



A Review Article

The Question of God's Perfection

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Abstract

Is God perfect? The recent volume entitled *The Question of God's Perfection* stages a conversation on that topic between mostly Jewish philosophers, theologians, and scholars of rabbinic literature. Although it is neither a work of biblical theology nor a contribution to the theological interpretation of scripture, *The Question of God's Perfection* yields stimulating results for these other, intersecting projects. After briefly describing the volume's central question and contents, the present essay situates the volume's offerings within the state of the biblical-theological and theological-interpretive fields. In its next section, it considers—and compares—*The Question of God's Perfection* with one twentieth-century theological antecedent, the Dutch theologian K.H. Miskotte. In closing, it poses questions for ongoing discussion.

The Question of God's Perfection: Jewish and Christian Essays on the God of the Bible and Talmud, edited by Yoram Hazony & Dru Johnson. Philosophy of Religion – World Religions 8. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019. ISBN 9789004387959

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The Question of God's Perfection is neither a work of biblical theology, as it is usually defined, nor a contribution to the “theological interpretation of scripture.” It is the record and freeze-frame of a theological conversation, or perhaps better, a theological debate, staged between mostly Jewish “philosophers, theologians, and scholars of rabbinic literature” (Hazony and Johnson 2018: 1). As the present essay intends to show, however, *The Question of God's Perfection* yields stimulating results for these other, intersecting projects to which it does not directly belong. It also provides some clarity about the relationship between the longstanding, if controverted, discipline of biblical theology and the more recent movement for theological

interpretation. After briefly describing the volume's central question and its contents, the present essay situates the volume's offerings within the state of the biblical-theological and theological-interpretive fields. In its next section, it considers—and compares—*The Question of God's Per-*

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fection with a little-known twentieth-century theologian, K. H. (Kornelis Heiko) Miskotte (1894–1976), a forebear of the so-called Amsterdam School of Biblical Interpretation. In closing, it poses questions for ongoing discussion.

What It Is

The Question of God’s Perfection is, as its title indicates, a collection of essays entertaining a single theological question; and it is a *theological* question, a matter of theology proper, in that it addresses the character and profile of God. This “properly theological” focus will become important in due course. More specifically, as the book’s title suggests, that theological question concerns the ostensible perfection of God. Is God perfect?

The question might sound rather abstract, even obscure, if not for the massive weight of theological tradition informing it. As it turns out, “God’s perfection” is shorthand for a richly ramified and historic way of thinking about the divine being. The essays of the volume refer to this classic approach as “perfect being theology” (sometimes as a semi-technical term with caps, “Perfect Being Theology” [211, *passim*] or an abbreviation, “PBT” [104]). According to this theology, God is that being, “possessed of all the omni-superlatives associated with ‘perfection’...omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, and immutability” (43).

The volume’s primary interest is not so much to trace out the historical pedigree of this conception as to debate its merits. And yet its normative status, which is to say, its historic predominance, is very much to the point, and lends the book its pique. The titular questioning entails, after all, a reappraisal of the default theological outlook of a millennium or more. Judaism adopted perfect being theology from Maimonides onwards, in the twelfth century CE; Christianity lived with it from far earlier, arguably from the second century CE. Querying “is God perfect?” hence contains within itself a judgment about the whole spiritual and intellectual history of these two kindred religions. Could they have gotten off course in regard to so fundamental a matter as the character of God? And what could possibly induce a course correction?

The answer of most essays in the volume, and especially its first three in the section titled “Challenging God’s Perfection” (9–62), is *yes*: Judaism committed a

theological misstep and a forfeiture of its patrimony by absorbing perfect being theology. By way of course correction, the theological sources that offer an alternative are exactly those that predate Maimonides: principally, the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, “Judaism’s foundational texts” (1, 9). The essays that argue in one way or another for the counterproposition (“God is *not* perfect”) therefore feature a declension narrative of sorts as well as a recuperative, *ad fontes* program. On the one hand, they tell of the infiltration of Greek thought. The editors’ introduction cites Xenophanes, Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle (3; also 10–11). Plato comes in for special scrutiny: Yoram Hazony observes in the first chapter that Plato’s theology draws inspiration from mathematics, geometry in particular, and consequently, the divine attributes modeled on Plato’s thinking have a formal and idealistic quality quite unlike real and observable phenomena (15). Berel Dov Lerner in the second chapter describes Plato’s philosophy as “cognitive short-cut[ting],” an artifact of limited human faculties and not “a road towards glimpsing the transcendent” (29). A later chapter by Heather Ohanesson lays the fault not at Plato’s feet, or the Greek philosophical tradition’s at large, but at Aristotle’s (219). Alex Sztuden names Philo as culprit (142–44). Regardless of the exact conduit or mechanism, a “fall” has happened, and Hellenization is its watchword.

