

## **The Wonder of It All: The Relationship Between Mystery and Art**

*While the word “mystery” may at first suggest the unknowable, Randy Smith presents a biblical understanding of mystery that affirms ever-increasing knowledge of the truth and unlocks the world as a fertile field of exploration for the Christian artist.*

### **Mystery and the Arts**

I often am intrigued by visual scenes or word pictures that suggest some element of mystery. In fact, I have a small but growing collection of “mysterious” photos—grainy, cloudy, overexposed, underexposed, and blurred photos that I have made (sometimes by accident, sometimes on purpose) over the last twenty years. In one, the camera pans with a luminous white gull as he skims above the blurred brown waters of the Savannah River just outside Augusta, Georgia. In another, my youngest brother “disappears” in a timed exposure as he rows a green jon boat across our uncle’s south Georgia pond at dusk. In a picture that exists only in my mind, my father as a rural child of five or six stares into a darkened chicken house at night, straining to see the last row of Rhode Island Reds on the roost as they recede from light and sight. These mysterious images with seen and unseen elements have often prompted me to respond creatively—usually through writing poems.

This is the subject—the relationship between mystery and art, between beauty and wonder—that I wish to explore in this essay. I suppose I should begin with an attempt to define “mystery” (most certainly an ironic task), or at least to say what I think it is not. For sure, I do not believe that mystery is what *Webster’s College Dictionary* says it is—“anything that is kept

secret or remains unexplained or unknown.” The problem here is with the “remaining” and “keeping.”

As it seems to exist in human experience, mystery is associated with situations where truths are hidden but potentially and progressively revealed (i.e., the truth does not *remain* hidden)—the developing child in a womb, the appropriation of grace through communion, the decline into old age and death, the changing nuances of color in a winter sunset. A better definition of mystery might be the following: a truth, beauty, or quality that is hidden, but which has the potential to be discovered and progressively known, though never known fully or finally.<sup>1</sup> In addition, we might say that mystery finds its origins in the interaction between finite and infinite, between seen and unseen realities. All of this seems to get closer to the heart of what mystery is and how it functions.

So, then, what is the relationship between mystery and art? In my own experience, mystery is the very foundation for art—the unfolding of mystery the very reason that art exists. God has given art and imagination to humans as tools for digging into the mysteries of creation (reason, intellect, and observation are other powerful excavation tools). Of course, as Christ makes clear in Mark 4:11, spiritual truths can be apprehended only by those to whom God grants spiritual ears, the ability to hear “the mystery of the kingdom of God.”<sup>2</sup> However, there does seem to exist some common grace through which God allows men and women to “un-earth” the wonders of this world, and even of eternity, through “common” means. Nicholas Barker, a poet and English professor, defines art as the “unfolding of previously unrealized potentialities in the aesthetic dimension of creation, or ... the exercise on the part of artists of their God-ordained dominion over the aesthetic dimension of creation.”<sup>3</sup> Through art, we can “subdue” (Gen 1:28) our mysterious world—unfolding the wonders that God has folded into creation.

In order to delve deeper into the nature of mystery, I would like to examine the concept from three perspectives: as a biblical doctrine, an aesthetic principle, and a practical motivation for artists.

### **Mystery as a Biblical Doctrine**

In the Bible, we find four important mysterious subjects: the Godhead, creation, man, and the gospel. Ironically, the infinite God invites human beings to “know” Him in scripture: “For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hos. 6:6); “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). In his treatise on *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer comments on the sense of purpose and power that come from knowledge of God:

What makes life worth while is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has, in a way that no other man has. For what higher, more exalted, and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?<sup>4</sup>

Certainly, this “knowing” involves more than intellectual effort—individuals know God through faith, will, emotions, and moral practice as well.<sup>5</sup> And God has revealed himself and his character in many ways—the general revelation of external creation and internal conscience; the specific revelation of the written Word (Bible) and the living Word (Jesus Christ).

Yet, for all the emphasis on knowledge and revelation, the Bible also acknowledges that God is an inscrutable mystery and wonder: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor?’” (Rom. 11:33-34).

Here, Paul recognizes that the omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent God cannot be known fully and finally by man—our “knowing” Him must always be a work in progress.<sup>6</sup> From a human perspective, mystery has its genesis in the interaction between God and man, between infinite and finite—mystery occurs when we encounter the One “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3). No diminishing rate of return exists when pursuing knowledge of God—he promises drafts of love, grace, beauty, and truth evermore satisfying than previous ones.

While the mystery of God arises from his infinite nature, the mystery of creation is rooted in its symbolic value, in the fact that it testifies to a spiritual and eternal reality that exists above, beyond, and behind physical nature.<sup>7</sup> We might define a symbol as something that stands for more than itself—and this “standing for” all of creation does as we know from the first chapter of Romans: “For since the creation of the world [God’s] invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead...” (Rom. 1:20). We find a similar testimony from David in the Psalms: “The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge” (Psalm 19:1-2). Again, mystery rises out of the interaction between finite and infinite, temporal and eternal, natural and supernatural. In many ways, we do see “in a mirror, dimly” (1 Cor. 13:12) from our vantage point in this world as we peer through the cloudy window of creation into eternity.

