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Book Review: The Unfolding Mystery of the Divine Name (Knowles)

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Book Review

David A. Skelton

Michael. P. Knowles, *The Unfolding Mystery of the Divine Name. The God of Sinai in Our Midst* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012).

God's list of divine attributes he gave to Moses in Exodus 34.5–7 is a significant moment not only in the book of Exodus but throughout the entire Old Testament. Recognizing the centrality of this passage, Michael P. Knowles uses the divine attributes God reveals in it as a key heuristic and interpretive lens for biblical theology in his book *The Unfolding Mystery of the Divine Name: The God of Sinai in Our Midst*. In this book, Knowles demonstrates the trajectory of these attributes throughout the Old and New Testament as well as their prominence in Judaism and Islam. Each chapter follows this trajectory and in doing so, Knowles hopes to provide an “inquiry into a theology of encounter” (24) as well as demonstrate the practice of “generous orthodoxy,” which is an interfaith dialogue that takes seriously one’s own religious tradition while also acknowledging contributions from the tradition of others (25).

In his first chapter, Knowles explores Moses’ desire to know God’s name in the book of Exodus. For Knowles, Moses’ original intention to know God’s name in Exodus 3.13 was a naive attempt to gain control over God (32–33). Israel follows a similar path in its attempts to reduce God to a golden calf, but in this moment of complete failure on the part of Israel, when Moses has given up any attempt to constrain or control God, God reveals Godself. The thirteen attributes God reveals are an exposition of God’s name and describe from God’s own mouth the character that God has already revealed in divine actions of mercy and grace to Israel (39). The rest of the book delineates these attributes in order to reveal God’s character and call the readers to imitate God (47–49).

In the chapters that follow Knowles moves seamlessly between biblical interpretation, history of interpretation and the usage of a particular divine attribute among Jewish, Christian and Islamic communities. For example, in regard to divine mercy, Knowles suggests that “mercy” or “compassion” is God’s central characteristic. Prayers and petitions often appeal to this specific attribute and, even when God acts in judgment, God is always looking for a chance to forgive, redeem or show compassion (57–62). Just as this quality was central to Israel and is predominate in modern Jewish prayers and benedictions, God’s mercy is also core to God’s being in Christianity and Islam. For the former, God is the “Father of Mercies” as seen in the story of the Prodigal Son (74–75) and, for the latter, the attribution of mercy and compassion to God appears at the beginning of all but one of the 114 chapters of the Qu’ran and the names that makes up this phrase are the most important of the “Ninety-Nine Beautiful Names” for Allah (51). Similarly, Knowles compares assertions by both Simeon the Just and Simeon ben Gamaliel concerning the “three things that sustain the world” in the Mishnah, in order to accentuate the pairing of “truth” with “steadfast love” in both the Old and New Testament.

He concludes his book with a survey of several biblical and apocryphal texts as well as texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Talmud in order to accentuate the reverberation of Exodus 34.5–7 throughout the Bible and the Christian and Jewish faith and the use of these divine attributes as key demarcators of piety for

the righteous in both traditions. He also hopes that this reflection on the legacy of Exodus 34.5–7 throughout both testaments and various Abrahamic traditions will help Jews, Christians and Muslims recognize their common heritage and give them a basis (perhaps even a language) for fruitful conversation (239). For this Knowles should be commended.

Reading Exodus 34.5–7 as an exposition of the divine name is quite helpful. The reappearance of this revelation as a creedal statement throughout the Old Testament (cf. Num 14.18; Neh 9.17; Pss 86.15; 103.8; 145.8; Joel 2.13; Jon 4.2; Nah 1.3) and Moses imploring God to act in accordance with this revelation in Numbers 14.18 suggest that this exposition had profound significance both for Israel and for God. Thus Knowles is right in his attempt to build an Old Testament theology around this self-revelation. Nevertheless, his methodology is at times deeply suspect. Although he realizes he's risking "historical inexactitude" (25), his choice to ignore historical, social and textual context makes much of Knowles' work appear to be more of a theological word study that occasionally dabbles in comparative religion. In this synthetic/comparative approach, Knowles also assumes on several occasions that texts in Judaism, Christianity and Islam that use language from Exodus 34.5–7 are dependent on the Sinai event for that language and that these words mean the same thing in every occurrence and in every tradition. His intention is to show that the Bible and Abrahamic traditions that use the OT return to themes from Exodus 34.5–7 many times and in many different ways (25), but the key issue is why they do so. An acknowledgement of shared themes and motifs is a great starting point for interfaith dialogue, but ignoring the history and context of these passages allows one to gloss over key differences that one also cannot ignore if one is to have a successful interfaith dialogue. Finally, for one deeply committed to interfaith dialogue among the Abrahamic traditions, Knowles scarcely interacts with Islamic texts. He slightly rectifies this problem in his online workbook (www.ivpress.com), but even there, he predominately accentuates the Christian and Jewish tradition.

Despite these criticisms, I highly recommend Knowles' book for both ministers and theologians. Through it (and its helpful online workbook) one will think deeply about the core creedal statement of the entire Old Testament and the breadth of God's self-revelation from Sinai. Knowles' insights show why the core tenants God expounds in Exodus 34.5–7 were powerful for Israel and why they remain deeply impactful for Jews, Christians and Muslims alike.

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