On the other hand, the texts to which these contributors make theological recourse are the first and oldest within Judaism. These essayists stand at the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths (Jer 6:16). They revisit biblical and rabbinic writings and find surprising, fresh visions of God there, delivered by the plain or literal sense. Not one but two of the chapters in the initial section challenging God’s perfection take departure from the Talmudic tractate, *Berakhot 7a*. It depicts a High Priest entering the Holy of Holies and seeing YHWH there upon a throne. YHWH addresses the priest by name (“Yishmael!”) and makes a request (“my son, bless me!”). In reply, the priest utters a prayer for God’s mercy to prevail over the other divine attributes. YHWH’s response is to nod, apparently in assent (27; 44).

The scene represents everything that Maimonides sought to purge from Judaism’s view of God: divine anthropomorphism, affect, corporeality, and responsiveness to human input are all amply on display. Throughout its

third and fourth sections (Divine Morality” [113–65] and “Divine Attributes” [169–230]), the volume’s authors identify many other, similar examples of these characteristics elsewhere in scripture and the commentary tradition. These examples include divine anger (Edward Halper, 130–41), power, though not omniscience (Alex Sztuden, 142–65), non-metaphysical perfection (Randy Ramal, 169–88), and divine wondrousness (Ohaneson, 211–30).

The volume’s challengers of perfection pay special attention to God’s proper-namédness. Hazon suggests that the four-letter Name, the Tetragrammaton, indicates “incompleteness and change”; “even God himself is described as possessing no static nature, responding to Moses’ questions about his name with ‘I will be what I will be’” (11). Dov Lerner and James Diamond both allude to the rabbinic tradition according to which the name *YHWH* adumbrates God’s mercy, while *Elohim* specifies God’s justice (30; 48)—a twofold “dynamic divine morality” (30) befitting a “God of becoming” (50). In keeping with the template set by the rabbinic legend about the High Priest’s prayer, these authors also point to the human contribution to God’s ways and works: in Exodus, Moses “jolts God into a mode of compassion” (54), and in Kabbalah, humans repair the divine unity through their performance of *mitsvot* (51). After all, as Zechariah says, on the day that *YHWH* is king over all the earth, “his name [will be] one” (14:19); see in this connection Joshua Weinstein’s chapter, “Unifying the Name of God” (189–210, esp. 209).

The second section of the book contains three chapters defending perfect being theology (“In Defense of God’s Perfection” [65–109]). Eleonore Stump, the opener, cites “the great medieval philosophers of the three monotheisms, Averroes [Islam], Maimonides [Judaism], and Aquinas [Christianity]” (65). Her account of a simple and immutable, which is to say, unchanging and noncontingent, God leans on one from among this trio, Aquinas. Lenn Goodman in the chapter following leverages Maimonides, and, sympathetically, Plato: “Plato and Torah reach common ground” (84–88, here 88). Brian Leftow’s brief entry examines what the friendship of a perfect being would mean (104–09).

Goodman’s chapter also attends to the Name of God, though his comments trend in a quite different direction from the critics of divine perfection. He finds that “it’s

clear enough [in God’s “I am” statement to Moses in Exodus] that God called Himself the Absolute” (91). God speaks “metaphysically”: indeed, “what God gave Moses at the burning bush was no mere name but an argument [about] the Real” (ibid.). Goodman later characterizes the Exodus narrative as presenting “a thumbnail ontological-type argument” (92). On this reading, the Tetragrammaton is not a proper name nearly as much as a miniaturization of an ontological argument: an acronym of sorts for divine absoluteness—or divine perfection.

But more is at stake for the three defenders of perfection than individual intellectual sources or exegetical arguments: a retrospective understanding of the whole tradition in its development is involved. Continuity must be reasserted. No “fall” happened, but rather, the conceptual changes and enrichments that took place over the course of Judaism’s history must be seen as extending and clarifying truths latent within its earlier phases. Goodman’s essay thus tellingly includes a section on “Tradition.” According to him, the naïve and humanoid pictures of God in the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud represent “modes and moments of discovery” (95). Such moments have not lost their value, even as Maimonides and others have latterly and precisely exposed their inadequacy relative to the divine Infinite.

