



LIGHT

UNAPPROACHABLE

DIVINE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY
AND THE TASK OF THEOLOGY

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InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

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INTRODUCING THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

*Men of good sense who focus their minds' eyes sharply
on the attributes of the ineffable Godhead, see it as existing
beyond every created thing, transcending all acuity of intellect,
being wholly outside bodily appearance and, as all-wise
Paul says, "dwelling in light unapproachable."*

Cyril of Alexandria

THEOLOGY FROM THE CLEFT

"Please show me your glory." These five words make up one of the more audacious requests in the unfolding drama of Scripture. Recorded in Exodus 33, Moses converses with God in hopes to intercede on behalf of Israel following their construction of the golden calf. As a prophet who has "found favor" in the Lord's sight, he turns to make his bold request of God—*show me your glory*.

The audacity of Moses' request is not only matched but raised by the majesty of the Lord's reply. The Lord responded to Moses' request, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim my name

‘the LORD.’ And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will show mercy on whom I show mercy.” The Lord concludes his proclamation with a mysterious claim, “But, you cannot see my face, *for man shall not see me and live*” (Ex 33:19-20, emphasis added).

As the narrative progresses, instead of leaving Moses ensnared by his limitation of faculties, God provides a remedy to the problem of Moses’ inability to physically gaze at the Lord without perishing. The Lord accommodates Moses’ weakness through shelter: “Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, *but my face shall not be seen*” (Ex 33:18-23, emphasis added). From the safety of the cleft in the rock, the fullness of God’s goodness passes before Moses until he can safely emerge from his shelter to catch a glimpse of the back of the Lord.

There are several theological threads woven into this scene; indeed, from the act upon Sinai one could find the impetus for variegated biblical and theological themes and lanes of worthy exploration. Of these variegated theological lanes, the one most pertinent for our purpose is what seems to be the demonstration of an incomprehensible God. The God of Exodus 33 is goodness and majesty of essence such that he will not even be *seen* by his creatures, let alone comprehended by them. While the doctrine of incomprehensibility is not the primary exegetical focus of Exodus 33, this passage does *demonstrate* that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is out of the intellectual jurisdiction of humankind.

What will become clear from both biblical reasoning on passages like Exodus 33 and from theological reasoning given what we see in the biblical data is that from the waters of God’s incomprehensibility flows the double stream of blessing and curse in Christian theology. There is the curse of the task’s difficulty; as we seek to name God in Christian theology, the theologian’s entire enterprise will be frustrated by how this

God seems to be always just out of theological and linguistic reach. On the other hand, there is a profound blessing flowing from incomprehensibility as well since the *otherness* of this God means the glorious well of Christian theology will never run dry; contemplating God's beauty will never be exhausted. Those glorious realities that cause us creatures to marvel at our God are incomprehensibly endless. The theological enterprise of knowing and naming God will not come to full fruition until the church lays hold of her glorious gift of eschatological sight and beholds God with the new vision of the blessed. But until that great day when we move from knowing in part to knowing fully (1 Cor 13:12), the incomprehensibility of God will always be something of an exasperation and thrill for the Christian theologian.

The frustration of knowing and naming the incomprehensible God comes even more into focus as we define the task of Christian theology. If the theological task is the study of God and all things in relation to God, then God's incomprehensibility will bring about a myriad of consequences.¹ Putting the pieces together, it may seem a reason to despair for the student of theology who seeks to know and name the triune God if he is as incomprehensible and altogether different as Exodus 33 depicts him to be. We can hear this despair in the prayer of Anselm as he begins *Proslogion*:

Come then, Lord my God, teach my heart where and how to seek You, where and how to find You Lord, if You are not present here, where, since You are absent, shall I look for You? On the other hand, if You are everywhere why then, since You are present, do I not see You? But surely you dwell in "light inaccessible" (1 Tim 6:16). And where is this inaccessible light, or how can I approach the inaccessible light? Or who shall lead me and take me into it that I may see You in it? . . . He yearns to see You and Your countenance is too far away from him. He desires

¹This definition of theology comes from many sources, of which the most important for my personal development and the source I pull from here is John Webster, *GWM*, 1:1. Webster enlists Franciscus Junius to reinforce this point. See Junius on God as the principle of theology in *TTT*, 177-79.

to come close to You, and Your dwelling place is inaccessible. . . . I was made in order to see You, and I have not yet accomplished what I was made for.²

While at first glance, the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility may seem like reason for the student of theology to despair, when all things are considered, it is instead an invitation to partake in the grace of God. For, as God did for Moses, the Lord has provided shelter for the pilgriming theologian. Like God graciously led Moses to the cleft in the rock as an accommodation for his physical inability to take in an eye-full of God's glory, he has a remedy for our plight as well.

Therefore, like Moses, we will take to the accommodating cleft. From God's providential and gracious accommodation, we will conduct the task of Christian theology *from the cleft*. Like the prophet Moses, from the theological safety of God's accommodation, we will aim to still catch a glimpse of his glory. In the end, instead of an impetus for despair, God's incomprehensibility will be a wellspring of wonder and majesty of which we will never reach the bottom in this life.³

TOWARD A DEFINITION OF DIVINE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

For any project to succeed, two items are important—defining terms carefully and a clear thesis statement that drives the work. In this section, we will try to arrive at both.

