has been given to him. This is the *oikonomia* which is ‘the stewardship’ or ‘the administration’ which was mentioned in 1:10 where the *RSV* has translated it as ‘the plan’. God’s purpose or plan is thus discussed as ‘the mystery’, as we now proceed to understand it.

### **EPHESIANS 3:1–12**

In I Corinthians 4:1 we saw that the apostolic band were ‘stewards of the mysteries’. Here in Ephesians 3:2, Paul is shown to have been given the stewardship of God’s grace of the gospel so that he—Paul—could share that grace with

his hearers. The grace would embrace the whole matter of the mystery and its grace, as we saw it in Ephesians chapter one, but now something special is added explicitly, namely that of the inclusion of the Gentiles with the Jews in the assembly or community of Christ, ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16). Because this *is* a mystery, it is thus something that one would never come to unaided, even from one’s reading of the Old Testament and the personal possessing of the simple, saving elements of the gospel.<sup>2</sup> Paul, in this passage, makes two things clear to them: (i) the mystery of which he is presently speaking had not been made known to people in former generations; and (ii) it is now being made known to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit (v. 5; cf. I Cor. 2:9–10; John 16:12–15). Paul has spoken of having written this briefly, and the ‘briefly’ must, by nature of the case, refer back to 1:9–11 and 2:11–22 where all things are to be summed up in Christ, and where the Jew and Gentile both come through the Spirit to the Father and so, together, constitute ‘a holy temple to the Lord’.

Once Paul refers them back to what he has written briefly, then the mystery opens up. The Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promises in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Above we suggested that this mystery did not seem to be apparent in what we called ‘the simple, saving elements of the gospel’, but whilst the mystery as Paul recounts it here may not have been known in those elements, it was certainly

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<sup>2</sup> We mean that many Christians spend time rejoicing over their salvation, and remain at that point of experience. They are not even aware that there are mysteries for them to understand such as we are discussing throughout this book. They remain, then, as simple folk who do not understand the fullness of the truth. They are *nepoi* (as children), and not *teleioi* (as mature)—a fact which is saddening, seeing such delight and wonder come with the true knowledge of the mysteries.

implicit, since all Gentiles were having the gospel preached to them. It is true that at first there was some confusion in the early Church over where the Gentiles believers stood in regard to Israel. There was no doubt as to their being in the Church, yet even there some Christian Jews expected them to become as Jewish proselytes.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst Paul says believing Gentiles are ‘fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promises’, he is saying that the Gentile converts are not behind any in Israel, any more than Israelites are ahead of the Gentiles. This is the mystery, that the miracle of 2:11–22 makes the Church the body in which all are one. Israel, here, must be the equivalent of ‘the Israel of God’ stated by Paul in Galatians 6:16. That this mystery has not always been understood, and is today not understood by many, is shown in the fact that many see those of Israel as special, and the Gentile converts as less than them.<sup>4</sup> ‘Members of the same body’ could mean ‘the body of Christ, the church’ (1:23) or members of the body of Israel. It was virtually a quantum leap for many Israelites who had become Christians, to see the Gentiles as members of this latter ‘body’. They had not understood the mystery of grace which made the Church to be the Israel of God. Paul’s exposition of Romans chapters 9 – 11 was needed. Even today many Christians do not understand the exposition of these chapters.

Verses 7–12 now follow simply: one cannot miss their import. We find no difficulty in seeing Paul as a preacher of

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<sup>3</sup> We only have to look at Acts chapter 15 and the first three chapters of Galatians—especially 2:11–21—to see that the Gentiles were regarded as second-class folk in the church.

<sup>4</sup> Something of the above will be discussed when we see Paul on the mystery of the hardening of portion of Israel in Romans 11:25, *passim*.

the gospel, and even as one qualified especially by his apostleship, but whilst he was to proclaim the gospel, it was stated in a special way—‘to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan [*oikonomia*; administration] of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things’. What are ‘the unsearchable riches’? They can be seen as Christ’s own unsearchable riches, or the riches of the gospel. The word ‘unsearchable’ conveys two ideas, ‘unfathomable’ and ‘inscrutable’—as in Romans 11:33, Job 5:9, and 9:10—and would refer to the gospel. Then the additional ‘and to make all men see what is the plan<sup>5</sup> of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things’, would seem to mean that the ‘administration’ or ‘execution’ of the mystery by Christ should be made known to the Gentiles.

It would be essential for the Gentiles to know what is above in verses 4 to 6, otherwise the true understanding of the *ecclesia* or the ‘Israel of God’ would be deficient, and the unity of all (Jew–Gentile, male–female, free person–slave) would be at risk. So we gather, in passing, that knowledge of the mystery, though hidden for ages in God, must now be revealed to all believers, even ‘to make all men see’. It is not only the internal unity of the Church, but also for humanity to understand what God is about in history. Hence Paul says ‘God who created all things’. At first sight, this clause seems a non sequitur until we realise that he is saying of this purpose, which is an eternal purpose (v. 10), ‘It has remained concealed from the

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<sup>5</sup> The word ‘plan’ is not present, but ‘the stewardship’ (*he oikonomia*), that is, the ‘administration’ or ‘execution’ by Christ of the mystery.

beginning of things; but it was the very purpose of Creation itself'.<sup>6</sup>

Not only must this mystery be made known to all men,<sup>7</sup> but it must also be made known 'through the church'. This may mean, on the one hand, that the Church is the accomplishment of Christ's administration (*he oikonomia*) and so a demonstration of the mystery, and it may also mean that the Church is to proclaim by its life and its utterances of the gospel, the mystery of God. That is, it proclaims this not only to 'all men', but also the statement 'the principalities and powers in the heavenly places' shows how significant is this mystery to the outworking of God's plan (1:9–10; 3:4–6). 'The heavenly places' are often used in this Epistle, and so the powers referred to may be both good ones and evil ones, but whoever they are, it is by the Church that knowledge comes to them; knowledge they will use for good or evil, depending on whether they are good or evil powers.

In verse 11, Paul closes the fact that mystery is 'the eternal purpose' and that, through the work of Christ, it has already been *realised!* Thus the plan and purpose of God has been set and settled in Christ Jesus. The question of access has thus been settled—both Jews and Gentiles now have access to the Father. This is the heart of the great mystery.

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<sup>6</sup> Robinson, *Ephesians*, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup> We may seem to be going against our understanding of 'mystery' as intelligible only to the elect and not to those as yet outside the Church, but when Christ preached the mystery of the Kingdom of God it was to all in Israel, and even though they did not understand it, it was because of their unwillingness to hear by which they remained deaf. Likewise, 'all men' must have the mystery proclaimed to them, whether they will hear or not.



**EPHESIANS 6:18–20**

When, then, in 6:18–20, Paul asks for prayer, it is so that ‘utterance may be given me in opening my mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel’. That mystery covers both the salvation aspect and the whole ‘administration of the mystery’—God’s plan in making Jew and Gentile into one body, one humanity through the Cross. Paul is probably not asking for prayer for the matter of opening the mystery, so much as opening the gospel. Doubtless they cannot be separated, and certainly they constitute the one entity in the light of I Corinthians 2:1 and I Timothy 3:16. In the former, it is the mystery of Christ crucified being the power and wisdom of God, and in the latter are objective elements of Christ’s ministry and being. Certainly, without intercession, nothing will come to the hearers. One does not naturally understand ‘the mystery of God’.

## CHAPTER NINE

Pauline Ideas of Mystery in  
Colossians

## COLOSSIANS 1:24–29

It is necessary to have the text before us, so that we might see the mention of ‘mystery’ within the whole of this passage:

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.

It has been said that Ephesians is a Letter entirely on the mystery of God. Some commentators see it as dependent on the Epistle to the Colossians. In some ways Ephesians is an expansion of the ‘mystery’ material of Colossians,

but Colossians also has elements not as explicitly present in Ephesians. We have seen in Ephesians that the mystery is the gospel, and with it, and as part of it, the outworking of the 'administration of grace' in the unity of Jew and Gentile in the one body; the outworking of it all being shown to the principalities and powers by the Church. All this we could rightly call 'the culmination of salvation history'. Each believer needs 'the spirit of wisdom and revelation' to understand the mystery and so to live in it in true hope. This is the thrust of the Ephesian Epistle.

In Colossians, the passage of 1:24–29 is important. In it Paul gives all of himself 'to complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church'. In Acts 9:16, Christ had told Ananias, regarding Paul, 'I will show him much he must suffer for the sake of my name'. The 'must' (*dei*) shows the necessity for such suffering, and Paul had accepted this. Each believer must suffer, as many Gospels and Epistles show us. Paul recognised that in the preaching of the gospel this would have to be, and he is content to 'fill up the sufferings of Christ', that is, his part and contribution to them. Perhaps there is a hint that he will go beyond what is required of him to take on others' sufferings. In any case, Paul, who has never seen the Colossian church face-to-face, has such love that he is concerned for them. He is an apostle for the whole Church, and was given a special office and commission, 'to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints'. 'To make the word of God fully known' carries the idea of the 'whole counsel of God', that is, the whole mystery. He then repeats the theme of Ephesians, 'the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints'. What, then, is the

mystery? The answer is, 'God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory'.

The presence of Christ in the Church is 'the riches of the glory of this mystery', but it is now 'among the Gentiles' and not just 'among the Israelites'. Romans 9:4 speaks of the gift of glory given to Israel, and it was never thought such glory would be given to the Gentiles. Well, it is given, when the Gentiles are brought into the Church, that is, 'the Israel of God'. 'The riches of the glory of this mystery' is indeed a profound expression. We are reminded of Paul's ascription in Ephesians 3:21, 'to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever'. The glory in the Church *is* Christ Jesus, and in Colossians 1:27 his presence *among* them is 'the hope of glory'. 'Christ in you' can best be translated 'Christ among you', but it does not exclude the thought of 'Christ indwelling each one of you'. Verse 28 has, 'Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ'. The warnings and the 'teaching every man in all wisdom' is the showing to them the mystery and 'the glory of the mystery' and thus helping them to grow and mature, 'so that every person may be presented as mature in Christ'. Here the 'Christ in you' is complemented by the '[you] in Christ', the means by which the mystery operates and is fulfilled. In verse 29, Paul tells them how much he puts into their becoming mature 'with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me'. It is the goal of making every man mature which causes Paul to use all the energies given to him for this very purpose. Paul is indeed captured by the mystery and harnessed to its outworking. To make every man mature is not an aim just for individuals, but for

persons in the context of the whole Church. 'Mature' gives the idea also of being mature in that one can understand, and live in, the mystery and mysteries.

If we stand off for a moment and contemplate Paul's mystery, then it becomes clear that it is, indeed, a mystery, something to which no one, unaided, would come or could come. When we go back to 1:15, and proceed through to verse 23, then we see more of the mystery of Christ and the Father's intention to reconcile all things through him. He, Christ, has created all things: he will reconcile all things 'by the blood of his cross'. When a church, a local community of Christ, understands this mystery, then it is placed in the widest context of 'the big picture'. It is also stimulated to be part of that working mystery. Strong conviction seizes it, and has it working to fulfil the mystery; that is, its particular part of that mystery.