“Can we,” Goodman asks, “avoid a tone of condescension in describing biblical symbolism and the tropes that Aggadah and Halakhah build upon it?” (ibid.). Goodman argues that we can avoid that condescending tone. Anthropomorphic conceptions of God and the religious practices that assume them are, he says, “not just souvenirs, quaint caricatures of higher thought, or gray precipitates of a vision now lost” (ibid.). Notwithstanding this reassurance, Goodman does regard the depictions of God in Judaism’s “foundational texts” with a certain chariness. He refers to biblical and rabbinic characterizations of God as “symbols,” and urges that they are “not taken as though they intended no more than themselves” (96). In other words, they *do* intend more than themselves; their simple or plain sense cannot be treated as the sum total of their communicative remit, and their obvious, even, one might say, corporeal meaning gestures towards a higher, spiritual significance. In the end, for Goodman as for the other contributors to *The Question of God’s Perfection*, the constructive role of

the literal sense and a reading of the history of interpretation mutually implicate one another.

What It Offers to Biblical Theology and Theological Interpretation of Scripture

The Question of God’s Perfection offers a discussion, or at least the raw materials for a discussion, between mostly Jewish scholars on the subject of “the God of the Bible and Talmud” (per the book’s subtitle). None of the participants say about what they are doing that it is or it bears upon “biblical theology,” and the particular nomenclature of “theological interpretation of scripture” is nowhere to be found. However, this review essay proposes that this edited collection presents a helpful intervention for both these discourses, and even brings their fraught relationship into sharper relief (for one account of the contentious relationship between these two disciplines, see Treier 2008a; also Treier and Anizor 2010).

The first order of business for such an argument is to draw the three comparands into the same frame of reference. This can be done in a general enough way. All three, or at least relevant forms of all three, are *theologically constructive*. That is, they do not only stockpile observations about the ancient world or bygone religious traditions. They seek to launch positive claims about God and/or the life lived before God. To be sure, some kinds of biblical theology are descriptive only. John Collins, for instance, prefers a “sociohistorical approach” according to which biblical theology is a subdiscipline of historical theology (Collins 2005: 24–33). But many other, maybe most other, varieties of biblical theology aim at reforming speech and conduct to do with God. More than that, biblical theology and theological interpretation of scripture share alike with *The Question of God’s Perfection* an *exegetical interest*. Somehow the operation of making “live” arguments about God is, procedurally, a matter of reading “foundational texts.” Constructive theological deliberations are, for these three, textual.

That said, the traditions that “house” the three discourses diverge from one another, and so, too, their choice of foundational texts. Biblical theology and theological interpretation are both, historically at any rate, Christian and Protestant. Biblical theology traces its origins to J.P. Gabler’s inaugural address in 1787 (San-

dys-Wunsch and Eldredge 1980; see also Stuckenbruck 1999). The genesis of theological interpretation is more convoluted and ecumenical, at least insofar as Roman Catholics and Protestants have both participated at the ground level (Treier 2010: 149–53). But Jewish contributors to biblical theology have been few, and at times that nonparticipation has been programmatic (Levenson 1993; but see now Kalimi 2012). Theological interpretation has no Jewish contingent that I am aware of. In view of their shared Christian lineage, the discourses of biblical theology and theological interpretation perennially engage the New Testament as a “foundational text.” Not so with *The Question of God’s Perfection*. Its canon is Jewish, as are most of its authors.

Given this first and broad commonality—constructive theological aspirations achieved through exegetical work—and this major distinction of corpora, the remaining similarities and differences between these three projects become more interesting. The previous section suggested that the status of the literal or plain sense of the foundational texts and an overall reading of the history of interpretation sit orthogonal to one another, or at least this was true of *The Question of God’s Perfection*. Its chapters challenging God’s perfection appeal to the literal sense and tell a Hellenizing “fall” story, whereas its chapters defending God’s perfection tell a story of complex continuity between successive interpretive eras and understand the literal sense as preliminary to other, extended senses. But these same markers can also help to map the contested relationship of biblical theology and theological interpretation.