An implication of the Creator-creature distinction is that God is not merely bigger than his creation but altogether different. Consequently, God is incomprehensible in terms of theological knowledge and ineffable in terms of theological language. However, as the Lord wants to be known, God has provided ways for finite creatures to meaningfully

²Anselm, *Major Works: Monologion, Prologion, and Why God Became Man*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 85.

³Special thanks to Matthew Barrett for pointing out the role of incomprehensibility in Exodus 33 both many times in person and in Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 15-19.

know and name him by virtue of divine accommodation. Therefore, as we contemplate God and all things in relation to God, we do theology as receivers of accommodated glory and not creators of intellectual reality. Contemplating God's accommodated glory will impact how we speak and think about the divine nature. We therefore pursue a posture of necessary theological humility and reverence throughout the entirety of the theological task knowing that the possibility of pursuing theological contemplation and application rests upon the grace of the Creator to make himself known to limited creatures.

This book will consequently discuss ideas related to how we know and name the incomprehensible God. We will explore theological method in which the finite creature attempts to contemplate God and all things in relation to God. The limitedness of the creature, combined with the limitlessness of the Creator, will manifest—at least—in ontological, linguistic, epistemological, and temperamental consequences within the theological task. It is these methodological consequences this book explores.

Now that we have the thesis and aim of the book stated, we now move toward a careful definition of terms—most important, defining the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility and one of its corollary doctrines, ineffability. Before arriving at a solid definition, I'd like to establish a few nuances to make sure my claims are clear or not overly rigid or overstated. For the rest of this first chapter, then, we will explore a few nuances and points of clarity that will be helpful as we work toward defining God's incomprehensibility and ineffability. To be specific, we will consider: (1) the tension found in biblical indicatives and imperatives as it relates to knowing God, (2) possible misperceptions about the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, and (3) two ditches students of theology must avoid while affirming the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility. Considering these three previous points; we will (4) offer a working definition of both incomprehensibility and ineffability.

Tension between indicatives and imperatives. One way to demonstrate the tension found in the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility is to contrast some of the biblical data's indicatives with a few of its imperatives. In other words, there is tension between what the Scripture commands of believers concerning their knowledge of the Lord and what the Scripture says about the creatures' ability to know the Lord. For example, the Scripture demands that God's people know him. In fact, God instructs his people through his prophet, Jeremiah, "let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me" (Jer 9:24). Moreover, we are told that "this is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God" (Jn 17:3). Maybe the height of the Scripture's imperative calling God's people to know the Lord comes from the lips of Jesus as he states, "You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews" (Jn 4:22).

While these passages come together to form what seems to be a clear imperative—know the Lord—it is also important to maintain the indicative force seen throughout Scripture—the essence and ways of the Lord are not fully knowable. As for biblical data on this indicative, we read in Psalms that "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, and his greatness is unsearchable" (Ps 145:3), and "Great is our Lord, and abundant in power; his understanding is beyond measure" (Ps 147:5). The psalmist also says of God's works, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it" (Ps 139:6). We read elsewhere in the biblical data: "Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33). Finally, the indicative is seen arguably nowhere clearer than 1 Timothy 6, from which this project takes its title:

I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the

proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, *who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see*. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen. (1 Tim 6:13-16, emphasis added)

As we will see in the coming chapters, this seeming contradiction has received much attention in theological antiquity. The paradox in which Scripture gives us the imperatival—*know the Lord*—while also giving us the indicative reality—*the Lord is unknowable and unsearchable*—does not lead to the conclusion that the Scriptures are contradictory. Rather, the simultaneous existence of the indicatives and imperatives in tension will produce a number of important theological consequences, especially in the nuances needed to affirm a biblically faithful notion of divine incomprehensibility while allowing a meaningful hope, on the part of the creatures, to know and name God.

Possible misperceptions about the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. Given that the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility postulates a God that is beyond the reach of creaturely intellect, it ought to come as no surprise there are misperceptions which arise in affirming this doctrine. Identifying possible points of misconception will prove helpful in working toward a definition and in norming some of the claims about the doctrine. So, it is worth outlining a few of these misperceptions in this first chapter as they will provide guiderails for the rest of the book in order that we may not fall prey to an underdeveloped doctrine or an overstated doctrine. While this list is not exhaustive, here are seven possible misperceptions about the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility.⁴

First, divine incomprehensibility is not merely affirming that God is un-comprehended. It is not as if God is a mystery that is yet to be resolved. Or, to put it another way, it is not as if we are on a path toward

⁴To see these seven misperceptions and a short answer to each one in a concise form, see table 1.1.

the development of creaturely epistemology such that one day we will comprehend God, but at this point he happens to be un-comprehended by his creation. Rather, the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, as stated in the thesis of this book, is one of the many implications of the Creator-creature distinction. God is not merely a bigger version of the creature such that with the passing of enough generations and with adequate human intellectual power, the creatures will climb the mystery that is God. On the contrary, God is altogether different from the creature such that all the generations of Earth will come and go and none of them will be any closer to a full comprehension of God than those who came before.