Following the passage of 1:24–29, Paul wants the Colossians to know how greatly he strives for them, as he strives for all with whom he has contact, and of whom he has knowledge. He undoubtedly includes the battle of prayer in this striving. Again its goal is in 2:2 and 3:

*that their hearts may be encouraged as they are knit together in love, to have all the riches of assured understanding, and the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.*

The language is again that of 'assured understanding', 'the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ', 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'. This fits what we have seen in Ephesians of the Gospel, the plan and purpose of God, the unity of Jew and Gentile in one body, the endless resources of Christ to fulfil the plan of 'summing up all things' and 'reconciling all things' in himself, as we in him are 'filling

them full', as seen in Ephesians 4:9–10 (cf. 1:22–23). It is here we are reminded of the passage of Ephesians 3:1–12. Thus we conclude that God's mystery *is Christ*, and therefore the only way to know the wisdom of God is through Christ. That they—Jew and Gentile—are one, 'knit together in love', means the mystery is working in plain fact, at Colossae, in the church. This is seen in 2:9–10, where Paul says, 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness of life in him, who is the head of all rule and authority'. Such knowledge of the working excites our faith, and changes our stance from that of spectators to that of participators.

The outworking of the mystery under this authority of Christ, and through all his fullness (cf. Eph. 1:23), is continued in the Colossian Epistle to 4:1, where its practical operations are defined through descriptions given of their salvation and their life in the living assembly—life that we summarise as relational. Paul is not simply giving paranetics for ethics' sake, but for the sake of the mystery outworking itself in such relationships.

As in the last chapter of Ephesians, so here in the last chapter of Colossians, Paul requests their prayers 'that God may open for us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ'. This is the mystery of Christ which takes up all his vision, and the mystery is opened by the revelating word. At the moment he is in prison, but it is for the Gospel that he is there. What he desires is a yet further opening for proclamation. He contemplates the thrilling outworking, whether he is permitted to have a further part in it or not, but he longs to have such a part. Please, will they pray for him thus?

It is clear that Paul sees every opportunity taken, every gospel pronouncement furthering the fulfilment of the

mystery. In 1:25 he calls this making ‘the word of God fully known’, and in 1:23 he claims that it ‘has been preached to every creature under heaven’. This claim of its universal proclamation seems to parallel his statement concerning the gospel in Romans 10:18, ‘But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have; for “Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the end of the world”’. There may be an enigma here, that the gospel has been preached, is being preached and will be preached, and yet all are said to have heard it. Whatever Paul means by these two sayings—and many debate their meaning—nevertheless the universal nature of the Gospel is clear. The mystery encompasses all creation and all time. For a gospel—a ‘good news’—to be universal in import and action speaks powerfully of its eternal nature and its ultimate, eternal fruit.

## CHAPTER TEN

## Other Pauline Teaching on Mystery in Romans and I Timothy

### ROMANS 11:25

In the flow of his argument concerning Israel, Paul, in Romans chapters 9 to 11, is answering an objection someone may have brought up concerning the failure of Israel in history, namely, 'The word of God has failed!' (see 9:6). Paul avers that the word has not failed. Israel has failed, but that failure does not mean that God has abandoned Israel. They have stumbled, but not so as to fall for ever (11:11). Paul persists doggedly in using the doctrine of 'the remnant'. A remnant of Israel composed of blood descendants will be saved, but not all Israelites. It is God's business to 'have mercy upon whom [He] will have mercy'. All 'depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy' (9:15, 16). His use of the figure of the olive tree, of domestic and wild branches, is showing that God has had mercy on the Gentiles and has included them



in the olive tree,<sup>1</sup> and whilst Paul does not say it explicitly, this is the mystery (cf. 16:25–26). We cannot here open up the whole of Paul’s argument, but 11:25–26 and context needs to be pondered. The text is:

Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand the mystery, brethren; a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles come in, and so all Israel will be saved; as it is written,

‘The Deliverer will come from Zion,  
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob’;  
‘and this will be my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins.’

Paul is speaking of a special mystery, namely, the hardening of a *part* of Israel. This will continue until the full number of the Gentiles come in. To this point most commentators are in agreement with their interpretations. They say that once all the elect Gentiles come in, then something will happen by which ‘all Israel will be saved’. One school of thought is that which is set out in 11:13–24, and specifically that of 11:15, where it is implied that when Israel rejected Jesus as Messiah, then it was cut off, but the Gentiles were thereby allowed to come in. The acceptance of Israel will mean ‘life from the dead’; that is, a great

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<sup>1</sup> What is the olive tree? It must be Israel, but Israel as God has intended shall be one in which Gentiles are included, as in I Corinthians 12:13, Colossians 3:11, and Galatians 3:28. Paul’s use of the term ‘the Israel of God’, in Galatians 6:16, must have in view all Jews who have come, and will yet come, to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, and all Gentiles who likewise acknowledge him as their Messiah. The olive tree must, by nature of the case, be ‘the Israel of God’. It is profitable to recall that John the Baptist and Jesus—and later, Paul—indicated that blood descent from Abraham and Jacob did not qualify a person *per se* to be in God’s Israel. This indicates that both the Church and the Kingdom of God have their members from Jew and Gentile sources.

surge of life will come into the people of God and perhaps into the whole creation.<sup>2</sup> Another view is a simpler one. It says that the mystery is that ‘a hardening has come upon Israel until the full number of Gentiles come in, and so all Israel shall be saved’, and means that the hardening is there upon part of Israel, and upon a part only—the part that in Paul’s day and following has ever been hardened against Christ—and this will remain thus until the full number of the Gentiles comes in. When that full number of the Gentiles comes in it means all Israel will now have been saved. That is, the Jews who have come in at Pentecost and following, and the Jews who come in down through the times of the future, will all be in the Israel of God, will all constitute ‘the Israel of God’, so that when these are all one then *all Israel will have been saved!*

What, then, of the part of Israel that has been hardened? The text does not tell us. It does not say explicitly that they will no longer be hardened<sup>3</sup> and will then come in. We

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<sup>2</sup> At this point, Paul seems to indicate a great transformation of the people of God will take place with the inclusion (re-inclusion?) of Israelites who had once rejected Christ. Is this, however, the case? It can be argued that ‘the acceptance’ is of those who now see Jesus as their Messiah. Will there, then, be a time in history when this will happen, so to say, *en masse*? Because it seems to comport with 11:25–26, it is assumed a time will come in history when there will be a large part of continuing Jewry which will turn to Christ. It is profoundly to be hoped, but whether the text is referring to such a happening is not clear just from wedding 11:15 with 11:25–26.

<sup>3</sup> The thought is that they will be softened and come in. This is a wonderful thought, but does the text say it? No. Does it imply it? Not necessarily. If we are influenced by 11:15 to think there will be a national acceptance by Israel, then certainly we will see the hardening upon part of Israel as now turning to a softening. What we have not considered is that *only* a part of Israel has been hardened. What does this mean? It surely means that all those not hardened are part of ‘the Israel of God’. They are already saved, and their sins forgiven. We must keep in mind Paul’s former saying of 2:28–29, that ‘he is [only] a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal’.

have to understand that it is into the Israel of God that the Gentiles have been permitted and predestined to come.<sup>4</sup> Thus Paul's disquisition on the mystery in Ephesians 3:1–12—following his teaching of Ephesians 2:11–22—tells us that that will be a body in which Jew and Gentile are as one, and no distinctions are made such as were once made.

### ROMANS 16:25–27

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory for evermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.

This text is similar in idea, if not in format, to what Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:4–9, namely, that the mystery and also its revelation<sup>5</sup> have been kept in wraps, so to speak,

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<sup>4</sup> If 'the Israel of God' and 'the Church of Christ' are the one, then, when 'all Israel will be saved', into what will the Jews come? The answer must be that the Church, the *ecclesia*, is the Israel of God, but the use of that term would have been difficult to exercise in the early days of the Church, or, for that matter, afterwards. It would be signifying two Israels—an old one with the name 'Israel' unchanged, and new one called 'the Israel of God'. Paul's use of this term in Galatians 6:16 is adroit. Even so, there can only, ever, be one Israel, and that must be the Church; but to claim this would have created a furore and have caused confusion, so that use of the term *ecclesia* was a thoughtful and pacific one.

<sup>5</sup> The mystery is one thing, and its revelation another. This is what we have seen in our study of 'mystery' and 'revelation'. Mystery is what God has, is and will be doing. Revelation is the unveiling of the mystery to those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, and wills to obey—otherwise there is no revelation.

until the appropriate time of revelation. Paul said in Ephesians 3:5 that the mystery was at present being revealed to the apostles and prophets by the Spirit. Here in Romans 16, Paul is virtually saying this is the case, but he gives to ‘the prophetic writings’ a specific value in imparting the mystery. Just as Paul in Colossians 1:23 and Romans 10:18 has indicated the universality of the proclamation, so here he is saying the mystery is to be made known to all nations. Paul has inferred a number of times that when he preaches the gospel it will bring those to respond who will thereby understand the mystery of God. Here he is saying that the gospel, which includes the mystery to be proclaimed, will ‘bring about the obedience of faith’. The thought is the same.

What is ‘the obedience of faith’? In Romans 1:5, Paul speaks of Christ ‘through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations’. Likewise in Romans 15:18–19 he writes:

For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me to win obedience from the Gentiles by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders . . .

That hearing the gospel is hearing a command, and that believing is obeying, is seen in many New Testament passages:

And the word of God increased, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests were obedient to the faith (Acts 6:7).

But they have not all obeyed the gospel . . . ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people’ (Rom. 10:16, 21).

... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (II Thess. 1:7–8).

... chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood (I Pet. 1:2).

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren (I Pet. 1:22).

### I TIMOTHY 3:8–9

Deacons likewise must be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain; they must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.

This is a valuable passage, even though small, for it first tells us the condition for holding the mystery of the faith, namely, having a clear conscience. Just as in I Corinthians 13:2 it is vain and pointless ‘to understand all mysteries and [have] all knowledge’ without love, so the mystery of the faith cannot properly be known without a clear conscience. Already in this Letter, Paul has talked about ‘holding faith and a good conscience’, and has added, ‘By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith’ (I Tim. 1:19). What, then, is the mystery of faith? It is surely what is believed from the heart by members of Christ’s body, the Church, and ‘holding’ involves the practice which arises from that deposit of truth. This is borne out by our next reference.

**I TIMOTHY 3:16**

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion:  
He was manifested in the flesh,  
vindicated in the Spirit,  
seen by angels,  
preached among the nations,  
believed on in the world,  
taken up in glory.

