

[The following is the author’s original article, written in 2018 and unpublished elsewhere]

God Has a Name: A Review Essay

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John Mark Comer. *God Has a Name*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017. 288 pp. \$16. ISBN: 978-0310344209

K.H. Miskotte. *Bijbels ABC*. 8th edition. Utrecht: Kok, 2016. 224 pp. \$40. ISBN: 978-9043527361

The two books listed above come from immensely different contexts. The first, by John Mark Comer, addresses the spiritual-but-not-religious milieu of Portland, Oregon, at the beginning of the Trump era. The second, by Kornelis Heiko (K.H.) Miskotte (1894–1976), was initially published in Amsterdam under Nazi occupation; it has since run to eight Dutch editions.¹ And yet—for all that gaping difference—the two books also share much in common, and they offer several timely lessons for the project of interpreting Scripture theologically.² The review that follows engages both these dimensions, commonalities and lessons, in that sequence.

Maybe the most obvious shared feature of the two books has to do with their authors: both are men, white and Protestant, and both write as pastors. John Mark Comer is pastor for teaching and vision at Bridgetown Church in downtown Portland, a nondenominational or “free” evangelical church. At the time he wrote *Bijbels ABC*—“the biblical ABCs”—Miskotte was a pastor at the Westerkerk, a historic congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church in central

¹ Original edition: *Bijbels ABC* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1941). For more on its publication history, see Gijsbert van den Brink, “Alsof de naam niet onbetrouwbaar zou zijn! Over bijbels abc,” in *Het tegoed van K.H. Miskotte: de actuele betekenis van zijn denken voor de gereformeerde theologie*, ed. Wim Dekker, Gerard Cornelis den Hertog, and Tjerk de Reus (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2006), 163–85.

² Assessing a Dutch-language work from midcentury may also go some (modest) way towards fulfilling Daniel J. Treier’s suggestions for “globalizing” theological interpretation (*Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008], 157–86, here 184–85; cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “‘One Rule to Rule Them All?’ Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity,” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, ed. Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006], 85–126). Of course, Miskotte belongs as much to the global North as Comer.

Amsterdam.³ Both men also share a sense of “apostolic” responsibility: they strive as pastors to speak to the unchurched and to those at the margins of the church.⁴ As such, their books are “popular”: intended for wide circulation and not specialist consumption. This alone makes them unusual candidates for consideration within the framework of theological interpretation, which has often taken a more academic form.⁵ Stylistically, both books are aphoristic, even asyndetic. Comer’s paragraphs are short; sentences often sit by themselves in a pool of white space, and his tone is informal. The overall effect is meditative. Miskotte’s prose, by contrast, is urgent. Its feeling is unrendered; peppered with odd italicizations and with all-caps section headings that segue into the sections themselves, its voice is suggestive and essayistic.

Though “popular” in character, neither book is intellectually underwrought. Comer’s *God Has a Name* includes endnotes, and his acknowledgements thank several biblical scholars for vetting his work (pp. 263–64). But the radius of these theological debts is, perhaps, somewhat narrow: Greg Boyd, N.T. Wright, and Scot McKnight all make a showing, for example. Above all, Comer cites the influence of Gerry Breshears, his Old Testament professor at Western Seminary, who taught Comer to value Exodus 34:6–8 (“The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God...”) as “the most quoted passage *in* the Bible, *by* the Bible” and therefore as “ground zero for a theology of God” (p. 32). Line-by-line exposition of this Exodus text forms the backbone of Comer’s book, because it is, as Comer says, one of few places in the Bible where God provides a self-description (ibid.). The impulse to subject thinking *about* God to the

³ On Miskotte’s Amsterdam ministry, see Herman de Liagre Böhl, *Miskotte: Theoloog in de branding, 1894-1976* (Amsterdam: Prometheus, 2016), 177–216.

⁴ Miskotte would receive a charge from the Amsterdam Church Consistory in 1942 to work among unchurched youth in southern Amsterdam (de Liagre Böhl, *Theoloog*, 179–82). See also Martin Kessler, *Kornelis Miskotte: A Biblical Theology* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1997), 21–23.

⁵ In his section on “Prospects and issues for the future,” Stephen E. Fowl writes that “[c]urrently, the commentary and the scholarly article or monograph are the primary modes for contemporary theological interpretation” (*Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, Cascade Companions [Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009], 71–75, here 73).

unique shape of God’s own self-revelation, given in Scripture, thus basically motivates Comer’s approach. His is a work of “theological interpretation of scripture” in at least the lower-case sense of considering a theological question—God’s identity—with close reference to a scriptural text.