We will make frequent visits to the golden tongue of Christian homiletics throughout this book: John Chrysostom, and for good reason. Chrysostom's dealings with the fourth-century Anomoeanism led to the preacher writing a collection of twelve homilies now titled *On the Incomprehensible Nature of God*. Discussing the severity of Paul's adjective choice of "unapproachable" light, in the third homily of his collection, Chrysostom makes the point we are after here well, saying:

However, he did not say: "Who dwells in incomprehensible light," but: "in unapproachable light," and this is much stronger than "incomprehensible." A thing is said to be incomprehensible when those who seek after it fail to comprehend it, even after they have searched and sought to understand it. A thing is unapproachable which, from the start, cannot be investigated nor can anyone come near to it. We call the sea incomprehensible because, even when divers lower themselves into its waters and go down to a great depth, they cannot find the bottom. We call that thing unapproachable which, from the start, cannot be searched out or investigated.⁵

The unapproachableness of God's nature renders him incomprehensible, not merely un-comprehended. This side of the beatific vision, we

⁵Hom. III.12.

will, as Paul says, “know in part” and will not move into the knowing in full (1 Cor 13:9-12).⁶

Second, and related to the first misconception, is that the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility is a product of the noetic effects of the fall. This misconception states that it is only due to the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, and the curse they brought about that the mind of the creature is clouded such that we cannot comprehend God. This misconception seems to lack warrant for at least two reasons. First, if this were the case, it seems that other created-yet-unfallen creatures, such as angels, would obtain a full comprehension of the divine nature. We know that angels have ignorance even of God’s full work in the economy, let alone his nature *in se*. Peter tells us that “even angels long to look into these things” (1 Pet 1:12 NIV). Second, to assume that angels possess a full comprehension of God would violate the epistemological grounding for the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility in the first place. Again, the grounding for God’s incomprehensibility is not merely size, as if God is quantifiable, yet he exists in an infinite quantity which is beyond the reach of finite minds. Instead, a proper understanding of infinitude demonstrates that God is not measurable in terms of quantity but is wholly other from any creature—including the angelic hosts. Again, Chrysostom proves helpful here: “Let us then call him the ineffable, unintelligible God, invisible, incomprehensible, surpassing the power of human language, exceeding the comprehension of mortal mind, unexamined by angels.” Chrysostom continues this point: “invisible to the seraphim, unintelligible to the cherubim, undetectable by principalities, dominions and powers—in a word, by the whole creation—known only by the Son and the Holy Spirit.”⁷ So then, even creatures untouched by sin—like angels—cannot comprehend God, showing that incomprehensibility is not merely a product of sin.

⁶This is not to insinuate that a full comprehension of God is coming in the beatific vision but that conversation is for a later portion of this book—chapter five.

⁷*Hom.* III.5.

The third misconception is one that we will treat at length through the following chapters. It is a misconception, and one that has been utilized in theological antiquity, that an affirmation of the incomprehensibility of God means that creatures can have no positive knowledge of God. For the sake of clarity and brevity, allow me to state the point plainly—it is simply not true that an affirmation of God’s incomprehensibility necessitates an affirmation that creatures can have no positive knowledge of God. An affirmation that divine incomprehensibility entails a denial of the possibility of positive knowledge would be an injustice to the tradition of negative theology, the role of analogy, and the Lord’s efficacy in divine revelation.

Instead of diminishing a possibility of positive knowledge, the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility will cause the theological pilgrim to be careful with truth claims regarding knowledge and language of the divine. This is a far cry from admitting the impossibility of positive theology or a measure of cataphatic predication. Indeed, propositions as rudimentary as triunity and God being love (1 Jn 4:7) are in themselves a kind of cataphasis, a positive knowledge and affirmation of God, and belong to the core of the Christian religion. We will return to the theme of positive theology in chapter six.

The fourth misconception is directly related to the third, and that is the notion that the incarnation of the Son erases the need to affirm divine incomprehensibility. The relationship between the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility and the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity needs to be handled with care, and we will seek to do so in chapter two. Yet, it should be said here that there are two errors to avoid when keeping together incomprehensibility and the incarnation; we must avoid both an idea that the coming of Jesus of Nazareth in the flesh means we can disregard divine incomprehensibility while also avoiding the idea that the incarnation does not really reveal something special, positive, and significant about the Lord. Jesus’ words are revolutionary and revelatory when he declares, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9).

Moreover, the unknown author of Hebrews gets at the revelatory reality of Jesus' incarnation, saying, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1-2). The incarnation of the Son of God is the most explicit self-revealing we have from the Lord. In the coming of Jesus Christ, God did not give us more words, propositions, or prophecies about himself; he gave us himself. Yet, while the revelation that is Jesus walking among us is profound beyond words, it nevertheless does not bring to an end the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility.⁸

The fifth misconception of divine incomprehensibility is not only related to the fourth but builds off it. The misconception is that incomprehensibility is nullified by God's work in the economy, or the outward action of God among the creatures. On the contrary, divine incomprehensibility is not nullified by that particular act of the economy we call the incarnation, neither is divine incomprehensibility nullified by the larger concept that is the divine economy in its entirety. While God's economic activity is valuable and even efficacious in God's self-revelation, it does not negate his incomprehensibility. What is more, the biblical data seems to suggest that not only is God's essence incomprehensible, but so too is the fullness of his economic work. It is for this reason that David can say, "You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it" (Ps 139:5-6). The subject here of David's not understanding is not the essence of God, but rather the work of God. John also notes the inscrutability of God's economy, saying, "Now there are also many other things Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25). To summarize this misconception,

⁸In fact, rather than the incarnation rendering incomprehensibility obsolete, it is the incarnation that flows *into* incomprehensibility. As Benedict Pictet says, "Besides, the divine nature dwells in light unapproachable by mortals; it was therefore necessary that the mediator should become man, that we might obtain easier access to the divine nature." *CT*, 279.

not only does the single act of the incarnation not nullify divine incomprehensibility but neither does the entirety of the economy.