‘The mystery of our religion’ or ‘our godliness’ is the substance of the revelation of the mystery, and so what follows is descriptive of that religion or faith. The writer says that this is, without question, the way it is. When we look at ‘manifested’, ‘vindicated in the Spirit’, ‘seen by angels’, ‘preached among the nations’, ‘believed on in the world’, and ‘taken up in glory’, we recognise all the elements common to ‘mystery’, as Paul and others use the word. We can call it ‘the proclamation’ or the *kerugma*. It is what Paul calls elsewhere ‘the mystery of the gospel’. The elements are spelled out, and in this way are greatly helpful to show what is the mystery.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# The Meaning of Mystery in Revelation and II Thessalonians 2:3–9

## II THESSALONIANS 2:3–9

In this chapter, Paul is writing to members of the Christian congregation at Thessalonica who had been taught lately, by some, that the day of the Lord had come. Paul tells them this is not the case, since certain things must happen before that day can come. Paul had told them previously what was yet to happen. One will relate to a personage called ‘the man of sin’, ‘the son of perdition’, a counterpart no doubt to the Man of purity—Christ. Lawlessness was yet to so grow and ripen that a rebellion would happen—doubtless against God and His Kingdom—and in it this ‘son of perdition’ would be revealed. He would be found in the temple of God, that is, the Church, proclaiming himself to be God. All of these happenings Paul designates as ‘the mystery of lawlessness’. ‘Mystery’ may seem to be an esoteric term, but mystery is something which is revealed at the right time. The ‘man of sin’ will be exposed

for what he is, and lawlessness, also, for what it is. Paul is saying that another part of the mystery is that his—the ‘man of sin’s’—followers will be deluded by his counterfeit signs<sup>1</sup> and wonders into believing he is what he claims himself to be. God will be behind this delusion because the followers of this ‘lawless one’ will refuse to believe the truth and be saved. They will prefer the mystery of evil to that of God, of good. They will look on the ‘man of sin’ as God, and thereby earn themselves condemnation and destruction. It is clear to Paul’s readers that an immense blasphemy will take place, the like of which they would never even imagine. Evil being and evil action do constitute a mystery, but for the believer a revealed mystery, warning him of what lies ahead.

In passing, we may observe that ‘the knowledge of good and evil’ which the primal pair sought to obtain in Genesis chapter 3, is, in fact, no true knowledge of good and evil. To know good and to know evil is to give oneself over to the good and over to the evil—an impossible operation. To give oneself over to good is to reject evil, but even then the ‘good’ can only be known by revelation and never by some self-determined good action, or giving oneself over to the good.<sup>2</sup> One gives oneself to God, who

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<sup>1</sup> When we say ‘counterfeit signs’, we mean that signs and wonders are appropriate when they are initiated by God. Satan seeks to emulate good, and thereby prove himself to be good. So, then, ‘counterfeit’ really means ‘counterpart’. Everything of God, Satan seeks to reproduce in counterparts. For example, Revelation chapter 13 shows us a counterpart unholy trinity. We will see in Revelation 17 that there is a ‘woman of sin’, Babylon, and she seeks to outdo the woman of Revelation 12: and so on.

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 5:14 speaks about *distinguishing* between good and evil, which is other than knowing, existentially, what is good and evil.



alone knows good and evil, since He is 'God over all'. To give oneself over to evil is to reject good and to live in the horror and deceit of evil. No human being can outlast the evil he 'knows': in fact he never knows evil, but simply feels its impact. Evil is so deceitful that it cannot be known by men and angels in its true nature. As to 'good' it is only God who knows it since He is good! It is the most vaunting thing of all human pride for a person to claim that he or she can know good, or—for that matter—evil.

### REVELATION 10:7

In this chapter we meet something very much like Paul's understanding of 'the mystery'. We see the 'mighty angel' with a little scroll open in his hand. In Revelation 5 we see in God's hand the seven-sealed scroll which only the Slain Lamb can take and open, and his opening really involves all of history with its judgments and other actions. 'Little scroll' in this 10th chapter probably, then, refers to one event, and at first it seems to be a lion roaring accompanied by seven thunders. These thunders and their message seem to be for John only, for he is told to seal them up and not allow them to be heard, that is, interpreted and understood. Then the event happens, of the angel standing astride of sea and land, lifting his right hand to heaven, swearing by the Creator of all things:

that there should be no more delay, but that in the days of the trumpet call to be sounded by the seventh angel, the mystery of God, as he announced to his servants the prophets, should be fulfilled.

This must surely mean that what Paul calls ‘the plan of the mystery’ is about to be consummated.<sup>3</sup> In both Ephesians and Colossians the prophets, or the apostles and prophets, have the mystery shown to them by the Holy Spirit so that they may understand and proclaim it.<sup>4</sup> Revelation chapter 10 is congruent with the whole prophecy John has received and is to deliver.<sup>5</sup> Therefore we can see, perhaps, that John’s entire prophecy is, in reality, the mystery of God. Certainly it is about the mystery.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that, in the Book of the Revelation, there is a number of climaxes or consummations. This can be understood when we see that the happenings in the Book are not really linear, but a series of concentric circles, so that the same happenings are often described from a different point of view.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 3:4–5 says this mystery was not made known to the sons of men in other generations, but is now made known to the prophets and apostles by the Spirit. Colossians 1:26 speaks of ‘the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made known to the saints’. Romans 16:25–26 speaks of:

the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith.

Our conclusion would seem to be that the prophets did speak of the mystery, but not in terms which in their time disclosed the mystery: this was left for the appropriate time when the Spirit would make it known. The point we take is that the disclosure of the mystery is congruent with the prophets, and that, whilst it was hidden for generations, its reality lay in the prophets’ writings.

<sup>5</sup> Revelation 1:1–3 makes it clear that John the Divine is God’s prophet, and all within the Book of the Revelation is prophecy which ought to be read, heard and obeyed. Revelation 1:4ff. shows that it is to be delivered to the seven churches of Asia, sometimes taken to be the sevenfold church and so representative of the Church in all ages. Revelation 22:6, 7, 9, 10, 18, 19 show us that the prophecy is God’s pure message and must be obeyed under pain of judgment.

## REVELATION 17

We see in Revelation chapter 12 the mystery of the True Woman. The word ‘mystery’ is not explicitly present, but the presentation of the True Woman, being in apocalyptic language, must certainly present mystery to the viewer. In chapter 17 we have the mystery of the ‘woman of sin’, if we be permitted to coin that term—the female parallel to ‘the man of sin’. Verses 1–5 have a vivid description of this evil personification of womanhood. Verse 5 says, ‘and on her forehead was written a name of mystery: “Babylon the great, mother of harlots and earth’s abominations”’.

If for a moment we were to compare her with the wondrous Woman in Revelation 12, and were to see a name written on the head of that Woman, then it would surely be ‘True Woman the great, mother of all God’s children and of all earth’s holy things’. The unholy woman of chapter 17 is horrible because she is ‘drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the martyrs of Jesus’. The True Woman, by contrast, is the mother of the Christ and all the saints.

It is remarkable, though understandable, that, when John views this unholy, gaudily dressed woman, he is startled—‘When I saw her I marvelled’. John was greatly taken with her impressive appearance. ‘But the angel said to me, “Why marvel? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her.”’

As we have said before, mystery for the gnostics and mystics was something which was to be guarded carefully, and not opened to those as yet uninitiated by the rites and ceremonies. For God’s people, mysteries are to be revealed—mystery is the object of revelation—so that they will be

understood. Of course, we keep in mind that, as a mystery is opened to the faithful, it is at the same time closed to the unfaithful or faithless of hearers. John then proceeds, in the light of his own prophecy, to reveal who and what the unholy woman really is. In one sense we are back in II Thessalonians chapter 2, except that it is the 'woman of sin' with whom we are dealing and not the 'man of sin'. In this 17th chapter, the woman is related to the Beast of the previous chapters and with 'the ten kings of the earth', and both—the Beast and the kings—are related to Daniel's prophecy, though it is not our purpose here to deal with this matter.

The point we draw is that what is God's plan and purpose is a mystery which God gladly reveals to His beloved. Let none of us think it possible for us to understand evil. We only need to know what God reveals and nothing more than that.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

# A Conclusion as to the Matter of the Divine Mystery and Mysteries

### **A FORENOTE TO AN ESSAY ON 'THE MYSTERY OF GOD'**

#### **Introduction to the Forenote**

In our introductory chapters we tried to fathom something of the meaning of 'the mystery of God'. In following chapters we sought to look at passages in the Scriptures which related to this mystery, and to see the variations of meaning and the nature of the revelation of the mystery and its accompanying mysteries. The various observations which follow, below, are meant to stimulate our thinking and perhaps bring a little order to it before we launch into an essay which will try to draw together all that has been said. This may help to make the essay more intelligible.

### Comments on the Idea of ‘the Mystery’ and ‘the Mysteries’

We have seen that the word ‘mystery’ is found both in the singular and plural numbers. We can safely say that ‘the mystery’ is the overall reality of God, and His plan for the history of creation. We can also safely say that ‘the mysteries’, though each one in itself, yet all are parts of the one great mystery.

A mystery is something which is revealed by God at the appropriate time regarding the development of history, and which reveals the intention and action of God in regard to that which ought to be known, especially by the elect—those who are willing to hear and act upon what they hear.

A mystery is never a puzzle to be solved, or requires the reduction of its elements to rational categories whereby we may claim that we have *formulated* the mystery. What we formulate could not then be called a mystery, in the biblical sense, in which case it would no longer be called a biblical mystery. At the most, this might be said to be the substance of the mystery, but it could not, then, be wholly mystery. Paul, in I Corinthians 13, can at least visualise a person who might claim to understand all mysteries and have all knowledge, and yet be nothing because, in fact, he does not truly know the mysteries, since he does not live in them by means of divine love (*agape*). Probably there is no such person, but Paul is saying—by visualising hypothetically such a one—that *a mystery without love does not remain a mystery*. It goes against the essential nature of a godly mystery. This leads us on to Christ’s warning in the Synoptic Gospels, that the mystery will only open up to the one truly hearing. Truly hearing means to listen, to gather what is said, and then to act upon it. Parables were

told in order not to reveal, but to conceal the revelation from those who would not properly hear. A case could arise when one thought one knew the mystery, and could perhaps spell it out, but failure to act upon it would mean that what the person thought he knew would, in fact, have been taken away from him.