Bijbels ABC shows a more ecumenical intellectual outlook. Miskotte had completed a doctorate at Groningen University in 1932, nine years before writing *Bijbels ABC*. His dissertation topic was “the essence of Jewish religion,” for which he examined major, then-contemporary Jewish philosophers.⁶ Although *Bijbels ABC* lacks footnoting entirely, it moves with ease through the currents of European thought; names like Goethe and Spinoza and Dostoevsky crop up offhandedly. One theological inspiration stands out: if Gerry Breshears is the mentor behind *God Has a Name*, then Karl Barth is the unmistakable master informing the theological content of *Bijbels ABC*. This is evident from the first chapter, in which, for instance, Miskotte provides this section heading: “THE WORD HAPPENS.” He goes on to characterize the Bible as “a wide zone of [human] reflecting and seeking and drawing near,” which can and must be differentiated from “the Word that strikes” (p. 17).⁷

God’s address is, for Miskotte, present-tense: an event; a disclosure. It is concrete and particular—and self-authenticating. “God’s Word would not be God’s Word,” Miskotte writes, “if it were possible to ground its authority in something outside of itself” (p. 20). In relation to the event of the Word, the Bible offers the preparation and occasion. It is “a word about the Word.” All this Miskotte inherits from Barth. But Miskotte’s account of scripture is also more inflected by the Old Testament—and by Judaism. As the preparation and occasion for the Word,

⁶ For more on the dissertation and its reception, including its winning the Mallinckrodt prize, see de Liagre Böhl, *Theoloog*, 142–53; also Kessler, *Miskotte*, 34–37.

⁷ Page numbers are drawn from the 2016 Kok edition. I thank [name(s) removed for peer review] for help with the English translations.

the entire Bible is basically, in Miskotte’s view, *teaching*, and indeed, *divine instruction*—another word for which, as chapter 2 of *Bijbels ABC* reminds, is *Torah*. If the Word “strikes” (Dutch: *inslaat*, p. 17) the Teaching or Torah “remains” (Dutch: *blijft*, p. 34), and so it must be studied and learned and listened to; Miskotte appeals affectionately in this connection to the model of *beth midrash*, the Jewish “house of learning” (pp. 33, 78, 206). Furthermore: although Torah is diverse and symphonic, Miskotte maintains that it operates by a kind of *spiritual grammar*. Certain biblical keywords give traction to the spiritual study that Miskotte envisions; they are not the theological essence or *Sache* itself, but “instruments of Truth” (p. 61). These keywords—“the biblical ABCs”—are what Miskotte’s book aims to spell out. Notably, Miskotte draws each “letter” of the scriptural alphabet from the Old Testament. As a sort of catechetical primer, *Bijbels ABC* may sit more loosely under the rubric of “theological interpretation” than *God Has a Name*. Nonetheless, it, too, seeks by attending to scripture to make room for the living voice of God.

God Has a Name

Written by two pastors oriented towards the unchurched, yet carrying some theological heft, and also intensively focused on scripture: these commonalities are not incidental to the two books in question, but they do not yet touch the core content that overlaps between them—that which truly justifies their consideration in the same review. This overlap concerns the Name of God.

After a prologue, the first two body chapters of Comer’s book bear the same, one-word main title: “Yahweh.” These “Yahweh” chapters lay the theological groundwork for the four exegetical chapters that follow, which each exposit one line from Exodus 34. The subtitle for the

first “Yahweh”-titled chapter is this: “One simple idea that could radically alter how you relate to God: a name” (p. 11). Here Comer walks through the importance of names within the Bible, including the significance of the changes God makes to human names in the ancestral stories (Genesis) and God’s self-designation in the story of Moses’s call (Exod3). These comments set up for a “fall,” of sorts: the obscuring of the divine name Yahweh through its translation as “the LORD.” This substitution is, in Comer’s words, “a dangerous move.” Why? “Because the LORD isn’t a name; it’s a title, like the doctor or the judge or the president. Calling God ‘the LORD’ is like me calling Tammy ‘the wife.’ That would be *weird*...[b]ecause I’m in a close relationship with her, and that’s not the language of intimacy” (p. 52).