The sixth misconception which could possibly arise in dealing with divine incomprehensibility is that an affirmation of the doctrine may take away the zeal Christian's feel toward the task of Christian reasoning on the persons of the triune God. If God is utterly incomprehensible, might this discourage followers of Jesus from doing the hard work of contemplating the deep things of God? Is incomprehensibility an invitation to downplay the need for theological reflection? We ought to earnestly deny this claim. An important point for this book, and an important point for a nuanced and careful doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, is that the doctrine is a revealed doctrine. Revelation plays a central role in the Christian faith as the God who dwells in unapproachable light has not left us in our helpless estate. God has revealed himself in nature, in the apostles and prophets, and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ. It is through revelation that we come to know God as incomprehensible. Therefore, the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility should be a motivator for thorough Christian reflection; for in no other sphere of our life do we run up against something so majestic to be completely out of bounds in terms of the efficacy of our thoughts and words yet still knowable. God is a revealed incomprehensibility, and in that revelation we learn that it is "in him that we move and live and have our being" (Acts 17:28). A thorough study of the incomprehensibility of God will ultimately lead to the reality that even the love of God is incomprehensible. Instead of finding despair in the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, Christians will find a bottomless well of wonder. Divine incomprehensibility means that the goodness of God, and all we see as good in him—his love, kindness, justice, mercy, grace—it is all incomprehensibly bottomless, and we will never plumb his depth in our lifetimes—or a thousand lifetimes.

The seventh and final misconception is based on logical argument and is thought to be an internal problem for the doctrine of divine

incomprehensibility and divine ineffability. The misconception is that these two doctrines—incomprehensibility and ineffability—are self-defeating. The logic, as it is said to go, is that negative theology, like the denouncement of comprehension or articulation, is in itself a kind of comprehension or articulation. If we describe God as unknowable and unspeakable, then we are making a claim regarding his person and even trying to articulate what his person is like—unknowable.

Some have postulated this self-referentially defeating argument against proponents of divine incomprehensibility. See, for example, Alvin Plantinga, who wrote:

But if this is so, then, presumably, at least one of our concepts—being such that our concepts don't apply to it—does apply to this being. Either those who attempt to make this claim succeed in making an assertion or not. If they don't succeed, we have nothing to consider; if they do, however, they appear to be predicating a property of a being they have referred to, in which case at least some of our concepts do apply to it, contrary to the claim they make. So if they succeed in making a claim, they make a false claim.⁹

The logic of this claim seems to make sense and is rather straightforward: even a predication of “incomprehensibility” or “ineffability” is a predication pertaining to theological epistemology and theological language, and is therefore self-defeating.

Augustine seemed to feel the tension of this critique too, which suggests that theologians contemplating incomprehensibility today should not merely throw this appraisal aside. Instead, we ought to recognize that an affirmation of real and meaningful incomprehensibility is

⁹Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 6. For example, Simon Hewitt, *Negative Theology and Philosophical Analysis: Only the Splendour of Light* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 21, accredits this view to Plantinga. While Plantinga's line of reasoning is applicable to questioning the validity of *apophaticism*, it is still not entirely obvious that Plantinga deserves to be seen as an enemy of negative theology in its entirety. A charitable reading of Plantinga's work could read him as critiquing a notion of negative theology that would deny *any* possible sort of *cataphasis*. Yet, this objection of incomprehensibility being self-defeating is still worthy of contemplation and answer.

difficult as it is nothing less than the essence of God in consideration. Hear Augustine on this point:

Have I spoken of God, or uttered His praise, in any worthy way? Nay, I feel that I have done nothing more than desire to speak; and if I have said anything, it is not what I desired to say. How do I know this, except from the fact that God is unspeakable? But what I have said, if it had been unspeakable, could not have been spoken. And so God is not even to be called “unspeakable,” because to say even this is to speak of Him. Thus there arises a curious contradiction of words, because if the unspeakable is what cannot be spoken of, it is not unspeakable if it can be called unspeakable. And this opposition of words is rather to be avoided by silence than to be explained away by speech.¹⁰

Augustine, feeling the tension of predicating ineffability, notes that maybe silence is the best choice of action for the Christian theologian. However, while we ought to listen to the North African theologian in his suggestion of silence, we ought as well to continue hearing him as he concludes, “And yet God, although nothing worthy of his greatness can be said of Him, has condescended to accept the worship of men’s mouths, and has desired us through the medium of our own words to rejoice in His praise.”¹¹

Predicating the apophatic concepts of incomprehensibility and ineffability is not self-defeating because of God’s economic activity of self-revelation. God’s incomprehensibility is a revealed incomprehensibility. The one who shows up in a burning bush and tells the prophet he is to be called “I AM” has chosen to make himself known. In making himself known, he has revealed that the creature will never fully comprehend his essence or articulate his glories. We have the sturdy epistemological ground of revelation to stand on when we predicate apophatic terms to God. This point will become all the

¹⁰Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, NPNF¹ 2:524.