We have seen that the mystery of God can only be understood by the revelation of the Holy Spirit to the hearer. That revelation is not simply a proposition, though it may be the subject and object of propositions. In no case can the proposition or propositions themselves constitute the mystery. We have seen above that mysteries are not themselves tenuous. They are the divine and eternal realities, revealed to Man by God's Spirit. They are substantial, immutable, the way God is working in His wisdom and purpose. A person's *relationship* with a mystery is, nevertheless, tenuous. When one does not live in the mystery, that is to say, his—or her—mind is not always humble before what he hears, and his spirit not always obedient, then that one loses the mystery. Since it was never a puzzle to be solved, or a proposition to be retained, but a life to be lived, then the mystery 'closes up again', so to speak. He is outside of it. This conclusion becomes intelligible when we realise that God is the mystery, His mystery is conveyed in and by the Son and the Spirit, and is concerned with how persons live in God and in His plan for human and creational history. One of the beautiful things of living in the Spirit is that the mystery never becomes effete, dull, conquered in its meaning and so a thing which is matter-of-fact. To the contrary, it is the mystery which constantly is alive and fresh, always giving delight.

The mystery is thus the will of God, the One who keeps His own counsel but reveals it through His prophets

insofar as it concerns Man in his progress through history (cf. Amos 3:7). Thus 'the whole counsel of God' is that wisdom by which He had determined, before time, the course of the history of the creation and Man as His special object of redeeming grace and ultimate glorification. The outworking of that plan is in time, and is revealed to the elect so that they will understand the context in which they live, and the actions of God which would otherwise have baffled them. By this 'insight and wisdom' of the purpose and plan of God, they would more understandingly live their lives.

The practical outworking of the mystery speaks of the people of God, Israel, now being one with the received people of God who have come through the Cross of Christ, that is, those known as Gentiles. This oneness in which is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free person, must mean that humanity which fell at the Fall in Eden is now restored into one people through the blood of the Cross, and that such a people will go on to be both sanctified and glorified in the consummation of history. The inheritance will be for all who are this people of God, without any regard for their ethnic origins, their gender or their vocational positions in time.

To know the mystery, then, is to know the whole thrust and pattern of God's history, from the beginning of creation through to the new creation when there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Before that culminating action, God is concerned with the glory of His creation, including the glory and glorification of Man. To fulfil His plan and purpose, He has to deal with the matter of personalised evil in celestial creatures (angels, principalities and powers) and the terrestrial creature (Man). Part of the mystery is that He



does this by the incarnation of His begotten Son, Jesus of Nazareth, and then through that Son's body, called the Church. To the Church, the mystery of God is revealed, and those of the Church are to proclaim the gospel and its mystery to all humanity. Celestial powers, both good and fallen, see the grace of God and the plan of that grace working out through the Church.

There will be a time, then—a point in history—when God's plan will climax and be completed. This will mean that the mystery of God and all His mysteries will find their completion in Him. God will thus be vindicated, if there needs to be talk about the justification of God, commonly known in theology as 'theodicy'; that is, the justification of God as He creates and rules over a world in which there is both righteousness and wickedness at the one time. Then it will be seen that the mystery of God is not some ethereal and mystical notion, but the reality of the eternal, living God. It will be seen that the mystery of evil is vanquished and obliterated for ever, and the mystery of godliness is established for ever.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# An Essay on The Mystery and the Mysteries of God —Part 1

This essay would be, perhaps, one of the most difficult one might undertake. This is mainly because its primary terms are apt to be misunderstood. For example, if this essay were abstracted from this book and its background, then the term ‘mystery’ would be understood in what we might call ‘a natural way’, that is, as that entity which is either unreal or imagined, or mystical or parasensory. Since it is none of these, but biblically is a reality which exists because its Author is God who chooses only to communicate reality by a revelation, then the difficulty of reasoning it as we do a proposition from received data must be understood. Even so, there is a good case which can be argued for its nature and authenticity. Mystery is a disclosure of God’s mind and action for His creation which Man’s mind, unaided, cannot grasp.

A few years ago I was watching a Peter Ross *Sunday Afternoon* television session on the ABC in which

appeared two young men who were obviously sophisticated, avant-garde types. One was reviewing a book by Graham Greene, and the other one a volume with the title *Sacred Poetry*. I forget which of Greene's books the first reviewer was discussing, but it drew him into an appreciation of all of that author's writing.

'There is something about Greene which fascinates me', he said. 'I am quite taken by all his writing, but I can't pin down what he is at. There is a mystery about it all. I want to understand what he is trying to do, but it baffles me. It goes beyond what we normally know or think. It is like penetrating into something we do not know. Obviously he knows what he is at, but I need it to be interpreted to me.'

He certainly looked baffled, but at the same time delighted that Greene was going beyond the bounds he expected of novel writers. 'He is not just metaphysical, but has something of a spiritual quality which I cannot comprehend.'

I forget most of what was said, but remember that he referred to the author as having had a religious experience, yet none of that obtruding in the novel.

'It was like being taught by a person who has grasped something, is obsessed by it, and I want to get to know it.'

For a time he and Peter Ross discussed Graham Greene and his novels, as well as his unusual life, but both could come to no conclusion.

The second reviewer confessed that religious poetry was not at all in his line. He had been greatly taken by the volume of *Sacred Poetry*. In this case it was not an anthology, but a book by the one writer. He talked quite freely about the material. Then he said suddenly, 'He is a man who has hold of wonderful material. I concluded he is a hierophant.'

Peter Ross and the other reviewer seemed to know what ‘hierophant’ meant. I didn’t, but I wrote the word down, determined to discover its meaning later.

‘You see’, he was saying, ‘he is a very wise man. He has wisdom of a most unusual order. When he writes he opens up areas to you that you do not seem to see in any prose writing. I think we all admire the shaman and the guru, and all wise persons, even if we do not fully understand them. This kind of person is generally old and has tapped something beyond what we think and see in life. He takes us out into a different realm.’

As far as I could see, these two young men, brilliant and knowledgeable as they were, had not yet found what they greatly desired to find, that is, the wisdom of Greene and the writer of *Sacred Poetry*. I remembered reading a volume of John Donne’s works titled *Metaphysical Poems*. I knew that it was a prescribed book for English in secondary schools, but also knew it would not have gone down with students or teachers if it had been titled *Religious Poetry*, which, reasonably speaking, it is. John Donne of course wrote much love poetry which could not be called ‘religious’, and it is well known that he had a powerful change in his life which greatly altered his subject matter for ever. I think Donne could be called a hierophant, which, by the way, *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* described as ‘an official expounder of sacred mysteries or ceremonies . . . an initiating or presiding priest . . . the minister of any “revelation”’: the interpreter of any esoteric principle’.

It is clear that human beings like mystery of one sort or another. If mystery is missing, then—as this essay will seek to show—life lacks a sense of the unusual, the different, and the hidden meaning. There is nothing to anticipate

beyond the ordinary round. That is why even writers of whodunits and other mystery yarns evoke some interest and following. Of course, there is no lack of persons who peddle mystery, whether in religions, or in secret societies, gnosticism and prognostication. Nostradamus, Spiritualism, and even Scientism can stimulate those in search of mystery.

In chapter 4 of this present book, we discussed the wisdom of Koheleth, that is, ‘The Preacher’, the writer of the book *Ecclesiastes*. We noted that this man had tried, by what we might call the empirical–scientific method, to determine what is true wisdom. He experimented with ‘everything under the sun’, that is, all that is on the horizontal level—that which is tangible to the five senses. He found that he could not develop a philosophy of the horizontal, nor could he find a wisdom of the five senses and three-dimensional world. Like another wise preacher, Peter Forsyth,<sup>1</sup> he discovered that ‘conscience is that which makes us eternal’. We discussed the fact of a reaction to a so-called ‘horizontal’ philosophy. Often such a reaction brings thinkers to a vertical philosophy or religion. It creates hyper-spiritual practitioners: they can only relate to that which is above the horizontal, which is ‘spiritual’, and are often found as ascetics, mystics and those who have esoteric religious notions and practices. Koheleth found that God had ‘made everything beautiful in its own time [and had] put eternity into man’s mind, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end’ (Eccl. 3:11).

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<sup>1</sup> A theologian of the Congregational Church who died in 1921, and was a man of unusual spiritual depth. One could say, ‘A hierophant, indeed!’

The very fact of God's Being gave depth to everything, and a meaning which could not be confined to the horizontal, so-called. Bring God into the discussion, and the true moral and spiritual questions arise and need answering. One powerful statement of his was, 'I said; "I will be wise"; but it was far from me. That which is, is far off, and deep, very deep.' I am sure my two reviewer friends would agree with the old Preacher.

What Koheleth arrives at, surely, is a horizontal-vertical view of the world. The horizontal is no end in itself, but it is very much part of living—part of the whole—and is essential to knowing what is true wisdom. Likewise, the vertical gives true meaning to the horizontal and the horizontal does likewise to the vertical. Man and the creation, regarded as ends in themselves, are considered by Koheleth to constitute 'vanity and a striving after wind'. When God is left out of the equation nothing remains in reality. When we go beyond temporal reality to some imagined spirituality, then we become unreal, and at best we are dualists. We need the wisdom which Koheleth discovered.

I have considered writing a monograph titled *History Without Mystery*. It is certain that humanity likes its bit of mystery and, if not given it, will make it, one way or another. This is no proof that mystery is an ontological entity,<sup>2</sup> nor is it an indication that history without mystery is dull, indeed. The world is quite religious, given all its religions and given all its cultures. We do not judge

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<sup>2</sup> Ontology is a study of the metaphysics of being, but is generally understood as 'things as they really are'.

whether it is better or worse off for these things, but in them all some degree of mystery certainly exists. It is clear that cultures have their shamans, gurus, pundits, elders and teachers, and that these offer a wide range of elements of mystery. There have been great ethico-religious leaders like Confucius, Buddha, Mahomet and others. Rites and ceremonies also have their origins and practice founded to some degree in ancient mystery. Communism or fascism have not been able to obliterate cultural and religious practice, for the reason that they are ideologies.

As such, they maintain there is no mystery. An ideology is a formula for righting everything in this world, and works on the basis of the practical, non-mysterious nature of all things. Going underground under totalitarian pressure of ideologies, religions and cultures seem to gain strength for a resurgence when political domination collapses. The very pressures of an ideology create opposition and a back pressure against them, and, in that regard, ideologies can never succeed. They lack the delight and relief which can come from mystery.

In Western history we can trace much of the religious nature of its culture. The Renaissance, following a certain medieval darkness, brought a form of humanism, which, in turn, brought relief from superstition and preoccupation with the occult. The Renaissance did not lack some sense of mystery, as its forms of art, music and architecture clearly show, but it revelled in the freedom of a newly discovered humanity. The Reformation effected a revolution of what we might call 'liberating faith'. That is, faith as opposed to crass religiosity; faith in a God who loved Man and liberated him from the bondage of his conscience. From the time of the Renaissance arts of every kind flourished. With the advent of the Age of Reason and the

Enlightenment<sup>3</sup> humanism flourished, and cultural and religious elements were being subjected to critical examination. The development of scientific examination of the text of the Bible brought a different hermeneutic, a new comprehension of the Bible as a collection of documents which could be subjected to human scrutiny and assessed on the laws of human reasoning. Because of these views there was a loss of the formerly held authority of the Bible.