If this is the theological loss, the chapter’s second half specifies the theological *gain* of reclaiming God’s proper named-ness. Relating to God as “Yahweh” underlines that “God is a person”—“[n]ot an impersonal energy force or a chapter in a systematic theology textbook or a world religion” (p. 59). As one powerful index of God’s personality, Comer then describes the “give-and-take” exchange between God and Moses in the wake of the golden calf episode in Exodus 33. God proposes to destroy Israel and start over with Moses—to “reboot the entire franchise” (p. 61). Moses then “talks God out of it,” such that YHWH “relent[s].” Comer pays special attention to the Hebrew verb used here (\sqrt{nhm}), which can also be translated, to “repent” (ibid.; cf. also p. 137). God is, in other words, responsive; interactive; movable—“more of a friend than a formula” (p. 62). Comer sees this insight as hugely encouraging to Christian prayer.

In his second “Yahweh” chapter, Comer poses the question, “why does God need a name in the first place?” He answers like so: “because there are *many* ‘gods’” (p. 79). The biblical God, that is, belongs to a genus, and the name Yahweh singles out the one with whom we have to do. Comer is at pains to emphasize that Yahweh is “the Creator of the universe” whereas other

spiritual agents are creatures. Nonetheless, the Bible uses the same word for them both: *elohim*. The chapter tours through biblical texts that apply this word to other spiritual powers. Exodus 12:12 presents the lead example, and it also frames the relation of Yahweh to these other gods: “I will bring judgment on the gods of Egypt.”⁸ The latter exist and are real—Comer points to the court magicians’ successful execution of two miracles in Exodus 7—and Yahweh is “at war with them” (p. 82).

Jesus Christ, in Comer’s telling, is “Yahweh in flesh and blood”—the “tabernacling” of the same God, not on Sinai but now as a human being, as John 1:14 envisions it (pp. 55). Comer specifically disallows an exclusive identification of the New Testament’s God the Father with the Old Testament Yahweh: “Jesus is the long-awaited human coming of Yahweh” (p. 58; cf. also p. 108). Jesus therefore also enacts the climactic chapter of Yahweh’s longstanding war with the cosmic powers. Comer invokes the model of *Christus Victor*: “the cross is the decisive blow in [Yahweh’s] campaign against evil. The breakthrough victory. On the cross, Jesus defeated Satan, his pantheon of wild and dangerous beings, and even death itself” (p. 100). Comer even speaks of this event with the language of “invasion”: “our job is to stand in [Jesus’s] victory...to cooperate in heaven’s invasion of earth” (p. 101). In spite of Yahweh’s victory, the conquered powers fight on in a ferocious rearguard action; the chapter ends by indicating some areas where their dominion persists. Comer suggests that hardcore pornography and sex trafficking are the work of the defeated powers of this present age—and perhaps also Western consumerism, especially in its exploitative and corporate aspects (p. 118).⁹

⁸ Other examples Comer adduces include Num 33:4; Exod 18:11, 15:11; Ps 82; 86:8, 96:4, 97:7, as well as the first commandment of the Decalogue (“you shall have no other gods”; Exod 20:3) and 1 Cor 8:5.

⁹ Cf. Mirjam Elbers, “Inleiding: De A van het Bijbels ABC—lezen in bezettingstijd,” in *Bijbels ABC*, 5–11, esp. 9–11.

After two prefatory chapters, the third and fourth chapters of Miskotte's *Bijbels ABC* begin to address the book's material content; as with Comer, Miskotte starts with the divine Name. This is the title of the chapter—"Name"—and its first sentence declares: "The word 'Name' is, as it were, the A of the biblical ABCs, the first and decisive line in the design of the thoughts of God. In the building of scriptural vocabulary, it is the cornerstone" (p. 40). Miskotte here observes the reverential Jewish custom of leaving the Tetragrammaton unvocalized and unspelled, instead substituting "the Name." Besides this difference from Comer's treatment (on which, more below), Miskotte's chapter parallels Comer's first "Yahweh" chapter in two respects: monotheism and prayer. Miskotte writes of the Name's function that it "*distinguishes* God from *other beings*, gods and demons. The Bible does not reckon with a general concept of God, only later to add specific names, images, and qualities. The text speaks first and foremost about God as *one* god among other gods" (p. 41). Yet more provocatively, one of Miskotte's section headings reads: "monotheism is not special." The Bible, Miskotte claims, is indifferent to this philosophical concept. Rather, what the Bible prescribes is "more advanced than monotheism," even if it appears in the "guise of what is lesser," namely: in that God has become 'a' god in order to be known to humanity (pp. 44, 42).¹⁰ Like Comer, Miskotte then turns to the matter of prayer. Miskotte's treatment does not take up God's "holy mutability" (Barth's phrase, quoted by Comer; p. 64) but remains fixed on the unique properties of the Name itself. Guided by biblical vocabulary about "calling on the name," Miskotte sees the Name as the guarantee of divine particularity and availability. God is not "undefined and boundless," etherous and distant, but truly identifiable and approachable by this Name (p. 45).¹¹

¹⁰ Miskotte quotes many of the same scriptural texts that Comer does. For example, on p. 44, he lists Ps 50:1; 82:1; 86:8; 95:3; 136:2; 138:1; also 1 Cor 8:5.