¹¹Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, NPNF¹ 2:524.

more important as theologians begin to see God's act of self-disclosure as grace. For without such a condescending and accommodating self-revelation, the possibility of a theological endeavor would become fleeting.

These seven possible misconceptions about the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility will be important to keep in mind as we develop a definition of the doctrine and work on variegated nuances and contours of the doctrine. Below is a summary of the seven possible misconceptions, and a quick response, brought together in one place by way of a table.

Table 1.1. Possible Misconceptions about Divine Incomprehensibility

Possible Misconception	Potential Brief Answer
Incomprehensibility is synonymous with God being un-comprehended.	Divine incomprehensibility is not asserting that God is <i>yet to be comprehended</i> . It is not the case that with enough theological evolution and contemplation, the creature will arrive one day at a full and complete comprehension of God's essence. God is not only <i>currently</i> "un-comprehended"; he is the ever-incomprehensible one who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16).
Incomprehensibility is part of the noetic effects of the fall.	The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility is not rooted in the intellectual capacity of the creature <i>alone</i> . Rather, the doctrine is rooted in God's otherness. We cannot comprehend God <i>not just</i> because we are fallen, but because we are the creature, and he is the Creator.
Incomprehensibility means that we can have <i>no</i> positive knowledge of God.	The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility does not entail <i>mere apophysis</i> . Instead, <i>cataphatic</i> knowledge of God is possible due to his gracious accommodation. Yet theologians must still be nuanced about the nature of positive names and theology.
The incarnation of Jesus Christ as the fullest revelation of God nullifies the need to affirm divine incomprehensibility.	While the economic act of Jesus' incarnation is a real and even the <i>best</i> self-revelation of God, it is nevertheless itself a form of accommodated glory. While we can say, with Jesus, that those who have seen Jesus have seen the Father (Jn 14:9), we must affirm still, also with Jesus, that no one has truly seen the Father but the one begotten Son (Jn 6:46).
While the incarnation might not nullify the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, the full concept of the economy does.	The church has, throughout its long history, affirmed that God is best known through his works in the economy of redemption. Nevertheless, God <i>in se</i> cannot be made synonymous with <i>what God does</i> in the economy. Moreover, according to Ps 139:5-6 and John 21:25, even the fullness of the economy is incomprehensible.

Possible Misconception	Potential Brief Answer
Affirming incomprehensibility will diminish Christian’s zeal to contemplate their Lord.	The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility is a <i>revealed</i> doctrine. Meaning, the God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16) has <i>told</i> us he is incomprehensible and yet still invites us to contemplate his glory through his gracious acts of accommodation. Instead of demotivating the Christian in theological reflection in the lifelong process of Christian contemplation, we are invited to explore the incomprehensible one in whom we move and live and have our being (Acts 17:28).
The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility and divine ineffability is self-defeating because such an affirmation is itself a kind of comprehension and articulation.	Again, a vital point in a healthy understanding of divine incomprehensibility and its corollary doctrine, divine ineffability, is that God has <i>revealed</i> himself as such. In affirming the apophatic concepts of incomprehensibility and ineffability we stand on the epistemic ground of God’s self-disclosure; from that ground do we draw the authority to affirm these two negations of the divine.

Two ditches to avoid in affirming God’s incomprehensibility. When discussing the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, it is popular to use the illustration of two ditches that must be avoided on either side of the conversation, and for good reason. The repetition this analogy gets is not due to the lack of creativity in theological writers, but for the truthfulness that exists in the reality of both temptations when thinking about divine incomprehensibility.

Steven D. Boyer and Christopher A. Hall state the double temptation well: “While we have good grounds for expecting that reason will be unable to master God the Creator, we also have good grounds for believing that reason should not be abandoned as vain or worthless.” They continue:

This odd juxtaposition of legitimacy and humility challenges us to be on the lookout for two opposite theological errors as we proceed. We will need to avoid *both* an arrogant rationalism that denies the unspeakable greatness of God and thus loses mystery altogether, and an anti-intellectual irrationalism that affirms mystery so quickly and uncritically that reason itself is undermined.¹²

¹²Steven D. Boyer and Christopher Hall, *The Mystery of God: Theology for Knowing the Unknowable* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 14.

The existence of this double temptation—to either make God so explanatory as to lose mystery, or claim mystery so quickly as to lose the privilege and right of theological contemplation—leads Hall and Boyer to the profound conclusion, “Every faculty must approach God as God—and this means that every faculty should expect to be overwhelmed and undone by a supremacy that cannot be mastered. . . . Reason, too, comes before the mystery legitimately, but she comes as a petitioner seeking her Lord’s bounty, not as a judge demanding a satisfactory explanation.”¹³

These are the two erroneous ditches to avoid when affirming the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. The language utilized in this book to acknowledge the double error on either side of divine incomprehensibility is that of *theological despair* and *theological idolatry*. On the one side, we must deny that nothing intelligible or truthful can be predicated of God. We, as creatures, due to the revelatory grace of God have hope in knowing and naming God with a measure of confidence trusting that he was not deceptive in his self-revealing. On the other hand, we do not operate within the theological task with such confidence as to name him as he really is. To use the language we will construct in chapter six, while affirming the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility, we ought to avoid the theological despair that all our theology proper is merely equivocation while also avoiding the theological idolatry that in our creaturely mind and words we can know or name God univocally.