As for mystery, the well-known Irish deist, John Toland, wrote a book titled *Christianity Not Mysterious* at the end of the 17th century.<sup>4</sup> This book was premature, but its successors have been many down through the past couple of centuries. The objectivity of theology practised by some Reformers, and especially their successors, has sometimes denied validity to subjective experience as being part of true theology. Of course, the debate has widened considerably since the age of Toland. Eberhard Jüngel has written:

One of the dark puzzles of the history of theology is the way in which the positive New Testament understanding of mystery has constantly been suppressed hermeneutically in theology. Talk about God is often understood in the tradition of mysterious talk. But it was thought to be mysterious because its object, God, cannot actually be known by our thinking. *Talk* about God is

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<sup>3</sup> 'The Age of Reason and the Enlightenment' was an 18th century rationalist philosophical movement. It had a strong impact in its time and has greatly influenced modern thinking. It has affinities with Hellenic thinking—the principle that Man can reason out all things. The Hellenes —Greeks—were nevertheless people who had their own mysteries of legends and myths. Life was often quite superstitious in regard to the using of portents and other omens.

<sup>4</sup> It is said that Toland suffered loss of any professional prospect and was black-listed by all society in England. So deep-seated was the belief in the mystery of religion, that his generation could not stomach this adventure into rationalistic religion.



accordingly regarded as *inauthentic* talk. This hermeneutical skepticism with regard to the speakability of God can be so intensified that the demand is made not to speak of God at all because our thought cannot genuinely know him. It is virtually a kind of theological self-commendation to introduce 'God' as an unspeakable term. As doubly enlightened theologians, we have been taught that what cannot be *known* is something we cannot *talk* about. And 'whereof one cannot speak, therefore one must be silent.'<sup>5</sup>

The Reformed Evangelical hermeneutic has not been left untouched. Much evangelical theology today is so caught up in the desire to be rational and prove its categories of thought by clear reasoning, that the mysterious has all but vanished. If there is mystery in the Scriptures as the very text shows, then it must be shown there is nothing actually mysterious—so the new evangelical hermeneutic goes—but that its seemingly mysterious nature can be rationalised and brought to logical, propositional understanding. In this sense such evangelicals are children of the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. The danger is that they will miss the dynamics of the mystery and its mysteries, and thus have a stunted gospel; one which seeks to deal with the sin of Man through a *kerugma* of salvation, but then misses, to a great degree, the significance of the mystery of God in the affairs of Man, creation and history.

We have in biblical fact a whole body of devotional and theological materials which deals with the love and worship for God that the saints have had down through the ages. The Psalms and many of the prophecies of the Old Testament are in verse and song, and their revelations of God are profound. Love for God is almost always the

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<sup>5</sup> Eberhard Jüngel, *God As the Mystery of the World*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1983, p. 251.

response to God's love for the worshipper. Indeed the worshipper is created from that Divine love. Relationality between God and Man, Man and God and creation, are very powerful themes. Whereas artists, writers and poets speak of their inspiration from the Muses, the word 'Muses' is but an acknowledgment that their fine works do not proceed from themselves, from their egos, but from some power outside them, so almost magical are their creative efforts. The astute Christian substitutes the term 'Holy Spirit' for 'Muses'. It is true that in the primary sense only God is Creator, but being in God's image we, too, create on a secondary level, always using the plastic things of creation and of our powerful imaginations to bring through the mystery, that which is above the horizontal as the mundane: not that anything in all creation is essentially mundane. We seem to be filled with icons that communicate something of a mystery—a kind of 'other-worldliness'—though this mystery cannot be said to be the mystery of which we have spoken in this present book. A study of Christian hymnology, devotional literature and liturgiology should convince us that Man, on the whole, does not live barrenly on the horizontal. Rarely is a human being found who lives solely on the horizontal plane. Tiring of this flat existence, that one will seek to titillate the palate with something supra-mundane, even if he—or she—has to invent unreality! That 'God has put eternity into his heart' seems to determine the true measure of Man, always being pushed forward to what we might call 'the supra-natural'.

When we have 'history without mystery', human beings will invent their own mystery or descend to the mystiques that surrounded the old idols. They will make new idols which they can worship. To develop the mystiques of

worship is to make a substitute for worship of the Living God. Paul's treatment of this in Romans 1:18–25 still stands as one of the best interpretations of that matter. Man desires worship, and some link with the numinous. The rich development of worship in the Christianity of the early church was powerful for the new devotees, but it arose, not as a thing in itself, but as the outcome of dynamic truth: the simple, but profound, gospel. When true doctrine falters and is emasculated, then worship becomes weakened, or veers towards a sacramental sacerdotalism which produces something of its own awe, or an egalitarianism which destroys the awe innate in true biblical worship.

Where mystery is missing in what we call 'the secular world',<sup>6</sup> it soon manufactures its own mystiques, be they of the idolatrous kind—mentioned above—or of religionless nature, such as is shown and known in hedonism which we find even in the arts, for here a kind of 'mystery' is acknowledged. Aesthetic pleasure is often linked with pleasure for its own sake. It is found in sports and the religion of the amphitheatre, with its gods, its devotees, its rituals and ceremonies. It is often found through technology which aids the mysterious to be devised and developed

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'secular' is always opposed to the term 'sacred'. We know that much which is called sacred is humanly invented and structured. Paul spoke of much of Israel having 'zeal without knowledge'—a profound observation. Religious categories are not necessarily sacred in the deepest meaning of that term. The truly sacred is received by faith and is holy, drawing forth true worship. If we say that all things which are not 'religious' are 'secular', then we have missed the point of the beauty of creation and the reasonable brilliance of technology—and so on. This kind of dualism of the material and spiritual, and the monism which sometimes appears to regard them as one, are not the answer. Esau was called a 'profane' or 'secular' person because he disregarded the covenantal inheritance with its material and spiritual elements. Perhaps the best synonym for 'secular' is 'anti-God'.

through electronics, through films, videos and the world of cyber space. There is no end to devising mystery, but ultimately there is no satisfactory response to this in the human heart. In that ultimate it knows the difference between what is devised and what is created, what is manufactured and what is the eternal.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## An Essay on The Mystery and the Mysteries of God —Part 2

We have spoken of a general high regard for wisdom, hence the occupations of hierophants, shamans, gurus, pundits, elders and the like. With many of these wisdom leaders there is a keen regard for the occult, for what we call 'white magic' and 'black magic'. There is a recognition that, mostly, human beings have a desire for something beyond the three-dimensional world and its living with the five senses. Hence such things as Freemasonry and other semi-occultic and wholly occultic cultuses. There is, of course, a commonsense wisdom which is found in every culture on the ways of going about human, social living. Biblical books such as 'Proverbs' and 'Ecclesiastes', and apocryphal books such as 'The Wisdom of Solomon' and 'Ecclesiasticus' are wisdom writings. Most cultures have their similar wisdom recorded or passed orally from generation to generation through the wise men or women.

The early Christians regarded the wisdom of the Gnostics and similar philosophic and religious systems as mischievous and without appropriate basis, with bias against the God of the Bible, and they felt it right to expose them as dangerous. This attack was both within the New Testament and in the writings of some leading Christian scholars of the early centuries. Likewise, later, great debate raged between Christian and Muslim scholars.

Paul, for one, does not regard proponents of ‘worldly wisdom’ with any tolerance. He knows the immense power of any system of wisdom to distort the truth. He opposes the wisdom of God to ‘the wisdom of this world’. The following long quote from Paul’s writings (I Cor 1:17 – 2:13) certainly takes up the theme of two kinds of wisdom:<sup>1</sup>

For Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written,

‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.’

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the ideas in this chapter may seem to repeat those of chapter 7. However, the main point taken there was mystery, with only a small mention of wisdom. Here the main point is wisdom, with a smaller reference to mystery.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord.'

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the heart of man conceived,  
what God has prepared for those who love him,'

God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit.

Paul is a proponent of Godly wisdom, not only the wisdom he learned in Judaism, but also wisdom which had come to him as a great treasure in his encounter with Christ and the apostolic faith. At the conclusion(s) of his doctrinal presentation of the righteousness of God in Romans chapters 1 to 11, he cries, doxologically, ‘O the depths of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!’ He can scarcely find words to describe God’s wisdom and knowledge which he has outlined in those eleven chapters. As we have already seen in Romans 16:25–26, he calls this ‘the revelation of the mystery’. In Ephesians 1:9 he says, ‘He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will’, and he prays (1: 17), ‘that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him’.

Paul, then, is deeply desirous that his readers in the First Corinthian Epistle should be able to distinguish between human wisdom and Godly wisdom. God, he avers, does not simply allow the wisdom of the world to be one amongst many wisdoms. He sees this kind of wisdom as opposing the powerful word of the Cross:

For it is written,  
 ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
 and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart’ (1:19).

That is, God will destroy such wisdom. Again, in 3:18–20, God says He will catch the so-called wise in their craftiness:

Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise.



For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their craftiness,' and again, 'The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.'

It is apparent to Paul that God pursues those who would oppose their worldly wisdom to His Godly wisdom, that which we have seen to be the powerful mystery which is His plan, His purpose, His counsel and His will. He does not take the enmity of such wisdom lightly.

If we follow through our long quote (above) from I Corinthians, we see that the 'wise man', the 'scribe', the 'debater', are shown to be foolish. It is not by such wisdom as theirs that men and women come to know God. To the contrary: God's wisdom is that they may *not* know Him through their wisdom. 'The folly of what we preach' is the true wisdom of God. Jews, on the one hand, require signs to show that Jesus as Messiah is authentic, that he has come to deliver them from Rome and exert his divinely given power. The Cross to them was anathema; it could not be the wisdom of God, and certainly it was not an object—the object—of power.<sup>2</sup> The Greek desired a divine figure—should he claim to be the Saviour of the world—to fit their ideas of wisdom. Wisdom and beauty defined the most aesthetic of heroes, but a Cross was the sign of all that was ugly and distorted. In verse 17, Paul said he could have preached with 'eloquent wisdom', but then it would have

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<sup>2</sup> The theme of power in the Old and New Testaments is one of immense significance and importance. Whilst there may have been corrupt uses of political power in Jewish history, the fact that God is the God of power was primary in the thinking of true Israelites. Such power dethroned all gods, lords and idols. God was Creator and Lord of all nations. It was clear why Paul as a Pharisee hotly denied the authenticity of the Christian Messiah—so-called. The way of power, to Saul of Tarsus, was blasphemy of the worst order.

had to fit Greek thinking which was foreign to Hebraic ways of reasoning. It would have to be a ‘wisdom’ other than that of the Cross. Thus the Jews see Paul’s so-called wisdom to be no less than a scandal, and the Greeks, as vapid stupidity. How could a hanged criminal be the Saviour of the world?