Later in Psalm 19, David demonstrates the symbolic value of creation through use of metaphorical language: “In [the heavens] He has set a tabernacle for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoices like a strong man to run its race” (Psalm 19:4-5). Because the creation is inherently symbolic—from its inception, pointing to Someone,

someplace else—David is free to use one thing to stand for another, to compare two dissimilar things, the sun and a bridegroom. In the rising and setting of the sun, we see a creation-picture of earthly and heavenly dramas—a groom pursuing his beloved, the heavenly bridegroom (Christ) pursuing his bride (the Church). As Paul says when he compares marriage to the relationship between Christ and the church, “This is a great mystery” (Eph. 5:32).

The mystery of man rises out of his unique position as the image-bearer of God. At the creation, the triune God said: “Let us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). As a divine image-bearer, man is personal, relational, rational, creative, moral, and spiritual. In each individual, something of God can be seen, even though this image is obscured now by human sin. In Psalm 139, David praises God for the marvel and wonder of his own self: “I will praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made; marvelous are Your works, and that my soul knows very well” (Psalm 139:14). Even though we are finite, there is mystery in us because our very bodies and selves point to the infinite One who “knit [us] together in [our] mothers['] womb[s]” (Psalm 139:13, NIV).

In the New Testament, the Greek word for mystery (*mystērion*) is used twenty-eight times, twenty-one times by Paul himself, primarily to refer to the “mystery” of the gospel—hidden in ages past, but now revealed to the saints.<sup>8</sup> Through the incarnation—the person and work of Jesus Christ—we find the ultimate intersection of infinite and finite, temporal and eternal, and thus the zenith of mystery itself. In Colossians, Paul tells his readers that he has become a minister of “the mystery which has been hidden from ages and from generations, but now has been revealed to His saints ... which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:24-27). In Ephesians 1, Paul says that God has “made known to us the mystery of his will”—that in the “fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ” (Eph. 1:7-10). By

condescending to become “blood and guts, glands and genes,”<sup>9</sup> Christ brings us into the presence of profound eternal mysteries. As Paul says, we are invited to know that which (and the One whom) we can never exhaust knowing—“the love of Christ which passes knowledge” (Eph. 3:19).<sup>10</sup> Much as Adam and Eve were in the garden, and as the saints will be in glory, believers now stand, because of the Incarnation, face-to-face with the most real reality. G. Bornkamm says in his entry on “mystery” in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: “In Christ the heavenly reality breaks into this world.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Mystery as an Aesthetic Principle**

Because of the awe-inspiring relationship between God and man, the symbolic essence of creation, the image-bearing nature of human beings, and the limitless riches of the gospel, artists can rest assured that they dig into a world and experience that is saturated with meaning—they do not chase phantom rabbits of beauty and truth. Of this, the metaphysical poets of the sixteenth century were convinced. Through “metaphysical conceits” (outrageous, extended metaphors) in their poems, these poets found connections between wildly disparate elements of human experience: between the bite of a flea and the consummation of physical love, between the twin legs of a geometer’s compass and the husband/wife bond, between military overthrow of a town and the subduing love of God for his own.<sup>12</sup>

Creative work such as this is predicated on a belief that our world lends itself to imaginative manipulation because it is inherently symbolic and metaphorical. Christians know this is true because the creation does stand for more than itself (the glory and attributes of God) and because there is a unifying thread running through all dissimilar things (the imprint of a Savior in whom all things are gathered into one).<sup>13</sup>

## Mystery as a Practical Motivation

A biblical understanding of mystery also provides a strong practical incentive for artistic endeavor. First of all, the presence of mystery encourages artists to develop eyes with which to see mystery. In *Mystery and Manners*, a collection of occasional prose on the craft of fiction writing, Flannery O'Connor argues that an appreciation of mystery motivates writers to look beneath the surface of life:

... if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious...then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself. His kind of fiction will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery...Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do. He will be interested in possibility rather than in probability.<sup>14</sup>

Elsewhere in *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor says, borrowing a term from medieval Bible commentators, that writers need to develop "anagogical vision"—"the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation," that can apprehend "the Divine life and our participation in it."<sup>15</sup> Emily Dickinson describes this kind of vision in a poem about how poets find amazing wonders right under the noses of the rest of us:

This was a Poet—It is That  
 Distills amazing sense  
 From ordinary Meanings—  
 And Attar so immense  
 From the familiar species