To show the consistency of this affirmation throughout theological antiquity, we move from Boyer and Hall writing in 2012 to Gregory of Nyssa, writing some sixteen hundred years earlier in the fourth century. Gregory writes about the tension between mystery and reason in knowing and naming God in his work against Eunomius:

Such then was the thought elaborated by our Teacher. It enables any one, whose vision is not obstructed by the screen of heresy, to perceive

¹³Boyer and Hall, *Mystery of God*, 14.

quite clearly that in the manner of existence of the essential nature of the Divinity is intangible, inconceivable, and beyond all rational comprehension. Human thought, investigating and searching by such reasoning as is possible, reaches out and touches the unapproachable and sublime Nature, *neither seeing so clearly as distinctly to glimpse the Invisible, nor so totally debarred from approaching as to be unable to form any impression of what it seeks.*¹⁴

With Gregory, and the centuries of Christian thinkers who have followed him, we ought to affirm that the divine nature as it really is in itself “intangible, inconceivable, and beyond all rational comprehension.” However, at the same time, we affirm—along with the Cappadocians—that we are not so “totally debarred” that we have no ability to “form any impression” of the divine. This is what the tension of avoiding both ditches pertaining to divine incomprehensibility looks like.

Toward a definition of incomprehensible and ineffable. There has been enough groundwork concerning the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility laid that we can move to our working definition of divine incomprehensibility and its corollary doctrine, the ineffability of God. Exodus 33 helped us begin the project by examining the sheer otherness of God and the following nuances helped make sure that we do not overstate the doctrine of incomprehensibility nor its role in the theological task.

Therefore, we will move forward with this working definition of divine incomprehensibility and ineffability, cognizant of nuances laid out thus far. Divine incomprehensibility affirms that God the Creator is wholly other than his creatures and the distinction between the two renders God out of the rational jurisdiction of the creature’s theological and intellectual comprehension. In no way can the creaturely imagination comprehend the divine nature as it truly is. As the finite will never

¹⁴CE II, 138, 89, emphasis added.

circumscribe the infinite, the creaturely mind will never surround all that is in God. Since God as God is out of reach for the mind of the creature, so too is God as God out of reach for the words and names of the creature. Divine incomprehensibility therefore necessitates divine ineffability as the creaturely limits, combined with the otherness of God, means that we cannot either fully know or name God as he really is *in se*.

While this working definition of the doctrines of incomprehensibility and ineffability is sufficient in talking about these two doctrines, our theologizing about incomprehensibility is not complete until our mind's eye turns toward the nuancing and norming realities of the divine self-disclosure that is God's revelation. While the divine nature is completely outside the rational jurisdiction for the creatures—human and angels alike—God has graciously revealed himself in nature, the Holy Scripture, and the person of Jesus Christ and these three modes of revelation therefore temper what we have to say about divine incomprehensibility. So, while not contradicting the above working definition as it stands, it is not enough to account for a thoroughly Christian doctrine of divine incomprehensibility as the Christian theologian must account for God's work in the economy of redemption as the second person of the Trinity dwells among the creatures before his death, resurrection, and ascension. How exactly revelation norms the utter incomprehensibility and unapproachability of God has yet to be seen and will be the topic of exploration for the chapters to come. For now, we will bring this first chapter to a close with a brief discussion of the theological method and outline for the rest of the book.

METHOD AND OUTLINE: RETRIEVING AND CONSTRUCTING THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE INCOMPREHENSIBILITY

Retrieving divine incomprehensibility. As the aim of this chapter is to introduce the conversation of God's incomprehensibility and set the stage for the remainder of the book, a word about method and aim is

in order. This work aims to be an exercise in both theological retrieval and constructive dogmatic theology.

As a work of retrieval, the primary voices we will interact with throughout this project are from centuries gone by. In part, a posture of retrieval is necessitated by the reality that the early and medieval church had much to say about God's incomprehensibility. The prevalence of the doctrine in the theological literature of these two historical eras renders the lack of such treatments in contemporary theological scholarship surprising.¹⁵ However, as we will see, it is important that we do not here treat the voices of yesteryear as a monolithic unity. As the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility gets at the unsearchable essence of the triune Lord, it ought not be surprising that theologians and theological eras had differing, and sometimes contradictory, emphases in articulating the doctrine. However, while there is indeed diversity throughout theological tradition, there is still enough overlap to work through major voices in hopes of retrieving a working doctrine of incomprehensibility for our day.

Traversing the halls of history reveals a rather consistent affirmation of God's incomprehensibility. Throughout theological antiquity, the doctrine of incomprehensibility has enjoyed a pride of place in theological prolegomena. The cast of theologians whose pen wrote of an incomprehensible God is vast, spanning both continents and centuries. From the theological orations of the Cappadocians and the homilies of Chrysostom to the confession of the post-Reformation, divine incomprehensibility received considerable contemplation and treatment.