Paul then makes the amazing statement, ‘But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [i.e. ‘Christ crucified’ is] the power of God and the wisdom of God’. One would think that both Jew and Greek would have a good case against the Christian gospel, for on grounds of plain reasoning this mystery sounds highly ludicrous.<sup>3</sup> Many Christians today would be scandalised, also, if they realised the ‘crudity of the Cross’, as it would have been proclaimed by the early Church. Nothing of romance or the aesthetic was proclaimed in that primitive *kerugma*. It might be surprising were we to abstract from our traditional shaping of the message of the Cross, the aesthetic and romantic accretions that have accrued. There has been an unconscious ‘demythologising’ of its ancient scandal.

It seems that some of the church members at Corinth had forgotten their early, humble beginnings, and were now

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<sup>3</sup> Christians sometimes are ashamed of the gospel which seems to be un-intellectual, and so, unattractive. Perhaps they have identified it with a dry ecclesiasticism. Evangelicals are often given to try to adorn the message with something stimulating, hence ‘eloquent wisdom’ which seeks to counter the simplicity of the gospel. One doubts that they have even begun to understand the vast dimensions of the ‘mystery of the faith’. It is dismally true, also, that—as someone has said—‘Ecclesiology has killed soteriology’. Rightly speaking, this cannot be the case, since soteriology is the basis for a true ecclesiology, but we may have, in many cases, moved so far from the dynamics of interrelationships and the society of love portrayed by the early church, that our ecclesiology has adversely affected our soteriology. The matter needs to be thoroughly examined.

adorning the gospel, or even syncretising it, with Greek wisdom. As seemingly foolish, they had shamed the (so-called) wise ones—both Jew and Greek—by their acceptance and consequent proclamation of the wisdom and power of God as residing in the Cross. Paul says that Christ has been made our wisdom—something we can understand in the light of the Ephesian and Colossian uses of ‘wisdom and knowledge’.<sup>4</sup>

In chapter 2, Paul continues his argument. He had not come proclaiming the mystery of God—the gospel—‘in lofty words or wisdom’, or ‘in plausible words of wisdom’. Although in fear and trembling he had set out the gospel, yet it was nevertheless ‘in demonstration of the Spirit and of power’. This was so ‘that your faith should not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God’. The power and wisdom of God is solely ‘in Christ Jesus’.

Paul then goes on to speak about ‘a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification’. The wisdom spoke of things humanly inconceivable which God had prepared for those who love Him. Fortunately, the Spirit imparts these ‘deep things of God’ inwardly. Because we have received ‘not the spirit of the world’—that other foolish wisdom—‘but the Spirit [of] God’, then we can impart this wonderful wisdom to others. We can be clear proclaimers of the mystery of glorification, for this is what Paul claimed for it.

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<sup>4</sup> Probably the best translation of I Corinthians 1:30 is in the *NRSV*, ‘He [God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption’. A permissible translation could be ‘who became for us the wisdom from God in righteousness, sanctification and redemption’. This would show the vast measure of wisdom, which elsewhere is one with the mystery of God.

For the rest: we need to see afresh many statements such as we have dealt with in our investigation of Paul's theology of the mystery. These are: 'he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will'; 'that he may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation'; 'the mystery was made known to me by revelation'; 'the unsearchable riches of Christ'; 'the manifold wisdom of God'; 'the mystery of the gospel'; 'the mystery hidden for ages and generations'; 'teaching every man in all wisdom'; 'the knowledge of God's mystery, of Christ'; 'in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'; 'the mystery of lawlessness'; 'the mystery of the faith'; 'the mystery of our religion'. These statements, seen together at a glance, stir us with warmth, interest and a desire to be couched in the knowledge of God's wisdom, or God's mystery. Man's wisdom, so often delivered pontifically, portentously, or proudly, seems—by comparison with the deep but simple gospel wisdom—to be unrelated to the depths of God and of Man. Because a child can enter into the mystery of the Kingdom of God, the wisdom that the New Testament proclaims seems to be so fragile and even superficial that we wonder at our own delight in knowing the mystery of God in the face of massive human reasoning. The structures that human wisdom have built seem to make godly wisdom to be foolish. Yet, in history, godly wisdom has tumbled empires. The key to knowing it and living in it is unflinching humility and an ear always ready to hear, along with a will always ready to obey. Its source is God and its living dynamic is Christ crucified, active in history as the wisdom of God, and made known by the revealing Holy Spirit.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## Living in the Mystery

In Chapter 12 we included some statements regarding ‘the mystery’ and ‘the mysteries’. They were various general observations, all of which could be helpful. What I seek to do in this chapter is firstly to arrive at the ‘shape’ or the ‘structure’ of the mystery, so that we can see it, if possible, as a whole. Secondly, I will try to make further observations about the principles by which we may live in the mystery.

**THE ‘SHAPE’ OF THE MYSTERY**

Those who study and explicate ‘salvation history’ (*heilsgeschichte*) find the Bible to be close to perfect for such an exposition. The Bible might also be called ‘covenant history’ and even ‘sanctification history’. In fact, it might also be called ‘marriage history’. Doubtless, all of these great themes are encapsulated in ‘the mystery of God’ and all mysteries contained within Him that He cares to unveil to the world.

The best place, it would seem, to try to commence a coordination of all elements of the mystery would be

Christ's words in Mark 4:11, et al. Christ has said there is a mystery of the Kingdom of God, or, the Kingdom of Heaven. The parable of the sower is especially told to show that, out of four kinds of hearers, only one will really hear 'the mystery of the Kingdom'. As the matter of the Kingdom is opened in the Gospels, it can be seen that Christ is the King or the Messiah of the Kingdom. The Kingdom, as Jesus explained to Pilate, is not of this world. In this sense it can be said it is not a political kingdom, but a kingdom it is, whatever adjectives we may use for it. It was about the Kingdom that John and Jesus preached in the beginnings of the Gospels, that is, at the beginning of the gospel. Nicodemus, as we saw, was told he needed spiritual birth, first to see it, and then to enter it.

When we come to Acts chapter 1, we see that Jesus speaks during the forty days with his disciples on the matter of the Kingdom. This seems to be his entire subject—the mystery of the Kingdom. The baptism of the Holy Spirit is to launch them into the action of the Kingdom. Witnessing to Christ, that is, preaching the gospel, will be presenting the Kingdom of God to their hearers, and requires this power of the Spirit to do it. Why? As we have seen in I Corinthians 2:7–13, the Spirit is needed to open the mystery.

With this in mind, we may now come to the passage we studied in our previous chapter, namely, I Corinthians 1:17 – 2:13. The mystery of God which Paul declared to Israel (2:1) contains the eschatological mystery of the glorification of Christ's people (2:7f.).<sup>1</sup> In chapter 1 the wisdom of

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<sup>1</sup> As against Post-Reformation period individualism, we have to learn to speak and think of the Church as a corporate body. It is the whole 'Israel of God' which is to be glorified and made into a kingdom of priests unto God. Whilst the eschatological climax is to come, the body, the Church, is in the process of Kingdom living and Kingdom proclamation, and its *raison d'être* is to be seen this way.

God and the power of God are wholly in and by Christ crucified. That is to say, the whole wisdom of God lies in the act of the Cross. It alone can redeem sinful humanity. *There is no other way*, or God would surely have taken it. To win rebels requires the Cross, but it is deeper than that. To shape all history to its final glorification and sanctification requires nothing less than the Cross. There can be no triumphant Kingdom without the Cross. Christ, the Son of God incarnate, is Lord over all the nations and all history, not by virtue of his deity,<sup>2</sup> but by virtue of his humanity triumphing over all evil powers, all sin, death and flesh, *at the Cross*. He who does not know that, does not know the mystery of God. The plan of the mystery, the will and purpose of God is, by the power of that Cross, to unite all things in Christ, and for that matter to reconcile them, fill them up, and wholly harmonise them.

The mystery of God is, then, Christ, and Christ is the mystery by which God works. In him is all wisdom. Out of his unsearchable riches, out of inscrutable wisdom, all things move powerfully and inevitably to their climax. Nothing can prevent that. History is determined by the death of the Cross—including the Resurrection—and all history is under the hand of the Crucified Lamb who opens the seven-sealed book. By means of his action, the defeat of evil at the Cross is worked out in history until that evil is cast into the lake of fire.

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<sup>2</sup> It is impossible to enter into the coexistence of the deity and humanity of the Son, which is, in any case, a fact, but to speak of the work of Christ as being that accomplished in his deity is to make him Docetic. Enough has not been made of the work of his vicarious humanity. 'Jesus is Lord!' was the cry of the early Church.

Within that mystery is the mystery, the profound mystery of Christ and his Church. Out of the power of the Cross, Jew and Gentile are brought together, forming 'one new man'. This new humanity—or 'third race' as it has been called—is Christ's Bride, his body, and having received Christ's fullness it works with him in working out the plan of God. As it does, it is watched closely by 'principalities and powers'. The Church knows, and works in, 'the mystery of faith' and 'the mystery of godliness'. It knows all about its Lord who has achieved the victory of history, and it is as joined to him as a human body is joined to the head.

Now the whole world must listen to the King—Messiah—High Priest who, at this moment—and in all moments—is the true Ruler of the world, that is, he is 'King of kings and Lord of lords'. He also intercedes powerfully for all mankind and in all matters of history. His intercession is the power and action by which things come to their consummation. He brings creation to its renewal, its sanctification and glorification.

What we have written briefly, above, is the sum of the mystery and its component mysteries. We have already seen that there are four kinds of hearers of the mystery of the gospel, and only one of these truly hears. That one sees fully God's mystery unveiled and responds by surrendering to God, having faith in Christ, being entered into the Kingdom, receiving the forgiveness of sins, purification and sanctification, being justified and adopted by the Father into the Family, thus coming fully under Christ's Lordship and so working as part of the mystery, the plan leading to the final consummation.

Where and how we fit all the parts of this mystery does not greatly matter. Our minds are filled with the mystery,



and our spirits are alive with it. The Holy Spirit has revealed both the Father and the Son, and the meaning of their plan, and the way it is being outworked by the Triune God. The Church works and lives in faith, hope and love, looking for the day of the 'profound mystery', the day of the Wedding Feast of the Bride and the Lamb.

### **LIVING IN THE MYSTERY**

Human beings, on any score, have to discover or make an object for faith, their faith. Without faith of some kind, human beings are doomed to limited existence. Up to this point in history, no one has solved all the problems and dilemmas, and certainly not the matter of death. People seek to have faith in themselves and how they can make a worthwhile life. Idols and other icons are the stock-in-trade bases for some sort—or sorts—of faith. We haven't the opportunity to live a life in which we only proceed forward when everything about life is proven. Our faith may be misplaced, but at least we exercise faith.

We also need hope. Hebrews 11:1 tells us that 'faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen'. Much of life is related to 'things unseen', not that they are necessarily things of spiritual mystery. We need to have hope of some kind, or we are hopeless. A hopeless person is in danger of a breakdown, of a nightmarish existence, of emptiness and of suicide. If the things of God's mystery are not well-founded, and are only the concoctions of a religious imagination, then they are not substantial, and we are without authentic hope. We have gambled our dynamic hope on a nonentity.

