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BOOK REVIEW

Michael P. Knowles. *The Unfolding Mystery of the Divine Name: The God of Sinai in Our Midst*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012. 254 pp. Pbk. ISBN 0830839858.

In *The Unfolding of the Mystery of the Divine Name* Michael Knowles jumps off the mystery novel *The Nine Billion Names of God* that he read as a teenager. He explores, both exegetically and theologically, the attributes of God described in Exod 34:5–9, called in Jewish tradition the “thirteen attributes of love” (a kind of Israelite confession of faith). He writes, “Only when we have an initial grasp of the nature and character of God can we begin to understand how and why prayer, mission, social action, or any number of other pious actions are either appropriate or even possible” (p. 20). The study emerged from some addresses at Ontario Pioneer Camp in the 90s, and carries both a sense of careful scholarship and devotional reflection.

After considering the question of how many names God has, and the importance of names and the naming of God, the book moves in five stages based on its text: A God Compassionate and Gracious, A God Slow to Anger, A God of Steadfast Love, A God Trustworthy and True, and A God of Forgiveness and Justice. Knowles then concludes with some reflections on such a God “in our midst” as the church. He is convinced that Scripture is much less statements *about* God and more about the experience *of* God (a theology of encounter). Hence, it is a matter of engaging the *dynamics* of the divine-human relationship, starting with Moses and coming into our own time. Knowles brings together reflections, not just from his own Christian tradition, but also what can be learned from both Jewish and Islamic traditions (the “three Abrahamic faiths”) in an attempt to bring in his own “generous orthodoxy” in the spirit of Brian McLaren.

In the first chapter, Knowles captures well the importance of names and naming in the Ancient Near East and in the Old Testament, and appropriately focuses on the classic Exod 3:14 statement, “I am who I am.” I am not convinced, as Knowles is, that the name YHWH was known to the patriarchs. Exod 6:2–3 states that the name YHWH was *not* known before the burning bush event, and the references in Genesis (4:26; 21:33; 28:16) can be adequately explained as Mosaic inserts into the Genesis narratives.

Knowles challenges the narcissism of a consumer age in which the worth of all things is measured against their relationship to ourselves. Rather, the nature of a “personal” God is that he is a God of history, covenant, and relationships—relationships in which he *chooses* to make people part of his divine purpose. And while it is true that knowing God truly lies at the heart of acting faithfully (creating a “family resemblance”), I would suggest that there is an incomprehensibility to God that must never be far from our thinking that we do *truly* know God.

Next, Knowles develops throughout the prophets, psalms, and Deuteronomy in particular, the compassion of God rooted in the Hebrew word *rehem*—womb—with all its nuances of mother-love. He points to the fact that compassion and graciousness are the opening attributes of our text, which shapes how anyone thinks about and relates to God, especially in prayer. Further, these terms not only express essential divine attributes, but also divine requirements for God’s people (“Blessed are the merciful”), as illustrated particularly in the story of the prodigal son. A crucial point in the chapter is his reflection on the statement “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and will have compassion on whom I have compassion” (Rom 9:11). He correctly points out that this is a statement of the vast treasure of God’s grace, and not something that appears to be “dangerously capricious” (per Pharaoh).

Knowles then explores a God who is “long in nostrils” (“slow to anger”). I enjoyed George Knight’s suggestion that the intended meaning may be, “it takes a long time for the snort of anger to come through God’s nose.” Knowles explores the idea from a sense of injustice (why does God take so long?) as well as an

expression of the forbearance of God. He lands on the latter (thankfully) as the ultimate expression of the mercy of God.

The use of apocryphal and Jewish literature throughout the chapter (and throughout the book for that matter) beautifully embellishes the biblical tension found in the language of lament, along with helping us see a more expansive idea of a “slow to anger” God. Interestingly, Knowles ties in the “fear of the Lord” with God’s anger. While there is an element of something to be afraid of, commonly the phrase “fear of the Lord” is used more of worship and awe rather than raw fear of the wrath of God. Perhaps the idea of Rashi, who expounded on the two nostrils of God as two divine dispositions, one for the righteous and the other for the wicked, is a little fanciful, but it does set the table for the two realities of God’s anger we see in both Old and New Testament writings. Ultimately, Knowles concludes, it is in the cross of Christ that both justice and mercy are served.

In chapter 4, with Rabbi Ben Bag Bag, Knowles turns the meaning and significance of *hesed* over and over, seeking the “everything” that is in the word. He points us to the Jewish tradition that *hesed* is one of the three foundations upon which the world rests (the other two are *Torah* and *avodah*). He then moves to Jesus and the rabbis in their reflections on *hesed* from Hos 6:6. From there, Knowles takes us to the Sermon on the Mount to point us to our responsibility to imitate that same kind of *hesed* as the essence of keeping covenant with God.