¹¹ Compare K.H. Miskotte, *The Roads of Prayer*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 25–29.

In spite of Miskotte's comments about "other gods," his attitude towards them and their existence is not, as in Comer's case, oppositional: war in the heavenlies does not occupy the centerstage in Miskotte's theological imagination, at least in *Bijbels ABC*.¹² Miskotte sounds rather disinterested in the character and endeavor of these other spiritual powers. The basic contrast governing Miskotte's chapter is not "God and the gods" (one of Comer's chapter subtitles), but "paganism" and "the Name." By the former term, Miskotte does not mean traditional or indigenous religions, and nor does he intend the label pejoratively. Instead Miskotte designates "the natural religion of human hearts": the default spiritual sensibility common to all human cultures, and which tend, in Miskotte's view, to exalt power. Given this propensity, gods can be understood as projections of human capacity upwards and outwards, expanded so as to outdo any competitors and to press beyond all human limitations; Miskotte sees abstract modern conceptions of God ("the All" or "Absolute") in this regard as no different from ancient Zeus or Odin (p. 52). By comparison, the biblical God is "much smaller" than these counterparts. God's relative smallness is readily seen in the anthropomorphism of YHWH, who in scripture engages with humans much like another human. But the smallness of God—the divine locality, as it were—is nowhere clearer than in God's *proper-namedness*. There the human-likeness of God gathers to a point. Miskotte writes:

Anthropomorphic speech about God [in the Bible] should not be excused away as a product of our limited, human mind, etc. It should rather be justified by appeal to the Name: the form that God takes in God's own self-revelation. On the basis of the Name we know that the human form that God has chosen, sanctified, and blessed comes far nearer to the reality of God than the forms of nature, or images modeled on impersonal entities like the Absolute, the Infinite, the eternal Power, the eternal Silence, or the

¹² See, however, Miskotte's treatment of "the powers" in his postwar magnum opus, *When the Gods are Silent*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1967), 220–224. Cf. also "the powers of this world" in Miskotte, *The Roads of Prayer*, 151–54; as well as Miskotte's lectures on Revelation, *Hoofsdome der historie: voordrachten over de visioenen van den Apostel Johannes* (Callenbach: Nijkerk 1945), on which, see also de Liagre Böhl, *Theoloog*, 205–8.

Abyss. God, this God, has human features, and therein we encounter the divinity of this God; the divinity of the Name (p. 49).

The Name of God is, then, for Miskotte, “the anti-pagan monument *par excellence*,” and “the cornerstone upon which all philosophical endeavor stumbles” (p. 52).

Miskotte’s next chapter is titled, “The Names of God.” Like Comer’s second “Yahweh”-titled chapter, Miskotte here coordinates his exposition of God’s name in the Old Testament (YHWH) with the Bible’s *other* proper name in the New: Jesus Christ. However, where Comer sees Christ’s coming as a new and decisive chapter in God’s ways with the world—the climactic invasion of hostile territory—Miskotte situates Christ’s coming in a far more continuous relationship with God’s works in and among Israel. This is possible for Miskotte because his vision of God in the Old Testament is already so focused on God’s *humanization*. Miskotte describes the fundamental witness of both testaments in the following words: “The essence of salvation is this: that God is a ‘human’ God, in contrast with the gods of the pagans and the Godhead of ancient and modern naturalism. God has become human” (p. 52). Consequently, “Jesus Christ is the *fulfillment, confirmation, and perpetuation* of the one name of God, YHWH” (p. 53).

Miskotte’s formulations about the relationship of Jesus Christ to the Name are epigrammatic. He makes no straightforward identification of Jesus Christ with YHWH as Comer does. Instead Miskotte writes an “equation”: “The biblical ABCs...specify this equation: Name = Revelation; name = YHWH, name = Jesus Christ” (p. 53); or he speaks of the “fulfilment” of the name YHWH in Jesus Christ, so that the latter name is “identical with the Name of which it was said, ‘this is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations’ (Exod 3:15b)” (p. 54).¹³

¹³ Cf. Rinse Reeling Brouwer, “Wel ‘JHWH is de drie-ene God’, niet ‘de Naam is Jezus Christus’? Een gesprek met Jan Muis over de ene Naam,” *Kerk en Theologie* 68 no. 3 (2017): 237–48.