¹⁵This is not to say there are no works which give special attention to the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility in modernity. For example, see Tomasz Stępień and Krolina Kocharczyk-Bonińska, *Unknown God, Known in His Activities: Incomprehensibility of God During the Trinitarian Controversy of the 4th Century*, European Studies in Theology, Philosophy and History of Religion 18 (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2018); Gregory P. Rocca, *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004); Paul van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God: Augustine as a Negative Theologian in Late Antique History and Religion* (Leuven: Peeters, 2011); and Deirdre Carabine, *The Unknown God: Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition: Plato to Eriugena* (Leuven: Peeters, 2015).

In the aftermath of Nicaea, the Arian sect known as the Anomoeans grew. Among the theological convictions of the Anomoeans was the heterodox belief that creatures can have a knowledge of God which resembles God's self-understanding. In other words, man "can and does know God as God knows himself."¹⁶ In a series of homilies against the Arian Anomoeans, Chrysostom deals explicitly with the concept of divine incomprehensibility before turning to the consubstantiality of the three persons of the Trinity. In his homilies warning the orthodox against the Anomoean fallacies, Chrysostom calls it "the height of folly" to think that we can achieve a perfect knowledge of God, for God is, in his essence, incomprehensible—both to men and to angels alike.¹⁷ Chrysostom follows this homily with four more like it in which he works through pertinent biblical data to show both the glory of God's incomprehensible essence and folly in men trying to reach a univocal knowledge of that divine essence. These homilies will receive substantial attention in chapter three.

Chrysostom is of course not alone in advocating a strong view of God's incomprehensibility. Moving from the more practical, focused homilies of a fourth-century preacher to the theological work of a seventh-century theologian, Maximus the Confessor had much to say about God's incomprehensible essence. Using the metaphysical triad of substance, potentiality, and actuality, Maximus the Confessor describes the divine essence as being incomprehensible to the creature, at least in a univocal sense. Maximus writes, "God is one, without first principle, incomprehensible, throughout being the total potentiality of being; he excludes absolutely the concept of temporal or qualified existence. . . . [H]e is indefinite, immobile, and infinite, since he is

¹⁶Paul Harkins, introduction in *Hom.*, 23. In his introduction to Chrysostom's volume in the CUA series, Harkins provides a helpful guide to the contours of the conversation around the relationship between divine incomprehensibility and Arianism.

¹⁷*Hom.*, 59.

infinitely beyond substance, potentiality, and actuality.”¹⁸ Maximus employs the categories of substance, potency, and act to help deliver readers to the vital lesson that God is “beyond being.” In the end, the oft-quoted line from Nazianzus, pulling from Plato, becomes something of a summary for a considerable portion of theological antiquity: “to know God is hard, to describe him is impossible.”¹⁹

These early voices show to be a first fruits of why the posture of retrieval is appropriate for this project. There is much contemporary thinkers can learn by sitting at the feet of those who have come before us. Moreover, as we turn to develop these historic conversations in greater detail, we see that not only did the early church (along with other eras) have a working category for divine incomprehensibility, but they had also worked through the implications of such an affirmation. So, while Chrysostom is right to call trying to understand God’s essence the “height of folly,” and Gregory is correct to say describing God is impossible, we can still avoid the temptation of giving into theological despair because the church’s doctrine of divine incomprehensibility speaks a better word.

To be clear, any notion of retrieval ought to be heard as a modest claim. There are far too many biblical scholars, theologians, philosophers, and the like doing exceptional work on divine incomprehensibility for this project to serve any “pioneering” purposes. Rather than attempting to pioneer any conversation, my hope here is to turn our collective ear to history in hopes that we might learn from saints gone by and then ask what a nuanced doctrine of divine incomprehensibility might mean for us within modern theological method.

¹⁸Maximus the Confessor, *Two Hundred Chapters on Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2015), 43. While God is beyond substance, potentiality, and actuality, according to Maximus, he nevertheless is the cause of all three: “He is, however, a substance-causing reality while beyond substance, a potentiality-causing ground while beyond potentiality, and the effecting and unending state of each actuality; so, to speak concisely, he is causative of each substance, potentiality, and actuality, also of each first principle, intermediate state, and end” (45).

¹⁹OR 28.4. Another translation renders it, “It is difficult to conceive God but to define him in words is an impossibility” (*NPNE*¹ 7:289).

Constructing divine incomprehensibility. Retrieving a nuanced doctrine of divine incomprehensibility—one that is rooted in the biblical data, historically informed, and dogmatically constructive—will aid in avoiding theological despair on the one hand while also avoiding any theological idolatry on the other. Avoiding this despair-idolatry dichotomy and finding a nuanced way forward to navigate both the indicatives and the imperatives of knowing and naming God throughout Scripture will move us from the activity of historical retrieval to attempts of constructing a dogmatic theology of divine incomprehensibility.

The aim of this project is relatively straightforward. First, I endeavor, even in a small way, to aid in retrieving the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility as a meaningful emphasis in Christian theology. Second, and of stronger emphasis in this project, I hope to move beyond retrieval to construction. After visiting the historic voices and the biblical text concerning God's incomprehensibility, I aim to develop three implications springing from the doctrine for theological methodology. These three implications will each, in their own way, impact the theological method. As we will see, considering divine incomprehensibility, there are (1) ontological implications, (2) linguistic and epistemological implications, and (3) implications of posture for methodology. Constructing these three implications to and from the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility will also provide the book with its outline.