What is *hesed*? No English translation can capture it. So with two stories—Ruth and Naomi, and David and Mephibosheth, and then Psalm 23—he points to the heart of the word more by illustration than definition. One cannot talk about *hesed* without going to the central chapter of the Book of Lamentations, and Knowles does not disappoint us. The *kap* stanza (standing at the center of the *heth* to *nun* stanzas) is the pivot upon which the five songs of Lamentations turn. Finally, while we may not know for sure whether *hesed* lasts to the “thousandth” generation or to “thousands” of generations, “God’s *hesed* is abundant and its scope is vast . . . [and is] the enduring expression of the very essence of God’s character.” One could further explore the idea of *hesed* by noting the shift in names from Ishbaal and Meribaal

(Baal, a Canaanite deity) in the writings of the Chronicler to Ishbosheth and Mepibosheth (*bosheth* meaning “shame”) in the writings of the Deuteronomist. In spite of the shameful association of the name Baal, *hesed* was active in their stories.

Next, God is a God of *'emet*. Knowles points out that the word captures a plethora of meanings including truth, trustworthiness, consistency, faithfulness, fidelity, steadfastness, and certainty. It is these that evoke and sustain belief. Whether or not we put any stock in the consonants of *'emet* being the first, middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet (surely more of a curiosity in a Jewish tradition than anything else), Knowles is correct in saying that God’s truth and trustworthiness capture the whole meaning of Scripture. Knowles works through the tight connection of *'emet* and *hesed* and correctly points out that at times they can be taken as a hendiadys, but also can stand alone with their own range of ideas.

Knowles acknowledges, but skirts, the relationship between faith and faithfulness in soteriological debate by concluding, “The Hebrew antecedents can accommodate the full range of possibilities.” However, he harmonizes Paul and James by bringing together “assent,” “trusting dependence,” and “faithfulness in conduct.” While a number of key texts are brought forward from Paul, John, and the Book of Hebrews, it seems to me that Hab 2:4 and Rom 1:17 (cf. Gal 3:11) can never be left out of this discussion, which they are (see an older, but excellent article by George Zemek, “Interpretive Challenges Relating to Habakkuk 2:4b,” *Grace Theological Journal* 1.1 [1980] 43–69).

The final of the five statements present a Gordian knot that Knowles tries to untangle. Certainly “iniquity” (*'awon*) “transgression” (*pasha*), and “sin” (*hattaa'ah*) indicate *both* varieties and range of wrongdoing, and that forgiveness overcomes one or all. However, what about the line, “who will by no means clear the guilty”? And what about “to the third and fourth generation”? Knowles works hard at exploring possibilities. However, to try and move an infinitive absolute followed by a finite verb away from anything but emphasis is misguided (see Bruce K. Waltke and Michael O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990] 584–88). “By no

means clear the guilty” stands as a translation, and the creative ways of the “pious interpreters” that Knowles explores only satisfy a sense of curiosity. I also found it interesting that in the discussion of “third and fourth,” he never goes to the opening chapters of Amos, “For three transgressions, and for four” In poetic genre, the “three yea four” literary form speaks of enough and more than enough—over the top. In other words, it is not an expression of *limitation* as Knowles is arguing, but rather an expression of *beyond* limitation (cf. the climactic use of numbers in Job 5:19; Prov 6:16; 30:15–17, 18–20, 21–23; Eccl 11:1–2; Mic 5:5). Yes, something is being differentiated between judgment to the “third and fourth generation” in contrast to steadfast love “for thousands.” But I am not sure Knowles has unraveled the Gordian knot, even by using Job, Jonah, and Jesus’ story of the ungracious debtor as illustrations. Knowles is right when he confesses, “Jesus and Jonah implicitly acknowledge the *difficulty* of forgiveness” (*italics mine*), and the only answer is found in the God who bears the sin and who is the first to do the humanly impossible, but divinely possible, namely, to forgive.

Knowles ends with a recommendation of seeking a gracious conversation between the three Abrahamic faiths—Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. But first he points to the narrative of Joseph as the story of one who came to embody the “divine character in human conduct.” Then, he moves from Joseph to the teachings at Qumran, the New Testament, and the early centuries of the Christian church in which the values and teachings of Exod 34:5–9 permeate their literature. Behind all this is the crucial point that acknowledgement of the qualities of God’s character in Exodus 34 was widespread in the prayer world of the rabbis in the time of Jesus. Thus, for Christians to reappropriate the thirteen attributes held in common with Jewish believers, and to a lesser extent, people of Islamic faith, “offers the possibility of knowing the ways of God, after the manner both of Moses and of Jesus.” From this vantage point, we have an invitation from Knowles to Jews, Christians, and Muslims into a conversation with each other. He acknowledges the difficulties, but argues that if we live out the character of God revealed in our text, the conversation will go better, and the divisions may not

seem so insurmountable. While to some this may sound like capitulation or compromise, Knowles is not so naïve as to think that there are not irreconcilable differences. But his call is to compassion, humility, forbearance, and charity. I would concur with Knowles that this is how the God of Moses acts and commands us, as the church to act in turn, if God is going to be in our midst.

Michael Knowles has written a book that will be helpful to pastors and scholars alike. His wide knowledge of Jewish and Christian extra-biblical literature provides a helpful contribution to how this critical text from Moses speaks into the thinking of Jesus, the religious culture of Jesus, and the church. His work at doing biblical theology in both Old and New Testaments shows exegetical care and thoughtful conclusions. My only disappointment is that I was not at Ontario Pioneer Camp when he expounded this text. Those must have been very special times.

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