Biblical theology, in its theologically constructive forms, has been inherently contrastive from its inception: it is what doctrinal or dogmatic theology is not. Or, stated differently, it includes within its self-concept a critique of the dominant, default theological tradition, as well as a proposal for remediation. Its delimiting adjective “biblical” announces the deficiency of the “other” kind of theology and, at the same time, its source of replenishment. Martin Luther’s haranguing against Aristotle and scholasticism linger in the background (Ebeling 1955; Childs 1992: 3–29; Barr 1999). It also deserves notice in this connection that “the Hellenization thesis” received its most forceful, even caricatured, articulation from the mid-twentieth-century “Biblical

Theology Movement” (Smith 1990). Brevard Childs’s classic book-length treatment of the movement observes that one of its “themes” that enjoyed a consensus was “the distinctive biblical mentality,” which in fact meant the Hebrew mentality in contradistinction to the Greek: “Since the latter were considered to be abstract, rationalistic, and theoretical, the term ‘Greek’ epitomized the false perspective that had beclouded the understanding of the Bible” (1970: 45). Childs mentions the influence of Thorleif Boman’s *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, written in 1960 and translated into English in 1970 (Childs 1970: 46, 70). This book, a sustained and point-by-point contrast between “Israelite–Jewish” and “Greek–Hellenistic” thought-worlds, does not advocate explicitly for a reading of history such that Christianity “fell” from the first into the second. But it does see its investigation as preliminary to assessing “whether and to what extent the *content* of Christianity has been affected by the rethinking [of that content in Greek thought-forms]” (Boman 1970: 20). It raises the question whether a primordial misstep has happened, and it prepares the groundwork for a program of recovery. Notably, that groundwork consists in surfacing the *formal* characteristics of biblical Hebrew—re-priming its literal sense.

Even as its corpus of foundational texts varies from that of *The Question of God’s Perfection*, biblical theology shares with it a dissident spirit and an expectancy towards the plain, or at least the non-allegorical, sense of its foundational texts; Childs describes eschewal of allegory as another of the unitive themes of the Biblical Theology Movement (1970: 37). The theological interpretation of scripture exhibits on the other hand a strongly re-connective interest. Its mood is one of respect for the premodern reading tradition; the signal status of David Steinmetz’s essay on “the Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis” is a case in point (1997). *Ressourcement* is its rallying cry. A chapter title of Daniel Treier’s introductory handbook is, for example, “Recovering the Past: Imitating Precritical Interpretation” (Treier 2008b: 39).

If there is any “fall” story given in accounts of reception history by theological interpreters, it pertains not to the use of Greek language and Greek concepts in Christian theology but rather to the advent of historical criticism. This repertoire of modern approaches seeks to explain the historical development of biblical literature:

to give a “natural history of the Bible” in terms of mundane factors. This enterprise has received intense scrutiny from theological interpreters. Even if the results of historical criticism are not, by and large, rejected, its contribution is reconfigured and relativized. Many theological interpreters demote it from gatekeeping over the entire interpretive process and allocate it a modest and preparatory role (e.g., East 2017). At the same time—and correlatively—theological interpreters have shown interest in “figural reading”: in discerning the trans-historical significance of biblical texts. These motions complement one another. The original and historical senses of the Bible—not necessarily coterminous with its plain or literal sense, but adjoining to it—are treated as waymarks en route to higher and more durable spiritual realities (Childs 1977).

In these regards, *The Question of God’s Perfection* stands at cross-purposes to theological interpretation: excepting its authors who defend perfect being theology (a minority report!), the book does not share theological interpretation’s esteem for the classical approach, nor its openness to figuration. *The Question of God’s Perfection* does, however, have one thing in common with theological interpretation (or some of it). It is pervasively concerned with the character and profile of God.

This theological focus does not typify all practitioners of theological interpretation, but it is an important initiative within the whole ecology of the movement. Angus Paddison’s 2015 chapter, “Who and What is Theological Interpretation For?” identifies two principal arguments within the overall agenda of theological interpretation. The first argument he calls the “theocentric approach;” the second, the “ecclesiocentric.” The watershed theorist for the first of these arguments is the late John Webster. The doctrine of God—the divine being and activity—are Webster’s lodestar throughout his oeuvre, and Webster seeks to re-envision other doctrines in relation to them. This includes the doctrine of scripture; Webster reconceives of the Bible not (only) as an artifact of this-worldly human forces but as a work within God’s saving and self-revealing economy (2003; 2012). Webster’s proposal has been massively influential on the movement for theological interpretation, inspiring and inflecting several other book-length entries (e.g., Paddison 2009; Sarisky 2013). So also, the specific

language of God’s “perfections” is well-represented in Webster’s own writings as well as those following in his train (Wynne 2010). “Perfections” for Webster identifies God’s absolute attributes: the superlative qualities of the divine being in and of itself and considered apart from God’s relationship to creation. *The Question of God’s Perfection* shares with at least this strand of theological interpretation a governing interest in God—and in the matter of God’s perfection.