These two proper names together constitute the “epicenter” of scripture; all the other names and titles given to God, all other descriptions, radiate out from there (*ibid.*). When, for example, later in the chapter, Miskotte expounds the scriptural term “Father,” he does not understand it as a unique identifier for the First Member of the Trinity: Miskotte rather describes “Father” as an epithet of the Name, treating it alongside other epithets like *Elohim* and *El Shaddai*.

Miskotte’s proposal diverges from Comer’s in several aspects. As noted, Miskotte follows Jewish usage and speaks of “the Name” rather than vocalizing the Tetragrammaton.¹⁴ Comer mentions this tradition—“the Hebrews...grew so scared of accidentally breaking [the fourth] command that they just stopped saying [God’s] name altogether” (p. 51)—but he does not observe it. On the contrary, Comer argues that “we need to get back to calling God by his name” (p. 53); a liturgical reform of some magnitude!¹⁵ This difference reflects another point of theological discoordination if not disagreement between the two pastors: Miskotte, as one would expect, given his dissertation topic, references Jewish scholars as viable theological interlocutors and teachers for him as a Christian. Judaism does not receive explicit thematization in *Bijbels ABC* as it would in Miskotte’s other works, but the assumption is everywhere at work beneath its surface: that YHWH keeps faith with *this* people, the family of Israel; that their covenants and privileges are not revoked or superseded.¹⁶ Comer does not explicitly reserve any such place to Judaism. In one diagram, he ranges pictures of “Judaism” beside pictures of “Islam” and

¹⁴ Although he is not entirely consistent; for occurrences of the vocalized name (Dutch: *Jahve*), see pp. 27, 44, 46, 52-58, 63-64, 69, 70, 75, 87, 89, 92, 93, 103-5, 110, 119, 128, 131-2, 142-3, 151, 174, 180, 185-6, 196, oftentimes in quotations from scripture.

¹⁵ For a criticism of this proposal about Christian liturgical or devotional use, see Christopher R. Seitz, “Handing Over the Name: Christian Reflection on the Divine Name YHWH,” in *Trinity, Time, and Church: A Response to the Theology of Robert W. Jenson*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 23–41, esp. 26–30.

¹⁶ See, for example, Miskotte’s commentary on the 1950 confession of the Dutch Reformed Church; Kessler presents a partial translation (*Miskotte*, 114–21; also 34–46).

“Hinduism” and other world religions. He speaks of God’s desire to create a people who bear the name of God (pp. 259–61)—but he does not appear to have Israel’s descendants in view.

More will be said momentarily about these theological choices—but for now I note this important difference: their nomenclature for the Name, which also tracks with the theological posture of these two books towards Judaism. There is also the difference of how directly Comer and Miskotte identify the spiritual opponents of God with real-world entities. Comer’s theological lexicon draws from apocalyptic biblical discourse, and, like numerous contemporary apocalyptic theologians, he does not hesitate to label current-day forces such as corporate capitalism as the work of demonic powers. This is a minor note within *God Has a Name*, which is far more occupied with “matters of the heart,” but it does contrast with *Bijbels ABC*. Mirjam Elbers’s introduction indicates the reason for Miskotte’s reserve: although *Bijbels ABC* is very much a work of “resistance literature,” bracing the theological spines of beleaguered Dutch Christians under Nazi occupation, it also had to “fly under the radar.” Only two years prior, Nazi censors had caught and outlawed Miskotte’s book comparing Germanic mythology with the Old Testament.¹⁷ As a result, *Bijbels ABC* takes a more oblique approach—and it worked; Nazi censors let it pass.¹⁸ Despite his indirection, Miskotte certainly has aspects of Nazi ideology in mind when he expounds “paganism,” with all its martial and masculine aspirations.

Besides these differences, however, the core content of the two books overlaps significantly. Both commend the Name of God as a crucial—if not the crucial—theological recovery for the Christian church. They insist alike that God’s name anchors Christian thinking

¹⁷ K.H. Miskotte, *Edda en Thora: Een vergelijking van Germaansche en Israëlitische religie* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1939); see de Liagre Böhl, *Theoloog*, 183–88. English summaries can be found in Martin Kessler, “Paganism: A Historical Perspective,” *Seminary Ridge Review* 5 (2002): 19–30; and Pieter de Jong, “Miskotte’s Timely Perspective of the Religious Dimension of the Nazi Ideology,” *Shofar* 11 (2012): 20–40.