Implications and outline. Working on the relationship of incomprehensibility and these three methodological emphases is the primary aim of the book you hold in your hands. While I am interested in the historical development in hopes to learn from the church's history, the primary aim of this book is tracing the implications of divine incomprehensibility for theological method. This book is a project in asking methodological and dogmatic implications flowing into and out of the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. For this reason, if readers find themselves less interested in the aspects of retrieving the historic conversation surrounding the doctrine, I advise beginning in chapter five, which will allow readers to

jump immediately into my discussion of divine incomprehensibility and theological method; it is in chapters five through seven that I spend a majority of my time describing the import into theological method from the impetus of divine incomprehensibility.

As this project aims to be an exercise in constructive dogmatics, it will pull from exegetical, historical, and philosophical theology. These streams of Christian reasoning will allow us to reach our threefold implications of divine incomprehensibility, and these implications will also provide structure to the book. By way of a roadmap, the outline of the book is as follows. The book is broken into two parts. Part one—“Introduction, Antiquity, and the Biblical Data”—will seek to set the stage and begin the modest work of retrieving a historically and biblically informed doctrine of God’s incomprehensibility. Part two—“Divine Incomprehensibility and the Task of Theology”—will work toward the three methodological implications mentioned above.

Following this introduction, chapter two seeks to develop a biblical doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. As we have seen, even in this introductory first chapter, there seem to be passages in Scripture that push on one or another emphases with this doctrine. Working to harmonize tension between passages will take some exegetical work. Furthermore, chapter four hopes to provide a more mature biblical case for the doctrine than a mere proof-texting. I will work to show how the unfolding narrative contained in the Scriptures has a threefold argumentation for the doctrine: some passages (1) declare the doctrine, other passages (2) demonstrate the doctrine, and, finally, other passages (3) demand the doctrine.

Following the chapter focusing on the biblical data, chapters three and four will visit the halls of history in hopes to examine the nuances and development of the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility throughout theological antiquity. While an exhaustive examination of divine incomprehensibility in church history would be a worthwhile project, these chapters will aim to balance brevity and taking the

needed space to work through pertinent eras of historical theology. Spending time with thinkers of the past, examining both the confessors and the confessions of the church, will bring to light needed clarification when we confess that God is incomprehensible. The goal of these two chapters, working to bring the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility to bear so that we might turn, in part two, to seeking methodological implications, will be to determine which thinkers of yesteryear we spend time with.

Chapter five begins part two of the book, in which I turn to develop the three methodological implications built on the foundation of the doctrine. The first of the three methodological implications will deal with notions of ontology and seek to root the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. This chapter will give sustained consideration to the Creator-creature distinction as one of many streams flowing into the ocean of incomprehensibility. We will continue to develop the vital distinction between the Creator and his creatures as a distinction of kind, not merely of degree. In the end, this distinction between God and his creatures will impact how we attempt to know God, the way we talk about God, and our posture in contemplation before God. The conversation will then move toward theological and methodological implications of the Creator-creature distinction, especially what it means for the creature to learn about God in the economy of his divine actions.

Moving on from the ontological implication, chapter six will move into linguistic implications of divine incomprehensibility. The longest of all the chapters in this volume, chapter six will explore the conversation about religious epistemology and religious language in light of God's incomprehensibility. Conversations found in the sixth chapter span from items such as divine accommodation, apophatic/cataphatic predication, archetypal/ectypal theology, equivocal/univocal/analogical language, and more.

For the final of the three implications—the implication of posture—the book will take a slight turn in tone in chapter seven. Since the

proper location of theology and the proper culture of theology is the ecclesial body of Christ,²⁰ this implication will consider the work of the regenerate theologian. Revisiting Gregory of Nazianzus's point that knowing God is difficult but describing God is an impossibility, it would be easy to assume that the theological task is a hopeless endeavor. However, a nuanced understanding of divine incomprehensibility will help show the Christian thinker that while we need not be hopeless in the task of Christian theology, there is a rooted humility flowing from the doctrine. To state the case a touch stronger, because of the divine incomprehensibility, theological humility should not be considered a mere virtue in the theological life. Rather, if God is incomprehensible and our only hope of theologizing rests on his gracious act of accommodation, then we do theology as receivers: those who have received a message from the prophets and apostles in which God is making himself known, and ultimately receivers of the incarnation of Jesus Christ, which is the fullest revelation of God. Therefore, instead of humility as merely a theological virtue, we will see that divine incomprehensibility renders theological humility a necessity. The posture of theological humility is not optional in the life of a theologian; it is demanded by the pride-deflating reality that theology would be a nearly impossible task apart from God's gracious self-disclosure.

The volume will close with ten working theses concerning the doctrine of divine incomprehensibility. In no way are these ten theses meant to be taken as a "final word" on the matter. Rather, these are "working theses" that I put forward in hopes to help fellow theological pilgrims consider as we contemplate the incomprehensible God and all things in relation to God.

²⁰For this understanding of theology's culture, see John Webster, *The Culture of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019).

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