Webster does dedicate some attention to the proper Name of God, even claiming in one place (2005: 114):

In Christian talk of God, the nominal precedes the predicative. All dogmatic talk of God’s perfections traces God’s own pronouncement of his name; it simply says, in effect, “the LORD, he is God; the LORD, he is God” [1 Kgs 18.39].

But even here, and in spite of the biblical reference, Webster does not primarily have the Tetragrammaton in mind. Instead, his essay largely treats of divine perfections in relation to the triunity of the Christian God; the paragraph following this quote enumerates that the divine identity with which God names the divine self is the Holy Trinity. “God’s name is God’s uniqueness”—but that uniqueness for Webster (also for Wynne) appertains to God as Father, Son, and Spirit rather than to the four-lettered Name (cf. Soulen 2003).

In summary, then, *The Question of God’s Perfection* resembles forms of biblical theology in its interrogatory attitude towards the mainstream reading tradition and in its privileging of the plain sense of foundational texts. In these ways, it differs sharply from the theological interpretation of scripture which seeks to recoup pre-critical interpretation and hence also to recover extended or figural reading. However, *The Question of God’s Perfection* exemplifies the same theocentricity as some forms of theological interpretation, even to the extent of attending to God’s perfection(s).

These observations in comparison and contrast help to clarify the contribution of the volume. It is already noteworthy as a mostly Jewish repository of textually grounded, constructive theologizing. Biblical theology, though historically Christian, has a small but growing number of Jewish participants. *The Question of God’s Perfection* merits consideration alongside them. The

book is also dissident in its ethos and theological in its focus. This (rare) combination poises it to make an intervention in biblical theology and theological interpretation alike, representing a challenge to them both: to the first, it shows a salutary emphasis on the divine character, and to the second, the revisionary potential of closely reading foundational texts. In addition, a few of its chapters suggest the generativity of the divine Name.

How It Compares to Miskotte

The Question of God’s Perfection presents an uncommon constellation of qualities, listed out in the preceding paragraph. Their uncommonness both gives them promise and puts them at risk. In terms of promise, the volume stands fit to energize venturesome new directions in both biblical theology and theological interpretation. But the risk of constructing a theocentric yet exegetical forum stationed in a disciplinary no-man’s land and written mostly by Jewish scholars is: no one in the wider theological academy takes notice. To forfend that result and to ensure the volume succeeds in generating further work and reflection, the present review essay proposes a conversation partner: the little-known Dutch Reformed theologian, K.H. Miskotte. Sketching Miskotte’s theological concerns will locate *The Question of God’s Perfection* more richly within the fabric of theological scholarship over the last century; it may also suggest additional allies and resources for the volume’s project. But perhaps, more importantly, juxtaposing the volume alongside Miskotte will silhouette questions for ongoing discussion.

Miskotte was a pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church and an antecedent of the later “Amsterdam School of Biblical Interpretation” (on which latter: Bauer 1991: 25–146; Smit 2015: 86–93; Kessler 1994). Belonging to this Calvinistic theological lineage predisposed Miskotte to emphasize the Christian Old Testament as a “foundational text” on par with the New Testament, or as even more basic than it (Bauer 1991: 25–40). Serious engagement with (then) contemporary Jewish scholarship layered other insights onto this esteem for Hebrew Scripture. While pastoring full-time, Miskotte wrote a prize-winning dissertation on Jewish thinkers, such as Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber (Bauer 1991: 56–70; Kessler 1997; Böhl 2016: 142–53). From these two,

Miskotte absorbed several commitments: like them, he emphasized the *form* of biblical literature, its contour and keywords and rhythms. His own writings isolate a number of biblical *grondwoorden* or “ground-words,” Hebrew terms that he believed were freighted with special theological density (Miskotte 1967 renders this term as “basic words” [192–93]). They run like aisle lights through the whole of scripture, scaffolding and structuring the rest of it. They also point up the “act-character” of God’s revelation (Miskotte 2016: 96; 1967: 192). They are, that is, punctiliar and eventful: such terms identify concrete works of God (Hebrew *ma’aseh*), or acts of divine speech that do creative work (Hebrew *dabar*; cf. Boman 1970: 58–69). Given the prominence of scripture’s literary characteristics for this vision, like Rosenzweig and Buber, Miskotte and the Amsterdam School after him favored “idiolect translation.” They aimed not at dynamic equivalence but at mediating the tactile and sonic characteristics of the Hebrew original.