¹⁸ Elbers, “Inleiding,” 7–8.

and devotion, distinguishing God from other spiritual forces and ensuring God's addressability in prayer. What lessons might this joint reclamation have for the theological interpretation of scripture?

Lessons for Theological Interpretation

The first lesson of these two books for theological interpretation is a *cautionary* one. It concerns the attitude of contemporary Christian readers towards the churchly reading tradition. On the whole, theological interpretation—in its recent, English-language form—has advocated for an attitude of renewed humility, even deference, towards “pre-modern” exegesis.¹⁹ Modern historical criticism posed a massive break from tradition; such critical scholarship implied a kind of chronological conceit, an assurance of insight in excess of one's interpretive forebears. But the advent of theological interpretation signals a chastening of this haughtiness in some quarters at least.

Yet Comer's and Miskotte's books do not map well onto these coordinates. Both authors show substantial freedom from the premodern reading tradition. Comer writes, for example, that “those of us who live in the West tend to think of God in the categories of philosophy”; he then proceeds to list three divine omni-attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence; p. 33). Comer performs a brief nod, maybe to his own theological censors—“all of that is true; I believe it”—before decentering and demoting these descriptors, in effect carrying on as though they never were (*ibid.*). Miskotte is similarly cagey: “God does not appear to us as the most general, that which can be found everywhere, but rather as the most unique, that which can be sought and found somewhere specific. This does not mean God *couldn't* be the most general and the all-

¹⁹ E.g., David Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *ThTo* 37 no. 1 (1980): 27–38. Cf. Treier, “Recovering the Past: Imitating Precritical Interpretation,” in *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 39–55.

powerful and the omnipresent, but rather that the road to knowledge does not begin with the general” (p. 42). Notwithstanding this fainthearted admission of possibility, Miskotte’s thinking would seem to disregard these traditional divine properties; or worse, to place them on much the same footing as “pagan” exaltations of power (p. 69).

The “mood” of these remarks relative to the mainstream Christian reading tradition is not filially pious; one might rather say it is critical and free-thinking. This quality would seem to set these theological works more in the “modern” camp, and so to put them out of step with contemporary theological interpretation. But such an assessment would not be accurate. In at least Miskotte’s case, rediscovering the Name of God as a theological datum resulted from engaging tradition and not recusing it. The issue is: whose tradition? Miskotte came to his theology of the Name by reconnecting with Judaism—and with it, the church’s own Old Testament. In so doing, Miskotte compensates for a profound theological error lodged deep in his own, Christian reading tradition. That theological error is, in a word, *supersessionism*.

This term refers to the longstanding Christian teaching that the church has replaced the family of Israel as the human recipients of God’s favor and the agents of God’s will. By extension, *supersessionism* also identifies Christian teaching that implies the obsolescence of God’s relationship with the people Israel.²⁰ Although discriminating work has taken place to move Christian theology away from supersessionism, theological interpretation as an identifiable initiative in the English-speaking theological academy has not yet reckoned with it²¹—and this likely because such reckoning tends in an opposite direction from its characteristic promotion of

²⁰ R. Kendall Soulen, “Supersessionism,” in *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 413–14.

²¹ One searches in vain for entries on “supersessionism” within some of the main organs for the theological interpretation of scripture, e.g., the *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), or *A Manifesto for Theological Interpretation*, ed. Craig G. Bartholomew and Heath A. Thomas (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), or the thematic issue of *IJST* 12 no. 2 (2010).

respect for historic readings of scripture. R. Kendall Soulen's 1999 article "YHWH the Triune God" helpfully frames these two impulses: on the one hand, he points to the "trinitarian revival" in modern theology, which is "characterized by a spirit of *ressourcement*."²² (Theological interpretation does not coincide with this trinitarian revival, although it benefits from it and shares its spirit.²³) On the other hand, Soulen cites "the church's searching reevaluation of its teaching regarding the Jewish people, prompted by the Holocaust." The latter "exudes a spirit of repentance."²⁴

These two projects have been like ships passing in the night; Soulen's is a rare effort to bring them within hailing distance of one another. Like Comer and Miskotte, Soulen commends the Name of God as a focal point for theological deliberation. He also proposes the Name as a metric for "Israel-forgetfulness."²⁵ Wherever Christian thinkers treat the Name as an unimportant or incidental *theologoumenon*—as an aspect of God's self-disclosure that is now distinctively outmoded or obsolete (*pace* the Old Testament and Judaism)—there, too, one will find low regard, if not disregard, for God's covenant with Israel. Forgetfulness of the Name corresponds with forgetfulness of carnal Israel.