That perished by the Door—

We wonder it was not Ourselves

Arrested it—before.”<sup>16</sup>

Mystery also provides a second practical motivation for artistic pursuits—maybe the most impractical of all practical motivations. Through our creative responses to mystery, we are in a way practicing for eternal life. As John describes in his apocalyptic vision in Revelation, God will dwell with men after the creation of the new heaven and the new earth at the end of the ages: “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev. 21:3). Then, the redeemed will live in the presence of the limitless God forever—finite and infinite will dwell together, and, in that confluence, mystery will rise up eternally, rich and deep. Even though Paul looks forward to everlasting life and says, “now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I am known” (1 Cor. 13:12), he refers more to the full intimacy with which he will know God rather than to any full knowledge of God. By looking into mystery now, we practice one of our eternal labors—growing in our knowing of God evermore. If the perfect Christ himself grew on earth—“increas[ing] in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52)—then Christians can assume that they will grow eternally even in their perfected post-resurrection state.<sup>17</sup>

In this life, we are given the privilege of peering into our grainy photos of mystery. We apprehend love, loss, beauty, brokenness, faith, hope, and change. Sometimes, we see that which thrills our souls. But in the life to come, we will see with greater clarity of vision what we cannot even imagine now: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of

man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Cor. 2:9). In eternity, our knowing of mystery will know no end.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> In the entry on “mystery” in the *New Bible Dictionary* (ed. J. D. Douglas, et al., Downers Grove: InterVarsity P, 1993), the editors distinguish between contemporary and classical definitions of the word “mystery”: “But whereas ‘mystery’ may mean, and in contemporary usage often does mean, a secret for which no answer can be found, this is not the connotation of the term *mystērion* in classical and biblical Greek. In the NT *mystērion* signifies a secret which is being, or even has been, revealed, which is also divine in scope, and needs to be made known by God to men through his Spirit” (805).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotes are from the *New Geneva Study Bible*, ed. R. C. Sproul, et. al. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in *Literature Through the Eyes of Faith*, by Susan V. Gallagher and Roger Lundin (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 45.

<sup>4</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity P, 1979), 30.

<sup>5</sup> See the annotation on “True Knowledge of God” in the *New Geneva Study Bible*, 1167.

<sup>6</sup> S. Motyer, in his entry on “mystery” in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Walter A. Elwell, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), acknowledges the important role of “known” and “unknown” in Christian theology: “The concept of mystery has played an important role in Christian theology. The best theology has always maintained that the known must be balanced by the unknown, that God is a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, compelling the worshipper with awe toward him but remaining ultimately beyond the grasp of human reason and imagination” (741). In the same entry, Motyer discusses the flip sides of Paul’s use of the Greek word *mystērion* in his New Testament letters: “These two sides of Paul’s usage [of *mystērion*]—revealed and hidden—are not of course contradictory. They correspond to the two facets of all our knowledge of God, whose judgments are unsearchable and ways inscrutable (Rom. 11:33), even though ‘he made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will’ (Eph. 1:9, RSV)” (742).

<sup>7</sup> In his own maniacal way, Ahab searches for this spiritual reality in *Moby-Dick* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002). Ahab says to Starbuck, his chief mate on the Pequod, that he wants to “strike through the mask” of apparent reality to see what, if anything, is behind it (140).

<sup>8</sup> Motyer, 741.

<sup>9</sup> I owe this phrase to a prayer that Knox Chamblin (*professor emeritus*, Reformed Theological Seminary) prayed for our infant daughter, Flannery Grace, on a visit to our home. Dr. Chamblin acknowledges his debt to C. S. Lewis, who is the original author of this phrase.

<sup>10</sup> In his entry on *mystērion* in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), G. Bornkamm says that the “mystery of Christ” is “the eternal counsel of God which [was] hidden from the world but eschatologically fulfilled in the cross of the Lord of glory...” (617).

<sup>11</sup> Bornkamm, 617. Bruce Cockburn makes a similar statement in his song “Cry of a Tiny Babe” (*Nothing But a Burning Light*, Columbia Records, 1991): “Redemption rips through the surface of time in the cry of a tiny babe.”

<sup>12</sup> All of these examples are from poems by the English poet John Donne.

<sup>13</sup> Even an unorthodox thinker such as Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that “the world is emblematic” (“Nature,” *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Boston: 1960, 35). According to Emerson, the physical world was a manifestation of some vast, amorphous spirit that he called the “Oversoul”: “A Fact is the end or last issue of spirit. The visible creation is the terminus or the circumference of the invisible world” (36).

<sup>14</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Noonday P, 1997), 41-42.

<sup>15</sup> O’Connor, 72-73.

<sup>16</sup> Emily Dickinson, “448,” *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 6th ed., Vol. B (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 2516.

<sup>17</sup> We can assume that paradise will not be the stagnant place of “no change” that Wallace Stevens imagines in his poem “Sunday Morning.” Throughout the poem, Stevens argues that the sensual pleasures and vicissitudes (even deathly ones) of earthly life are better than a changeless paradise where “ripe fruit never fall[s]” (*The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 6th ed., Vol. B, New York: W. W. Norton, 2003, 239).