Finally, too, Miskotte learned from Rosenzweig to treat the Tetragrammaton as the preeminent site of divine revelation. While the Nazis occupied his country, and indeed, while he was moving nightly from house to house to avoid capture by them, Miskotte wrote a short book on the *Biblical ABCs* (2016; on its publication history, van den Brink 2006). It is a kind of catechetical primer and antifascist tract, especially oriented to biblical *grondwoorden*, “ground-words.” The first and most important of these structuring terms in scripture is, according to Miskotte, the divine Name. He calls it the “A” of the biblical ABCs. “In the building of scriptural vocabulary, it is the cornerstone,” he writes, “and it possesses a miraculous supporting capacity. It binds even the most disparate parts together and gives these contradictions a gleam of certainty that has no human origin” (2016: 40). The Name of God situates god as one god among others. God is not anonymous and all-transcending, but named and specific. This truth anchors all the other claims that Miskotte makes about the divine person and profile; methodologically, Miskotte returns again and again to the principle that “the road of our knowledge runs from the particular to the general” (2016: 72).

Miskotte applies this principle above all *theocentrically*. Most of the chapters of Miskotte’s *Biblical ABCs* are dedicated not to ethics or ecclesiology or apologetics

but to the doctrine of God: to elaborating what Miskotte calls the “divine virtues.” Miskotte’s method, centered on the concreteness of the Name, means that each divine virtue must be reasoned outward from a particular divine action narrated by a biblical text. Miskotte renounces the reverse procedure, of starting from some abstract proposition about the divine self. He sees this as the primary direction of classical theology, and, more than that, that many of the classical claims about God are quintessentially *religious*, in the pejorative sense that they are human-made and self-protecting (Cornell fc; cf. Greggs 2011). Asserting that God is unchanging or omnipotent, for example, compensates for human changeability and weakness. Unmoored from the particular way that God has chosen to self-disclose, abstract theologizing floats free and answers only to human fears and finitude. Miskotte does not address divine perfection per se, but his comments certainly bear on it, and at many points they run parallel to the arguments of *The Question of God’s Perfection*. Like the dissident contributors thereto, Miskotte eschews the traditional divine attributes such as omniscience or absoluteness; also like them, he seeks to hew closer to the foundational texts of Hebrew Scripture.

As with the first chapters of *The Question of God’s Perfection*, Miskotte glories in the humanoid god. His foundational texts do not include *Berakhot 7a*, the legend about the High Priest’s prayer, but he does dedicate special attention to biblical texts that narrate God’s repentance. So, for instance, his postwar magnum opus, *When the Gods are Silent*, concludes with fourteen exegetical “sketches” (1967: xvii), three of which expisit the Golden Calf story in Exodus chs. 32–34. Miskotte retells of the people’s apostasy at the foot of the mountain and then zeroes in on the dialogue between God and Moses, which is “filled with threatenings and intercessions [and] teem[ing] with priceless anthropomorphisms” (1967: 384). One of these latter appears in Moses’s prayer; Miskotte calls it “the most moving touch of all,” when Moses “cries out to Yhwh with the same word that the prophets used (‘turn away’). Repent thee, turn about, turn back, return to thyself, return to thy real deeds, the deeds of thy right hand!” (385). And in response, as v. 14 of Exodus 32 describes, “YHWH repented.” Miskotte exults in this event: “This is the great act, the primal act, groundless and yet in the midst of things. There is no fate to which

the Lord is subject, there is no law of being which holds him prisoner, there is no mortal power of unchangeableness in God. He is the design of his own life” (385). Later in the same sketch, Miskotte speaks of the Lord’s “glorious ‘repentance’” (388) and cryptically pronounces that “God is always ‘more human’ than [hu]man[kind]” (385).