On this line of reasoning, Comer's attempt to reclaim the Name without considering the status and meaning of God's covenant with the Jewish people seems radically unstable. Comer

²² R. Kendall Soulen, "YHWH the Triune God," *ModTheo* 15 no. 1 (1999): 25–54, here 26.

²³ See, e.g., John Webster's *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, Current Issues in Theology 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5–41, along with other works that situate the doctrine of scripture within the processions of the Triune God: Angus Paddison, *Scripture: A Very Theological Proposal* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 5–32; Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 1–12.

²⁴ Soulen, "YHWH," 26.

²⁵ Soulen, "YHWH," 30; cf. also the contribution of "Israel-forgetfulness" to the history of colonialism and white supremacy in Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

seeks to retrieve the Name with *sola scriptura* as his only charter.²⁶ Miskotte sees his argument for the Name within a larger theological field, i.e., a deepened and penitent Christian doctrine of Israel.²⁷ Regardless this divergence, the lesson these authors together offer to theological interpretation is this: tradition is not an interpretive panacea. An attitude of renewed respect to historic interpretation must be tempered by acknowledgment of its colossal errors. In addition to other voices urging that the newfound popularity of the Christian tradition may serve insidious ends,²⁸ Comer and Miskotte give evidence of its deep limitation and mistakenness in one crucial theological matter: contrary to deeply-ingrained habits of Christian reflection, God has a name.

The second lesson that Comer and Miskotte teach theological interpretation is not *cautionary* but *constructive*. The overlapping, core claim of their books illuminate a potential path into the no-man's land between two sundered discourses in the contemporary theological academy. On one side, there is the movement for *theological interpretation*; on the other, growing interest in *apocalyptic theology*.²⁹ The latter refers to a family of approaches in modern theology that ground their claims in the theological vision and vocabulary of the apostle Paul. Following the apostle, they envisage a present evil age under the dominion of demonic powers—yet decisively defeated through an event of divine invasion, namely, Jesus Christ. Theocentricity and a christological concentration define this school: God alone has power to destroy the present order and to emancipate its captives, and God has done so in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Militant opposition characterizes its rhetoric; and it is realistic, not only in its

²⁶ Comer does not use this Reformation slogan, but it guides his approach: e.g., “we don’t know what God is like, but we can learn. But to learn, we have to go to the source” (p. 29).

²⁷ Kessler, *Miskotte*, 114–21.

²⁸ See Willie James Jennings: “This new theological deployment of tradition needs to be read inside a wider historical frame of modern [white] masculine longing” (“The Traditions of Race Men,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112 no. 4 [2013]: 613–24).

²⁹ As evidence of the latter, see, for example, *ThTo* 75 no. 1 (2018).

focus on the past, concrete event of divine inbreaking, but also in its orientation towards the actual, this-worldly systems that degrade and destroy human (and nonhuman) life.³⁰

Where theological interpretation and apocalyptic theology have encountered one another in recent years, mutual critique has arisen. Joel Thomas Chopp provides a recent example from the side of theological interpretation; in a review essay of Douglas Campbell's apocalyptic theology, Chopp registers concerns about the place of *creation* and, more pertinently to this review essay, of *Judaism*. What is the status of Judaism within the "evangelical dualisms" of apocalyptic theology? Is Judaism transcended in the new creation, or does it endure?³¹ Does the Old Testament continue to be *Torah*, divine instruction for the people of God, or have the anti-god powers hijacked it entirely to their destructive purpose?³²

What Comer and Miskotte adumbrate is a form of theological interpretation of scripture that mobilizes several of the key features of apocalyptic while also (at least in Miskotte's case) emphasizing God's irrevocable election of Israel—and indeed and as such, the sign and index of God's relation to Israel, the divine Name. In this they have few precedents.³³ Both Comer and Miskotte are theocentric, and they observe a certain christological concentration, more pronouncedly in Comer's book. Their rhetoric is oppositional, although, as noted, they organize its axis in different ways: Comer's language appeals liberally to the superhuman whereas Miskotte, perhaps hewing closer to the theological texture of the Old Testament itself, describes

³⁰ This summary description takes inspiration from Philip G. Ziegler, "Some Remarks on Apocalyptic in Modern Christian Theology" in *Paul and the Apocalyptic Imagination*, ed. Ben C. Blackwell, John K. Goodrich, Jason Maston (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 199–216, here 210–16.