The third element we need for useful living is love. Hatred, enmity, suspicion, jealousy and the like are difficult to live with, and will destroy us, at least in some measure. If we find little in the life of love—either in loving or being loved—then life will be empty. We will need to fill it up with the other loves we manufacture and devise, namely love of material things, or love of the artistic, of music, poetry, sculpture, history, creation and whatever! It is interesting that these latter things all have some element of mystery, albeit not of eternal mystery, since it is that alone which can give humanity full-bodied satisfaction.

For those who are convinced of the mystery and mysteries of God, the threefold way of faith, hope and love is assured. For those who seek to have this threefold way without God, nothing can be assured. The Jew, who represents religion and its dynamic signs, cannot be assured. He needs those signs, and where they are absent he is not assured.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, the Greek who would apply to the brilliance of the metaphysical and the transcendental has no basis on which to do so, other than myths or the obtaining of a reasoned reality by means of his intellection. What, then, is the material for intellection?

We have said that God is ever at communication, and in the Scriptures we find men and women who have heard the

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<sup>3</sup> We need to be fair, here, in our assessment of the Jew who opposed the Cross. The signs he knew mainly had to do with God exercising signs and wonders in Egypt, with Israel in mind. Travelling through the wilderness, the fulfilment of the promise to give Israel the Promised Land, and such signs as those which attended the life of Israel were sufficient reason for Israel's belief in God. If Messiah was to come, then he would come for the living God, the God who acts in signs and wonders. The Jews opposing Jesus did not see his signs, wonders and miracles, and least of all the sign of the Cross, his death and resurrection.

voice of God or detected His Presence in their lives. We have others who dread being cast out of that Presence, Cain being the first to articulate his fear: ‘Behold, thou hast driven me this day away from the ground; and from thy face I shall be hidden; and I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will slay me’. Even in his anger with God and his hatred of God, he knows God *is*, and that He is good towards even the evil. By contrast, we have a later person, Enoch who walked with God; or Abraham to whom ‘the God of glory appeared’; or a scheming Jacob who wrestled with God via his—God’s—own angel, and being in the Presence eventually cried, ‘This is . . . the house of God . . . this is the gate of heaven’.

We have endless examples of men and women living in mystery. One of the most outstanding is Moses to whom physical symbols such as fire and the glory cloud were shown. When he asked God that he might see His glory, he was not merely a curious voyeur. God’s telling him that he could not see His whole glory and live, did not mean God would not display His glory to the man—and behind him, the nation—who needed to know that glory. His words were the revelation of His glory:

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation (Exod. 34:6–7).

Israel of old and the renewed ‘Israel of God’ have lived on that revelation.

When a person determines to live on his own, in his own presence, and from that to make his own search for God,

then he finds himself enclosed in the cast-iron walls of his own ego. Chapter 11 of the Book of Hebrews tells us that men and women went out of themselves for the sake of truly knowing God, the otherwise unfathomable and inscrutable mystery. Men and women lived in that mystery, God first revealing Himself, and these seekers then being known of God before they knew Him, but by being known, knew Him.<sup>4</sup> It is not because human beings do not know that God exists that causes them pain: it is that they do know He exists but will not have Him as He is. In pain because devoid of the Presence, there seems to be no way back to God, nor any incentive great enough to cause them to relinquish their idols. The pain they know is the pain of *not* living in the mystery.

### CONCLUSION TO 'LIVING IN THE MYSTERY'

Paul claimed that every human being lives and moves and has his being in God. This is Man's dilemma, his problem, and his pain. How can he possibly get out of God? He cannot. He must then transmogrify the Presence and make it the non-Presence, or seek to live outside that Presence. Yet, if it is painful to live in the Presence under protest, it must be exceedingly painful to live in the Absence of the Presence, and the Presence of the Absence.

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<sup>4</sup> Paul seems cruel when he says, 'No one understands, no one seeks after God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong', and when he claims that Man in his rebellion does not wish to have the knowledge of God, doubtless this is because it is too painful (cf. Ps. 14:1-3; Rom. 3:10ff.; 1:28).

At this ‘last’, we must discard using philosophical terms such as ‘transcendence’, ‘immanence’, ‘finite’ and ‘infinite’, and in their place speak of ‘the loftiness of God’s holiness’, ‘the reality of His presence’, His Creatorhood and our creaturehood. We are not dealing with metaphysics of being, but the matter of sheer relationships. We are filial to His Paternal; subjects to His Kingship; creatures to His Creatorhood. The reason we live and move and have our being in Him is because He willed and made it that way on His creating of all things. Because we strained away from Him, stiffening in dislike of relationship and wishing ourselves to be self-existent, independent possessors of creation, desirous of our own presence and of the absence of God, we have no authentic mystery in which to live.

As we trace history and its ancient monuments to human worship of ‘the divine’, ‘the numinous’, ‘the wholly other’, ‘the monstrous idols’, ‘the substitutive icons’, we find that all this religious fear and passion has flowered forth from the human ego, or the fantasy of replacing the true God with imitative deities. Man in history has missed the explosive, but unclean, laughter of ‘that ancient serpent the devil’, who deceives Man in regard to God, and would, red-dragon-like in his mad blasphemy and crazed ambition, seek to replace the Creator–Redeemer. Even Man cannot live out the ego wishes of his autonomy, but is taken captive at the will of the personal Evil One.<sup>5</sup>

If, on the one hand, rebellious Man lives in the excruciating ‘Absence of the Presence’, then, on the other hand,

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<sup>5</sup> cf. II Timothy 2:26.

submitted Man lives in the delight of the Presence of the Presence. God who has always been Spirit, and who has always been invisible to us, has chosen to know His elect, and hence they have chosen to know Him. The mystery of God did not begin with Christ's word about such a mystery of his Kingdom, nor did Paul discover a mystery of recent origin. Its revelation was as recent as was he, but the mystery had been hidden through the ages. The writer of Hebrews could speak of Abel offering up true sacrifice as he lived in the mystery. The eschatological always lived close to the person of faith, and the person of faith was always eschatological in his understanding and anticipation. Abraham looked for a city to come, and he saw it as substantial and never as visionary. Moses endured persecution and suffering 'as seeing him who is invisible'. Paul taught us that we look not at the things which are visible, for they are transient, but we look at the things that are invisible and which lead us to 'an exceeding and great weight of glory' (see II Cor. 4:17-18).

Behind all our studies, doubtless the question has been being asked—even by men and women of faith—'How does one live in the mystery?' The answer is, 'Do not ask the *how*, for the reality is with you'. All men and women of faith have ever lived in the mystery. It may not be that they have known it consciously, but they have known it, else they would not have waited for its consummation. Whilst the mystery is hidden from the sight of those who are not willing to see, hear and obey, yet they do live in it, for the mystery is God, and His working history, and His finally consummating that history. In that sense, no one is outside the mystery, so factual it is, and so much it is in action.

At the last, then, let us see God solves no mystery for us, as one does a puzzle. A puzzle solved is solved for ever: a mystery lived in, is a mystery experienced. True, when it is first revealed, it ceases to be as unknown, but when known it requires continually the reverence due to the God of grace who brought us into it. When the awe and reverence die, then the mystery closes off again, as the way of life in which we live. It becomes inscrutable again, and requires repentance from pride and accession to humility to live afresh in it. All of us in Christ live in that mystery continually. The loss of mystery is the loss of vibrant and resonant living. Its return is the occasion of high joy.

We need to know that we, the people of faith, are God-bearers. He, as the Triune mystery, indwells us, and we indwell Him. This is why others wonder at us, but in simplicity we are glad to live in the mystery.

We look back, then, at the whole matter of the mystery. It is the mystery of God; it is the mystery of the history God works out; it is the mystery of the gospel which has, at its heart and as its heart, the mystery of the Cross. It is the mystery of a people who are God's family, God's covenant body, God's ones who have been redeemed within the mystery from human guilt and divine wrath, and who will arrive at the mystery of irreversible sanctification, glorification and perfection. These people are not a small sect in history, opposing wrong views, but secreting themselves from the mainstream of history. This mainstream is the object of the mystery. It is the possessor of creation, and under the Lord of all, the victorious Redeemer, the Cosmocrator, the great High Priest, it declares to all nations the mystery of the God of love, the God who is holy,

the God who planned in love, before time, to glorify His whole creation.

As we have said, this strange and wonderful people live humbly in faith, hope and love, and by that living destroy the ever-working of the Man of sin and the Woman of impurity, thus exploding the mystery of lawlessness. The mystery of love overcomes all pride—celestial and terrestrial—and causes the beloved People to live in the eternal grace of God which brings them to the ultimate He has planned for them, in love, before the foundation of the earth.

All of this is our 'living in the mystery'. No act is so simple that it is not part of the mystery, nor so grand that it is not part of the same. All living in God is living in the mystery.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## The Profound Mystery

**THE ‘PROFOUND MYSTERY’ OF  
EPHESIANS 5:21–33**

This Pauline concept of ‘a profound mystery’ should have been taken up in chapter 8, but it is a principle that warrants a wider treatment than we have accorded to any passage. The reason is that this mystery embodies a theology which is not only of marriage, but also of all history. For this reason we need to examine the text with the intent to discover its widest meaning:<sup>1</sup>

Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing,

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<sup>1</sup> Note that a wide examination of this has been given in my book *The Profound Mystery* (NCPI, Blackwood, 1995). Most of the quotes used above have also been used as the basis for a separate study ‘The Covenant of God’, Thursday Morning Studies, study 10, 13/4/95, NCTM, Blackwood, 1995.

that she might be holy and without blemish. Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church; however, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

At first sight, the passage appears to be an exhortation on the way wives and husbands should live together. It is in the midst of injunctions which touch on families and the domestic and work situations. In Colossians 3:18–19, Paul simply says, 'Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them.' The apostle Peter gives a similar piece of advice to husbands and wives in 3:1–7 of his First Letter. We might be pardoned, then, for thinking this Ephesian quote is a typical apostolic passage dealing with marital relationships. Well, it is that, but it is much more. When Paul says, in verse 32, 'This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church', he is saying that the verse he has quoted from Genesis 2:24 is stating a profound mystery. The text is, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'.