Miskotte thus shares with *The Question of God’s Perfection* a cluster of hermeneutical themes: theo-centricity, a rereading of foundational texts, dissidence from perfect being theology, and a focus on the Tetragrammaton. Miskotte also rejects allegory, along with many other schemata by which Christians usually organize the Old Testament in relation to the New (1967: 105–19; 159–72). Instead of positing that the literal sense of Hebrew texts opens onto a larger or more lasting spiritual dimension, Miskotte finds the unity of scripture in its *grondwoorden*. Certain keywords populate both testaments of the Christian Bible, though their first and basic forms are given in Hebrew Scripture. In effect, then, the plain sense of the Hebrew sets the terms for his reading of the whole Christian canon.

These commonalities commend Miskotte and the Amsterdam School after him as potential allies to the questioners and reconstructors of *The Question of God’s Perfection*. But considering Miskotte alongside *The Question of God’s Perfection* also helps to specify questions for continuing down the theological tracks laid out by the volume:

- *Foundational texts*. First, there is the complex question of communions and corpora. To what extent and in what way is the *ad fontes* program of *The Question of God’s Perfection* transferable to Christian negotiations with the two-testament canon of the Old and New Testament? It is one thing for Jewish thinkers to revisit “foundational texts” when they consist, as a class, of all those that precede Maimonides. It is another thing for Christian thinkers whose scriptural corpus is internally differentiated—and oftentimes differentially valued. Miskotte prioritizes Hebrew Scripture, but this is unusual within the whole of historic Christian theology (and has come under criticism; Hasel 1991: 187). At most, Christian theology has given coequal weight to the testaments, if not more often privileging the New. The theological dynamics of a bifurcated canon compli-

cate a Christian replication of a retrieval such as *The Question of God’s Perfection* models.

- *Hellenization thesis*. Besides the hermeneutical challenge of a two-part scriptural corpus, reception of *The Question of God’s Perfection* by Christians may also face a historical challenge: the “fall” into Hellenization is internal to the Christian canon! In other words: the Jewish challengers of divine perfection appeal to a long tradition of rabbinic literature that is relatively uncongested by Greek philosophical concerns (though this, too, is debatable; cf. Boyarin 2004). But Christians do not have that option: the New Testament is in Greek, and it reflects popular currents and convictions from the world of Hellenistic Judaism. In whatever way Christian theological exegesis reasserts the decisiveness of scripture’s literal sense, it must work apart from this binary, of a pure Hebraic thought-world vis-à-vis a hybridized Hellenistic one. Miskotte outlines one possibility, which is to claim a formal or architectonic continuity between the testaments even over against the advent of Alexander the Great. But he may too closely approximate an outlook like Boman’s.
- *Literal sense*. *The Question of God’s Perfection* sets two ways before its readership: a renewed theological sourcing of the plain sense, even (or especially) when it pictures God as humanoid; or a commitment to the non-literal, indirect, or spiritual signification of such texts. But how can accounts of scripture’s theological normativity function without the figural or extended sense? Miskotte’s theology centers on the divine Name and traces out the *grondwoorden* or “ground-words” of scripture. But do these efforts suffice to unite scripture and make it available for use in contexts subsequent to its first? Or do they simply constitute their own forms of spiritual exegesis?
- *Theological profiles*. Both *The Question of God’s Perfection* and Miskotte strongly contrast the “priceless anthropomorphisms” (1967: 384) of foundational Hebrew/Jewish texts with the God of perfect being theology. Both the volume’s contributors and Miskotte are alert to the existential stakes of the human-like God, though Miskotte

more directly criticizes the classical doctrine of God as compensatory and projective. But might there be avenues to modulate this contrast? To identify biblical traces yet operative in the historic teaching? It seems that Miskotte himself at times related the Bible's theological offerings and the God of scholastic tradition dialectically rather than oppositionally. He could affirm the Heidelberg Catechism, with its line about providence (§27: "the almighty and ever present power of God"). Here, Karl Barth's more systematic treatment and more explicit engagement with scholastic resources may prove instructive; Barth's *Church Dogmatics* II/1 inspired Miskotte's *Biblical ABCs* in 1940.

- *Theocentricity*. The contributors to *The Question of God's Perfection* maintain a "properly theological" focus, as does Miskotte. So, too, one "argument" within the theological interpretation of scripture is, according to Paddison, the "theocentric approach." But is all this theocentricity exegetically warranted? Some contemporary readers find God to be the most central and arresting biblical consideration. But is God the foremost interest of (some? most?) biblical texts? When, if ever, does the Bible's foregrounding of nondivine personalities and paraphernalia countervail a theological concentration like these authors jointly pursue?

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