³¹ Joel Thomas Chopp, "Unearthing Paul's Ethics: Douglas Campbell on Creation, Redemption, and the Christian Moral Life," *JTI* 11 no. 2 (2017): 259–76.

³² Brevard S. Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 99–107; 206–18.

³³ E.g., Walter Lowe, "The Intensification of Time: Michael Wyschogrod and the Task of Christian Theology," *ModTheo* 22 no. 2 (2006): 693–99; also Paul K. Harink, "Israel," in *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003), 151–208.

the human project of paganism as the force against which Christians must strive.³⁴ However, the criticism of “monotheism” that both Comer and Miskotte articulate might offer an inroad into the spiritual vision of apocalyptic theology. YHWH names one power set against other, rival claimants to human devotion. Comer and Miskotte also begin to identify these counterfeit lords with real-life systems of oppression. The “realist gesture” of apocalyptic theology, with all its “notable explanatory power,” is thus also recognizable in their work.³⁵

This path into the theological no-man’s land must stay suggestive only for now. Suffice it to say as well that despite the anti-oppressive potential of their Name theology, whiteness “ambushes” Comer and Miskotte at several points.³⁶ Miskotte “orientalizes,” for example, when he appeals to “Oriental thinking” (p. 43) or to the “eastern philosophy of life” (p. 111).³⁷ He also casually compares the concept of “the infinite” to “the most dreadful negro-mask” (Dutch: *negermasker*, p. 69), apparently picturing an African mask.³⁸ These instances of racism are abhorrent but common to their time. By contrast, Comer’s “orientalizing” is abhorrent and perhaps uncommon for a newly published book. He refers to “Hinduism” as a parade example of

³⁴ But cf. Miskotte, *The Roads of Prayer*, 145–75.

³⁵ Ziegler, “Some Remarks,” 213. As such, Comer and Miskotte hold promise to realize Angus Paddison’s exhortation that “[t]heological interpretation needs to be less about ensuring the text absorbs the world and more about encouraging intensive forms of living, both with the text and in the world” (“Who and What is Theological Interpretation For?” in *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit: Essays in Honour of Andrew T. Lincoln*, ed. J. Gordon McConville and Lloyd K. Pietersen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 210–23, here 218.

³⁶ For this concept, see George Yancy, “Whiteness as Ambush and the Transformative Power of Vigilance,” in *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race*, 2nd ed. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), 217–42.

³⁷ It may also be that Miskotte’s pervasive emphasis on “hearing” the word of God as over against “seeing” reflects an anti-Semitic caricature ambient to his time and place. Of course, this rhetoric owes much to Deuteronomy (and also Paul; e.g., 2 Cor 5:7), and it also received a fresh retrieval by late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Jewish thinkers: Heinrich Graetz wrote that “paganism sees its god, [but] Judaism hears Him” (*Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, ed. Ismar Schorsch [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1975], 68); cf. Martin Buber: “der Jude des Altertums mehr Ohrenmensch als Augenmensch ist” (*Jüdische Künstler* [Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1903], 7); or Abraham Joshua Heschel: “Judaism has rejected the picture. [Its] only indispensable object is a Scroll” (*The Wisdom of Heschel* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975], 241). Nonetheless, even as an echo of biblical rhetoric and a concept embraced by (some!) Jewish thinkers, this contrast still may subtly reinforce a pernicious stereotype of the “artless Jew”; on which, see Kalman Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 13–36.

³⁸ I thank [name(s) removed for peer review] for bringing this passage to my attention.

exotic and demonic religion (pp. 75–79). So, too, Comer’s claim that “most of the men out colonizing the ‘uncivilized’ world [in the nineteenth century] were deists” (p. 105) is egregiously wrong and self-excusing.

Cautionary and constructive: the two pastors, Comer and Miskotte, though separated by generations and continents, jointly offer to theological interpretation a twofold lesson. Their theology of the Name cautions that the Christian tradition of reading, though deserving of respect, contains an error of immense and grievous proportions: forgetfulness of the personal Name of Israel’s God, and, alongside that, of Israel itself. At the same time, their recovery of God’s Name gestures towards an untapped theological direction, which could bring the concerns of two contemporary theological schools into a more enriching adjacency: on the one hand, theological interpretation of scripture and on the other, the resurgent theological interest in Pauline apocalyptic. Students and advocates of these approaches could discern together how to make a common witness against the deadly forces of this present age—in the name of the God whose name is above every name.