In chapters 3 and 6 we gave a helpful quote by Andrew Lincoln, and in chapter 6 another by Helmut Thielicke; I would like to repeat both here. The first quote is from Andrew Lincoln:

'Mystery,' therefore is not *any* deeper meaning of an OT text but precisely *this* meaning of Christ and the Church posited by this writer. Similarly, the mystery is not any marriage or marriage

itself, but the special marriage relationship of Christ and the Church. This is not a denial of the straightforward reference of Gen. 2:24 by any means. Indeed, as we have seen, the interpretation of Gen. 2:24 underlies the exhortation to husbands in vv 28–30. But even that use of Gen. 2:24 depended for its force on the ultimate reference the writer believed it had to the archetypal union between Christ and the Church . . . It was because the Church was Christ's body which was at one with him, a relationship which was the model for human marriage, that wives could be seen in terms as their husband's bodies.<sup>2</sup>

Helmut Thielicke says:

On the basis of the 'symbolic' character of marriage, Ephesians 5:32 speaks of a 'mystery' . . . In the New Testament the term 'mystery' is always used in the sense that a visible, earthly reality or process becomes a similitude of the transcendent sphere of salvation, that 'nature' thus points to the 'supernatural' . . . This kind of pointing or reference is called a 'mystery' because it cloaks and reveals at the same time: the mystery reveals itself to faith, whereas unbelief cannot understand it; 'to him who has, will more be given . . . , but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away' . . . Because marriage points to the order of creation and redemption it is a similitude of this kind and it also exhibits the same double meaning; for those who stand in faith within the order of redemption it *has* this symbolic character, whereas for others it can be merely a contract, a biological phenomenon, or at most a human bond. This is why the letter to the Ephesians calls it a 'mystery'.<sup>3</sup>

Paul calls the matter of marriage, as spoken of in Genesis 2:24, 'a great mystery'. The word is *mega* and can mean 'big', or 'large', or 'far-reaching'. It can also have the idea of 'immense' or 'profound'. Here Paul is using the term which is later used in I Timothy 3:16, 'Great

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<sup>2</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, p. 381.

<sup>3</sup> Thielicke, *Sex*, pp. 125–6.

[*mega*] is the mystery of godliness'. So, then, the matter of the marriage of a man to a woman is undoubtedly very significant, but it is not 'great' and 'far-reaching'. The principle of marriage as found in Genesis 2:24 gets its 'greatness' and 'far-reaching nature' from the fact that it is all about the marriage of the Bride and the Lamb, that is, the marriage of Christ and his Church. This principle of marriage is found in the Old Testament where Israel is the bride or wife of Yahweh. As we would expect, in the New Testament the Son is the Bridegroom and the Church the Bride. This idea must have come through from the Old Testament. Geoffrey Bromiley works from Paul's premise—that God provides a wife for His Son—and does this via the doctrine of the relationality of the Trinity:

In creating man—male and female—in his own image, and joining them together so that they become one flesh, God makes us copies both of himself in his trinitarian unity and distinction as one God and three persons and of himself in relation to the people of his gracious election. Analogically, what is between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and what ought to be and is and shall be between God and Israel and Christ and the church, is also what is meant to be in the relation of man and woman and more specifically of husband and wife. Neither the intratrinitarian relationship nor the union between the heavenly bridegroom and his bride is a good copy of a bad original. Earthly marriage as it is now lived out is a bad copy of a good original . . . It is simpler, however, because God himself took the initiative at the level of both original and copy. At the level of the original the deserted husband lovingly went to look for the erring bride and bought her back. He did this by offering himself, in the person of the divine Son, as the price of redemption.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Bromiley, *God and Marriage*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1978, pp. 77–8.

It is in the last two sentences of this passage that Bromiley shows that the Father had always kept the Bride in His intention for the marriage of His Son.

Karl Barth, when speaking of Genesis 2:24, says:

... as this whole second account of creation ... is permeated by the reference to God's gracious covenant with Israel as the internal basis of creation itself, the same is true of its conclusion ... it envisages the most important Old Testament relationship in which Yahweh is represented as the faithful Lover, Bridegroom and Husband of this people, and the latter as the equally unfaithful beloved, bride and wife ... In the New Testament Yahweh and Israel are Christ and His Church ... Indeed, now that its prototype—Christ and the community—has emerged as a historical reality, it [marriage] can and must receive quite a new consecration ... as a representation of what is its essence according to Gen. 2:18–22.<sup>5</sup>

Barth is saying that the account of Genesis 2:18–24 is prototypical of God and Israel, and so of Christ and the Church. He agrees that it has direct reference to the first couple, but that it is not confined to it. Andrew Lincoln then shows that exegetically it is Paul who is claiming that Genesis 2:24 is protological:

The emphatic ἐγώ and the particle δε in v 32b make clear that the writer is stressing that this particular interpretation of Gen 2:24 as a reference to the profound mystery of the union between Christ and the Church is his own. If, in fact, it also originated with him, then presumably he reached it through a typological exegesis, resting on a correspondence between creation (Gen 2:24) and redemption (Christ and the Church). Christ has already been seen in Adamic terms in Eph 1:22 (the church is his body), and so a text that refers to Adam's bodily union can now be claimed for

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<sup>5</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, pt 4, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1969, pp. 142–3.

Christ's union with the Church. ἐγὼ δε λεγω 'but I am speaking,' occurs also in the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, where it serves to introduce an interpretation contrary to the generally accepted interpretation of the Scripture passages in view.<sup>6</sup>

Because Paul claims he is properly exegeting the passage in Genesis as a mystery, does not mean that it is merely a Pauline idea. It is not that we are simply followers of Paul in his particular exegesis, but that this 'great' mystery was always so; always that way. Even so, it is good to hear from theologians who agree with him. Here, again, on the matter of the 'profound mystery' we hear from Markus Barth:

Rather Christ's union with the church has effected an unprecedented situation: the new creation leaves no room for a dialectic tension or wavering between creation and redemption. Marriage is no longer explained as a 'creation order,' but as an expression of renewal of all things through Jesus Christ. Indeed, according to Paul, the supreme love and the first work and effect of Christ were announced, promised, and guaranteed as early as the creation story. But creation itself, viz. the creaturely existence which God gave to man in the beginning, was only an intimation of marriage, not its ontological and ethical ground. Only Jesus Christ's coming, his love, his death, his dominion are the final, solid basis and model.<sup>7</sup>

In regard to Genesis 2:24, Markus Barth comments:

... that even such parts of the 'Law' that had evoked legal, legalistic, and at times casuistic debates and interpretations (the so-called *halacha*) were in actuality Prophetic in nature: 'A man will leave ... will be joined ... the two will become one ...' The substance of this promise according to Paul is not only marital

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<sup>6</sup> Lincoln, *Ephesians*, p. 382.

<sup>7</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, p. 731.

bliss: it is Christ's love for the church. Therefore what Gen 2:24 says about union in 'one flesh' is for Paul a prophecy more than anything else. Marriage stands under the sign of God's promise; it is not at the mercy of human traditions, laws, and their interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

## **THE EXPANSIVE AND ALL-COVERING NATURE OF THE DIVINE MYSTERY OF MARRIAGE**

This closing chapter of our book is important in that, when we peer into a mystery, we will find not one of the many mysteries is small. Each covers much ground, and since the Scriptures in a sense are one comprehensive mystery which incorporates all stated mysteries—as also a multitude not stated—then it has been an especially good exercise to study the Ephesian passage. It is also a fitting close to the book, showing how vast and comprehensive is 'a great mystery', that is, 'a profound mystery'.

In one sense we have only touched the edge of this present mystery—marriage. Whilst what is primary is the Marriage of the Bride and the Lamb, yet every marriage is a copy or ectype of the archetype, and so draws its meaning and significance from that archetype. That is why Paul concludes his argument in 5:33, showing that husband must love the wife, and the wife respect her husband. As in the divine marriage, so in the human: what is more, each couple draws its power and unity, as Bromiley has shown us, from the true marriage of Christ and his Bride.

To show the extensive nature of this mystery, we close with some observations from Robert's Jenson's brilliant

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<sup>8</sup> Markus Barth, *Ephesians*, p. 732.

book, *America's Theologian*, as he comments on marriage theology in the writings of Jonathan Edwards:

Edwards' answer takes us finally to the center of his systematic reflection, to—'as it were'—his notation of the universal melody's fugal structure: 'To this I say, that the Son is the adequate communication of the Father's goodness . . . But yet the Son has also an inclination to communicate *himself*, in an image of his person that may partake of his happiness: and this was the end of the creation, even the communication of the happiness of the Son of God. . . . Therefore the church is said to be the completeness of Christ.' It is as and only as a factor in the plot of the triune God's inner life, that God has a need to overflow. In the *Miscellanies*, Edwards is beautifully simple: 'The end of the creation of God was to provide a spouse for his Son Jesus Christ, that might enjoy him and on whom he might pour forth his love. . . . '[H]eaven and earth were created that the Son of God might be complete in a spouse.' The church is *with* Christ the object in the triune love and so the purpose of creation.<sup>9</sup>

Jenson comments, carrying Edwards' thoughts further:

Christ is the agent and beneficiary of all events from creation to fulfillment; 'as Mediator [Christ] rules all events . . . so as to conduce to the good of his church, and to bring to pass the ends of his mediation,' for since 'God created the world to provide a spouse . . . for his Son,' so 'the spiritual marriage of the spouse to him, is what the whole creation labors . . . to bring to pass.' And Edwards does mean 'whole creation,' for the material universe is, we must remember, but the intersubjective field of the community of spirits that makes history. Thus he can, with supreme sophistication and naïveté, say, 'the whole course of nature

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<sup>9</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *America's Theologian: A Recommendation of Jonathan Edwards*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992, p. 42. See also Thomas Schafer (ed), *The 'Miscellanies' (Entry Nos. a-z, aa-zz, 1-500)*, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 13 (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994).



. . . [is] subservient to the affair of redemption,' or again, 'Every atom in the universe is managed by Christ so as to be most to the advantage of the Christian.' . . . It emerges in the discovery not of God's good in ours but of our good in God's. And that is to say, the God the soul enters is the triune God, so that the soul can be one with God while yet God works his own will that is not necessarily ours; and the universality the soul appropriates is the encompassing fact of Christ's history rather than of the soul's own religious aspiration. I must quote one more piece of Edwards' beloved spouse-mysticism, of a drastic Christianity I am not sure is elsewhere found: 'There was, [as] it were, an eternal society or family in the Godhead, in the Trinity of persons. *It seems to be God's design to admit the church into the divine family as his son's wife* [emphasis mine]'.<sup>10</sup>

## CONCLUSION ON THE WHOLE MATTER OF MYSTERY

The exercise we have undertaken in this chapter has surely given us a glimpse of the far-reaching nature of all mysteries, and the immense privilege given to a hearer, or reader, in pursuing the matter of biblical mystery. It also gives a sense of awe at the greatness of God—'great is the mystery of godliness'. We realise that without understanding mystery, it is quite possible we may have missed the heart and marrow of all the Scripture. This could be especially so when we have tried to formulate by the reasoning of minds those propositions which, although substantially correct, may, nevertheless, not be the true substances of the mysteries.

To know that such mysteries are known in the hearing, that is, the doing, may help to instil that humility of mind

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<sup>10</sup> Jenson, *America's Theologian*, pp. 42–3.

and spirit by means of which we come to know what God is pleased to reveal. It is by this Word alone—the one which proceeds from God's mouth—that we can live out the experience of eternal life.

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